Barbara Sue Meier and Janine S. Fisk

Five Ways to Ensure a Positive Co-Teaching Experience for Co-Teachers and Students

Meier and Fisk provide recommendations that build professional partnerships with co-teachers and support the needs of students in inclusive classrooms.

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Co-teaching refers to having one general education teacher and one special education teacher with both providing inclusive instruction to a diverse group of students in a single classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2006). This instructional strategy has been implemented since the late 1980s to address the concept of inclusion in general education classrooms (Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). Interest in co-teaching has continued to increase since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required that all students, including students with disabilities, must have access to the general education curriculum. Additionally, emphasis on teaching students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, stressed in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, has prompted an increase in co-teaching (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

Co-teaching can be a gratifying experience, or it can be something that you feel you "need to get through" based on how you approach it. However, whether you are placed in a co-teaching position or you chose to be in one, it is possible to develop an effective professional partnership with your co-teacher (Mastropiere, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005). In this article, I provide five recommendations that will make co-teaching a more positive experience for you, your co-teaching partner, and for your students.

Recommendation:
Develop a Relationship

Get to know your co-teacher on a personal and professional level. Research shows that incompatibility of co-teachers is a problem (Pratt, 2014), and one way to address that incompatibility is through open communication, through both speaking and

listening, key to a good working relationship (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010). Before you begin to teach together, discuss your teaching philosophies. Co-teachers do not have to share the same teaching philosophy to be successful, but they do need to learn from one another and be open to differences in their philosophies. Having respect for each other is critical for effective co-teaching (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). Other areas that co-teachers should discuss are feelings about the academic achievement of the diverse students in your classroom, discipline procedures, and shared roles and responsibilities in the classroom (Conderman, 2011). Additionally, find out where each co-teacher excels. Once you both discuss teaching strengths, then share areas where you can support each other. One thing about being part of a team is that co-teachers do not have to be proficient at everything; you can count on each other for support. Finally, no matter how good your communication skills are, you still might encounter conflicts between co-teachers. Work together to develop a plan before any problems occur and be sure to acknowledge problems right away because it is much easier to deal with them when they first arise (Conderman, 2011).

Taking Action to Build Relationships

Here are some questions and materials that a teacher can consider discussing and sharing with potential co-teacher in order to build a relationship (Marston, n.d.).

Personal level. Where did you grow up? What are your hobbies? Do you have children? Other personal questions that you feel are appropriate for your co-teacher (Marston, n.d.). These questions will vary based on your situation.

Teaching. What is your teaching philosophy? What is your teaching style (e.g., hands-on, textbook based)? Are you flexible and able to adapt to a new direction during a lesson or do you feel more comfortable following "the script"? What is your discipline style? How do you manage behaviors in your classroom? What are the rules you need to keep in place when you teach with other teachers (Marston, n.d.)?

Academic achievement. Do you currently have any strategies in place to support your students who struggle in academic areas (e.g., reading, math) and with behavioral issues? What are some of the extended activities you implement for your students? How can we collaborate to support the students who are struggling as well as the students who are advanced (Marston, n.d.)?

Strengths and areas of support. What strengths (e.g., instructional planning, classroom management) do you have as a teacher? Are there areas where you feel collaboration would make you stronger? Marston (n.d.) suggests that an easier way to cover strengths is to list your strengths, needs, likes, and dislikes and then share them with one another. While you share them together, you can highlight the strengths with which the teachers take the lead in that area.

Conflict resolution. In what ways do you generally address conflicts with colleagues? Which strategy/format do you use for conflict resolution? When do you prefer to discuss conflicts (e.g., immediately if time, at weekly meetings)? Would it bother you if I mention a conflict knowing that we could not discuss it at that time? How would you like me to bring up a conflict (e.g., direct approach) (Marston, n.d.)?

Critical instructional conversations. The following websites provide co-teachers with questions to discuss their roles and determine their responsibilities in the co-taught classroom. Explicitly discussing and assigning roles lead to positive co-teaching experiences beneficial to both teachers and students. Beninghof's "Collaborative Teaching: Whose Job Is It?" includes embedded discussion questions, and Schmitt

and Neugebauer's "Co-Teaching Connections" provides downloadable PDFs.

Recommendation:
Plan Lessons Together

For co-teachers who have shared planning time, collaboration can be easy. However, for co-teaching teams without common planning time and who struggle to meet weekly, set aside some time for planning. Meeting for several hours once a month will allow you to work on developing units with your co-teacher (Stivers, 2008). If your administrator supports your co-teaching, talk with him or her about finding time to plan together as a team. One idea you could share is to have a substitute who is in the building covering for another teacher; he or she could teach your class instead of getting a scheduled prep time so that you can collaborate with your co-teacher. Additionally, take advantage of the social media tools that can support collaborative lesson planning (see Appendix A). If you do not have co-planning time, you can use *Google Docs* or *UDL Exchange* to co-plan and design your lessons. Both of these tools supply a collaborative platform where you can write lessons and make changes. Finally, for the planning, remember to script out the types of co-teaching, then implement throughout the lesson including the roles that you will take for each part of the lesson.

