

Supporting Co-Teaching Teams in High Schools: Twenty Research-Based Practices

Author

GERRY NIERENGARTEN, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth in Duluth, Minnesota. She teaches in the Education Department and oversees the Special Education Program.

Abstract

Including students with special needs in the general education classroom is being widely promoted in the public schools. This practice places a heavy burden on the general educator who is often inadequately trained to meet the needs of such a diverse classroom. Co-teaching has been one of the support strategies used to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities for learners with special needs in the general education classroom. This article provides twenty suggestions for high school administrators to consider when implementing co-teaching in order to support the teachers who engage in this promising practice.

Since Public Law 94-142, Education of All Handicapped Children's Act, passed in 1975, public schools have been striving to successfully include all students with disabilities into general education classrooms. As Voltz, Brazil and Ford (2001) explained, however, schools often focused on integrating general and special education *students*, rather than the systems of general and special education, and a systems integration concept was not seriously explored until the 1980's. With the shift from student to system, there came an interest and desire to provide more effective support for the increasing number of students with disabilities who were being included in general education settings.

Educational inclusion of students with disabilities has been widely promoted in recent years, resulting in ever-increasing numbers of students with disabilities receiving all or nearly all of their services in general education classrooms (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). In each of the age groups, 6-11, 12-17, and 18-21, the largest proportions were educated in regular education classrooms for most of the school day. Students receiving services were

outside the regular classroom less than 21 percent of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), which suggests a need for a systemic approach to improvement of student achievement.

Both general and special educators serving students with disabilities are part of collaborative teams working to meet the educational and behavioral needs of students in classrooms. These collaborative teams develop Individual Education Plans (IEP), strategize academic and behavioral interventions and do collaborative consultation. An additional model of collaboration that is gaining attention and implementation is collaborative teaching or co-teaching (Zigmond & Magiera, 2001).

Co-teaching has been one of the support strategies used to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities for learners with special needs in the general education classroom. Data from the National Center for Restructuring and Inclusion (Lipsky, 1995) indicate that co-teaching is the most frequently cited model for inclusive education. Co-teaching is defined as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 2). Studies suggest that co-teaching is not just a service delivery option for students with special needs; indeed, it provides all students with instructional advantages.

Co-teaching is, however, challenging to establish in any school setting. In order for co-teaching to be successful at any grade level, there are barriers to overcome. Building administrators can do a great deal to pave the way for a successful co-teaching experience for general and special educators and the students involved in the practice. In fact, active, visible involvement of administrators is key in both planning and implementing of successful co-teaching (Phillips & McCullough, 1990).

There is rich literature on the subject of co-teaching. This article organizes a synthesis of that research in the form of twenty suggested practices. Each of the practices is supported by my own case study (Nierengarten, 2008) and/or by other research. These suggestions are presented in anticipated order of implementation, which, in practice, is dependent on context. Regardless of the school site, the chances for successful co-teaching experiences increase when attention is given by administration to small factors that encourage and support teaching teams.

Before Co-Teaching

1. **Administrators need training.** Attend trainings before or along with the teaching teams that will be implementing co-teaching so that there is an awareness of the demands and skills that are required to successfully put co-teaching into practice. Several researchers (Magiera, Simmons, Marotta, & Battaglia, 2005; Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996) have noted that prior to training for the co-

teaching teams, administrators should have an understanding of the practice of co-teaching. The administrators can then provide vision, support and understanding for the general and special educators implementing the model. Administrators will be able to proactively address potential problems and issues before they lead to discouragement and frustration. Through this training a clear understanding of administrative roles and responsibilities could be communicated, which would provide background knowledge for better decision making in the schools by the administrator. (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). Nierengarten and Hughes (2010) also noted that administrative support was the single most noted area of need for the co-teaching teams in the mentioned case study.

2. **Allow teachers to choose to participate in co-teaching.** Choice implies willingness and ownership. A sense of ownership by the teachers results in them investing in the co-teaching relationship and increases the likelihood of success and sustainability (Reinhiller, 1996). Similarly, allowing the special educator to choose the content area of knowledge, interest, preference and strength in which to co-teach goes a long way in nurturing confidence in both educators as well as a willingness to share the teaching stage (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). When special educators are placed in unfamiliar subject areas, especially in a high school setting, they often feel vulnerable and have a difficult time keeping up with the content knowledge since they are learning along with the students (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). Their lack of content knowledge also limits the role they can assume in the classroom (Keefe & Moore, 2004).
3. **Train teachers prior to implementing co-teaching.** Although this appears to be an obvious action step, it seldom occurs. Teachers are often placed together in a classroom without adequate preparation to collaborate effectively. Teachers do not intuitively know how to co-teach. To be successful in a collaborative co-teaching arrangement, they need training and preparation that will help to develop skills in communication and collaboration, instructional strategies, responsibilities, building on another's strengths, and understanding of content (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker & Murawski, 2003). Additionally, collaborators must learn to clearly define roles, manage time, collect data and evaluate outcomes (Goor, 1994). Other authors (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Stanovich & Jordan, 2002; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003) have suggested that schools of education address collaboration in some form in their professional preparation programs.

4. **Preparing student schedules.** Relying on a computer to schedule student courses does not allow for the attention to detail that is needed. School teams need to consider co-teaching time, paraprofessional time, scheduled planning periods, class size and specialist caseloads (Walther-Thomas, Bryant & Land, 1996). It will also be helpful to create the class schedule before other students to allow for maximum availability and flexibility of courses. (Cook & Friend, 1995). This may require hand-scheduling in secondary schools, and it may create more structured schedules in elementary schools, but this option increases opportunities for serving students appropriately (Cook & Friend, 1995).
5. **Appropriate ratios.** Closely related to preparing appropriate student schedules is the need to establish suitable classroom configurations. When collaborative classes exist in a school, there is a temptation to overload these classes with high-risk students because there are two teachers in the classroom (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). In addition to scheduling students with identified learning and behavioral needs, other students who may be at risk could benefit from this type of collaborative classroom (Knackendoffel, 2005). As class rosters are prepared, it is important to keep the principle of natural proportions in mind (Brown et al., 1989). Natural proportion refers to the maintenance of the percentage of students' with disabilities in the classroom that is represented in the school (Brown et al., 1989). It is imperative that the classrooms that are co-taught are not heavily loaded with students with high needs. Other authors claim that to maintain a balance and prevent the class from becoming a dumping ground or being viewed as a special education class, a rule of thumb is to allow no more than 25-50% of the composition to be learners with special needs, which includes students who are considered at-risk for failing (Knackendoffel, 2005; Nowacek, 1992; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996; Zigmond & Magiera, 2001). The central point is to maintain heterogeneity in the classroom and create a learning environment that supports all learners.
6. **Verbal and financial support from administration.** The role that administrative support plays in the success of co-teaching cannot be overstated. Nearly every factor for successful co-teaching implementation is dependent on an administration that is supportive and invested in the initiative (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). Co-teaching requires direction from administrators who must be willing to listen and learn, and to help overcome obstacles such as class size, scheduling and personnel allocation (Arguelles, Hughes, & Schumm, 2000). Administrators provide moral, monetary, and

evaluative support throughout the extended time needed for these curriculum reforms to make a secure start (Jung, 1998). Support can also come from other sources within the school district through central administration as well as from university teacher-researchers supplying classroom teachers with multiple instructional models and research-based practices (Trent et al., 1998).

7. **Nurture an inclusive attitude in your school.** Inclusion is a way of providing a normalized educational experience for all children with disabilities (Scheffel, Kallam, Smith, & Hoernicke, 1996). In order to create an inclusive environment, an inclusionary school must have a support network powered by committed school administration. Scheffel, et al (1996) stated that, "The school administration must guide the school and its faculty and staff toward developing a school philosophy based on the democratic, egalitarian principles of inclusion and provide strong leadership to ensure that decisions are made consistent with the school's philosophy" (p. 4). Without a schoolwide shared vision of inclusion, teachers who want to work collaboratively encounter barriers since they may require the reallocation of scarce resources (Rice & Zigmond, 2000). It is through the commitment and motivation of the administration that teachers are able and willing to take the risk of attempting a new strategy.