Taking Action to Plan Supports for All Students

To support students in your classroom, incorporate concepts and strategies into your lessons that will help students with disabilities and other struggling students to gain access to the general education curriculum from the start of the lesson (see Appendix B). Creating supports is an essential inclusive strategy for students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting (Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). To do this, develop lessons that integrate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (i.e., multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement) (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and build in strategies and techniques that support all of the students in your classroom to access the general education curriculum (e.g., audio books, video clips, group work, rubrics). The goal of creating supports is to develop lesson plans while maintaining high expectations for their learning. Capitalize on each other's strengths to develop the best lesson plans to support your students.

Recommendation: Build Partnerships

Make sure that both teachers are seen as equals in the classroom. One of the biggest problems with co-teaching is the idea of parity. Students, parents, and peers need to see both teachers as equals in the classroom. Sometimes little things such as not having both teachers' names on the door or not providing both teachers in the classroom with adult sized desks and chairs give rise to a lack of parity. At other times it can be seen in how the co-teachers work together in the classroom (Stivers, 2008). For example, if one teacher in the classroom is always providing support to the other this can also be seen as a lack of parity.

Taking Action to Build Partnerships

There are several steps you can take to ensure that co-teachers are viewed as equals. One step is to explain to students that, "this year you will have two teachers during English," or whatever subject(s) you are co-teaching. Let students know that they can go to either teacher for help. Make sure to spend time with all students in the classroom regardless of your role (i.e., general education or special education teacher). For instance, vary who takes the lead working with students who have IEPs (Individualized Education Programs). By doing this, your students will not view the special education teacher as being there only for the students with disabilities. Additionally, changing who the co-teachers work with both teachers allows you to get a sense for how all the students in the classroom are preforming and to be better

able to plan for all of their students. Another step is to send a letter to parents letting them know that their child will have two qualified (certified) teachers in the classroom for whatever subject(s) are being co-taught. If possible, do this before the start of the school year. Explain how you will work with your co-teacher (e.g., instructional planning, roles, student support) and share how co-teaching will benefit their child (e.g., vary content presentation, scaffold learning, individualize instruction) (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). Once parents are informed about co-teaching, studies show that they support it (Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). A final step is to make sure that your colleagues are aware of your co-teaching successes. Hearing about your co-teaching successes increases the likelihood that more of your colleagues will co-teach. This can help build a more successful inclusive environment for all students in your school (Murawski & Dieker, 2008).

Recommendation:
Vary Teaching Strategies

You can adapt the co-teaching model to support the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms (see Appendix C). Students excel at different things and in different ways. So, if you use a variety of co-teaching models, you will better address the needs of all the students in your classroom.

Currently research shows that most co-teaching partners use the *one teach – one assist model* of co-teaching with the special education teacher being the one in the assist position (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Scruggs et. al. (2007), also note that many effective practices (i.e., peer mediation, strategy instruction, mnemonics, hands-on materials, study skill and organization skill training, test-taking skill instruction, and principles of effective instruction) are not being utilized and were rarely observed in co-taught classrooms, which further indicates that co-teaching is being implemented far less effectively than it could be. The continuous implementation of this co-teaching model helps vary instruction to meet the needs of the diverse students found in inclusive classrooms today because instruction moves away from lecture style instruction, and co-teachers vary instruction to meet the needs of the diverse students found in inclusive classrooms today (Scruggs et. al., 2007).

Taking Action to Build Variety

It is critical for co-teachers to move beyond the *one teach – one assist model* of co-teaching in order to differentiate instruction for students and utilize the skills that both co-teachers bring to the inclusive classroom. When co-teachers respect each other's

strengths and areas of growth, a fluid transitioning between taking the leadership and supportive roles can be utilized. This allows for better instruction and greater learning for all students. As stated earlier, co-teaching is an instructional model to support students with disabilities in accessing the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment (Conderman & Hedin, 2013). However, by implementing the various models of co-teaching throughout your lessons you will help all your students do just that.

Recommendation: Share the Lead

Co-teachers share the lead-teaching role based on the goals of the lesson. Often some special education teachers tend not to take the lead role in co-teaching because the general education teacher is seen as the content expert. However, it is important to make sure that both co-teachers provide meaningful instruction and are viewed by the students as integral to the classroom (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013). In order to change this structure and make sure that both teachers are viewed as integral to the classroom, plan lessons where there is fluid transitioning between the general education teacher and the special education teacher in the lead role.