During Co-Teaching

8. **Observe the co-teaching teams.** Once they have been trained, the administrators are knowledgeable about the factors needed to implement co-teaching and can be a valuable asset to the effectiveness of the practice. Observing co-teachers in an effort to provide feedback can be very helpful in aiding improvement (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Observation also conveys to the co-teaching teams that the administration values the teacher investment. Through observation, administrators communicate; they acknowledge to the teachers that they have assumed a level of ownership, accountability and acknowledgement of the teacher investment in this effort (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). The administration is also able to observe first-hand the effects of large classes and inappropriate classroom composition. It is one thing to hear about it, yet another to witness it.
9. **Common planning time.** Planning time is the number one issue for many educators related to co-teaching (Dieker, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004). Time is a scarce commodity for any teacher. The list of demands on a teacher's time during the course of a school day is nearly endless. To ask teachers to squeeze one more important

task into an already overloaded day is unreasonable. That is why the greatest gift that can be given to a team is allocated common planning during the school day. During the planning time, teachers are able to establish mutually acceptable expectations, solve problems, and work out technical aspects, such as who does what, when. It also allows for open and effective communication (Reeve & Hallahan, 1994; Trent et al., 2003). Murata (2002) found that the planning time together is more essential than co-teaching. If planning is not shared, the general education teacher often feels overburdened and the special educator feels as though he or she is not an integral part of the instruction (Cook & Friend, 1995). Unless planning time is worked into teachers' schedules, sacrifices will need to be made to fully prepare for the task of co-teaching.

- 10. Protect and respect the teams.** Respect and protection for the co-teaching teams can manifest itself in many ways and the administration can play a vital role in both of these areas. Cole and McLeskey (1997) suggest that administrators provide a "safety net" for teachers as they attempt to try new and different strategies related to their co-teaching arrangement. Protection can also be provided through adequate and frequent communication to stakeholders. What information is shared and how it is communicated significantly influences how others view, and subsequently respond, to the co-teaching effort (Cook & Friend, 1995).

It is essential that the assignment and investment of each team member be respected. Each member plays an important role in the co-taught classroom. Precious time and energy has been expended to develop the instruction that will be delivered during the co-taught lesson. It is tempting to administrators to pull the special educator from a co-taught classroom when there is a need for a substitute in a desperate situation. If the co-teaching team is viewed as a temporary or expendable resource, it becomes difficult for teachers to invest time or energy into planning when they could be pulled at any time. Administrators must view co-teaching as a foundational piece to the general education classroom and not just an add-on that can be manipulated when the need arises (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010).

- 11. Encourage evaluation and assessment of co-teaching.** Currently, there is a great need for high-quality research concerning co-teaching. If implemented with attention to addressing many variables, rigor, and consistency, a wealth of information and data can be gleaned from a co-teaching setting (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Goor, 1994). Teacher and student related data

would provide essential perspectives for further advancement of this school-based service. Both formative and summative evaluations are needed to develop and implement an effective co-teaching program adequately (Cook & Friend, 1995). Formative data will provide important information related to the implementation of the co-teaching practice and summative data supplies details needed for rethinking and revision of the program (Cook & Friend, 1995). In order for the practice of co-teaching to garner the validity and respect of the teaching community and to advance the practice more broadly, sound research and data are needed.

12. Develop and enforce appropriate Individual Education Plans (IEP).

It is imperative for teams to meet with parents, students, and other related services professionals to write appropriate IEPs for inclusive settings (Walther-Thomas et al., 1996). It is through awareness and choice that stakeholders are able to make the best educational decisions for students with disabilities.

In addition, Individual Education Plans must be adhered to at all times. Regardless of the grade level or the transition from primary to middle school or middle school to high school, the IEP is a legal document that dictates the services that a student must receive. If the plan calls for a student to be in a co-taught classroom then that service must be provided in the areas spelled out in the IEP. This may require hiring additional staff and the investment of training for those who are new to the practice of co-teaching (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010).

13. Be mindful of how change and interruptions affect the teams. Even small changes can impact the team and schedule. Talk with the teams before making changes to gather insight into how the changes may affect their classroom. Change in schedules, school assemblies, and student composition are especially important to consider at the high school level where changes can happen quickly and frequently especially during the first couple of weeks of a new term.

14. Allow for peer coaching and observation. An alternative to the traditional supervision model of the principal observing and providing feedback, principals might promote peer coaching, whereby educators receive assistance from each other (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Encourage the co-teaching teams to observe other teams, meet to discuss, experiment with techniques and strategies, and give feedback (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Implementation of new practices is greatly enhanced through the provision of intensive and ongoing feedback to teachers by their peers (Bregelman, Gertsen, & Morvant, 1995). In addition, co-teachers can ask their teammates

to observe and provide direct feedback. They then can set joint professional goals and receive support and encouragement from their partners (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008).

Additionally, observing video recordings of their own teaching can be beneficial for teachers. Seidel, Stürmer, Blomberg, Kobarg, & Schwindt (2011) argued that video recording can be cognitively activating. Video offers unique opportunities for knowledge activation and is thought to facilitate learner experiences of immersion, resonance, authenticity and motivation (Seidel et al., 2011).

15. **Time for reflection.** The importance and power of reflection to educators and their professional development cannot be overstated. These reflective practitioners can use data from observations, student performance and students themselves to guide and direct instructional decisions (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). Educators that co-teach are in an ideal situation to spur their own professional growth through dialogue with their co-teachers (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008).
16. **Encourage student feedback.** It is seldom that we seek student perspectives related to teaching. Who better to provide valuable data and feedback than the students themselves? Soliciting feedback on instructional performance from students can make for better instructional decisions in future lessons (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008).

After Co-Teaching

17. **Provide for continued professional development.** The investment of continued program maintenance and enhancement opportunities are essential to the longevity of any new initiative (Phillips & McCullough, 1990). Co-teaching teams require continued education, support and refreshment in order to keep the “fire” alive.

Maintenance of collaborative programs requires regular inservice opportunities to teach and reinforce skills (Goor, 1994). Administrators can play an important role by encouraging further skill development for the co-teaching teams. This could include monetary support to attend trainings, release time, making collaborative arrangements with other teaching teams or university support. Because administrators have relationships with other districts, partnerships could be established with teams that are engaged in similar efforts. These types of partnerships could provide a powerful tool for support and enrichment.

Program enhancement is initiated when the basic skills have been learned and participants are receptive to refining techniques or exploring further options (Phillips & McCullough, 1990). This enhancement can take the form of observing other co-teaching teams, viewing books or videos related to co-teaching (Phillips & McCullough, 1990), attending conferences and collaborating with institutions of higher education. All of these efforts towards professional development yield a high return and communicate to teams that their effort is viewed as a worthwhile investment.

- 18. Maintain the teams from year to year.** The consistency of partners allows for progress during the summer and the beginning of the new school year. Without this consistency, teams are always starting over and the opportunities to advance in practice are limited. It is not unusual for co-teaching partners to require 2-3 years to become acclimated and establish predictable routines. Although it is not unusual for teachers to move and change teaching assignments, the effort to maintain this partnership is worth the effort. Jung (1998) reported that teams can still be in a trial stage after four years of active co-teaching experience. Clearly, co-teaching is an effort that takes time and patience.
- 19. Provide incentive, celebration, and encouragement.** Administrators play a significant role as the primary advocate and cheerleader for the co-teaching teams. Serving as the official “cheerleader” for this new initiative, the principal can support the teams through the challenges and hurdles that are inherent in any new endeavor. By respecting what they expect, administrators encourage, recognize and publicly acknowledge the educators who choose to be innovators and pioneers (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008).
- 20. Be a visionary.** During the different stages of co-teaching, there needs to be a leader who will provide the vision, incentive and belief in the teachers and the process. Administrative actions that can promote vision are publicly articulating the rationale for co-teaching, educating the school and community about the accomplishments of the teams, and redefining staff roles so that all are expected to participate in collaborative planning and teaching (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). These efforts by the administration can also encourage broader participation by school staff (Walther-Thomas et al., 1996).

Co-teaching is a practice that is sure to become more and more common in a classroom where students with special needs are being included. It is an efficient and productive use of two highly trained and knowledgeable professionals. This article synthesizes twenty recommended practices

that are known to aid the implementation and success of co-teaching. As administrators and teachers work towards enriching the general education classroom through the use of co-teaching, the learning environment can lead to success for all students. Co-teaching requires careful planning and attention, and to neglect these strong recommendations would diminish the effectiveness of a promising practice.

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