Taking Action to Share the Lead

This change can take place in several ways. One way would be to have the special education teacher lead the review at the start of the lesson. Another would be for the special education teacher to provide the guided practice once the material has been learned. Additionally, the special education teacher could monitor independent practice for a small group of diverse students (Brown et. al., 2013). Conderman & Hedin (2013) propose having the special education teacher take the role of strategy leader. In this role, special education co-teachers would introduce research-based strategies that support students in accessing the curriculum that is being taught. Be aware that taking this approach does not reduce the need for co-planning or for teachers to become familiar with the curriculum (Conderman & Hedin, 2013). So, you might change the lead role based on whether you are focusing on content or on a strategy during instruction.

Here is an example: you and your partner are co-teaching about persuasive writing, and you want the students to learn the format and complete a graphic organizer as a strategy to help them organize what they will write. Once the general education teacher has taught the components of a persuasive essay, the special education teacher will take the lead to teach about the graphic organizer.

The special education teacher will discuss the importance of organizing information and explain how organizing information can help a student recall and write about it more easily. They would also explain the steps for completing a graphic organizer and model how to complete one. During this time, the general education teacher would walk around the room to monitor students and provide support to those who need it. Once the students understand how the graphic organizer needs to be completed, the general education teacher would take the lead and begin guided instruction by having the students complete an organizer with them. While the general education teacher is leading the instruction, the special education teacher would either complete the graphic organizer as a guide for the students or the general education teacher would complete it while instructing and the special education teacher would move around the room in order to support students who needed help with the organizer. This is just one example of how co-teachers can exchange the lead during instruction. Remember to build on your strengths as you develop your lessons and decide which co-teaching models you will include in each lesson. How you plan as a team is up to you, but when the students see that both teachers are capable of taking the lead in the classroom, then they really will see you both as integral to the classroom.

Conclusion

There are many challenges in co-teaching. With high stakes testing, mandated curriculums, and an ever-increasing amount of tasks being placed on teachers, many teachers worry about the extra time needed to co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess in their already overcrowded schedule. However, with these few simple recommendations co-teaching can be a highly engaging means of meeting more students' needs, producing higher literacy scores, and actually taking some of the pressures off teaching in isolation. Co-teaching can have a positive impact on both teachers and students if co-teachers collaborate successfully. As Graziano and Navarrete (2012) state, co-teaching benefits students when the co-teachers vary content presentation, provide individualized instruction, scaffold learning, and monitor student understanding of the topic. When co-teachers collaborate with one another, they can offer the aforementioned critical instructional supports to help students with special needs as well as all of their students to gain access to and progress in the general education curriculum.

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Barbara Sue Meier (Assistant Professor of Special Education, meierbs@uwec.edu) and Janine Fisk (Assistant Professor of Education Studies, fiskjs@uwec.edu) teach at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. They have spent many years teaching in the K-12 public schools. They have co-taught throughout their careers, learning in the process through situations in which co-teaching did not produce the desired outcome.

Appendix A: Lesson Planning Collaboration Sites

Name	URL	Cost and Information
Google Drive	https://www.google.com/drive/	Free – 15 GB Storage
UDL Exchange	http://udlexchange.cast.org/home	Free – provides template, build lessons individually or collaboratively, share, remix, or use other's lessons
Common Curriculum	http://www.commoncurriculum.com/	Free – provides templates, build lessons individually or collaboratively
Plan Board	https://www.planboardapp.com/	Free - Individual Site $5/month - Collaborative Site

Appendix B: Instructional Strategies to Support Struggling Learners

Name	URL
5 Common Techniques for Helping Struggling Students	https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/instructional-strategies/5-common-techniques-for-helping-struggling-students
How to Adapt Your Teaching Strategies to Student Needs	http://www.readingrockets.org/article/how-adapt-your-teaching-strategies-student-needs
Instructional Strategies for Struggling Students	http://www.edubabbling.com/instructional-strategies-for-struggling-students/
Differentiating Instruction in the Inclusive Classroom (Book)	http://imis.cec.sped.org/cec_prod/ItemDetail?iProductCode=P6180&Category=BOOK&WebsiteKey=269141f1-45d0-49b9-9769-40de3a48419c

Appendix C: Co-Teaching Approaches (Friend et. al., 2010)

Type of Co-Teaching	Definition	Examples
One Teach, One Observe	One teacher leads, the other gathers information about academic, behavioral, or social data on selected students or groups.	Observer tracks --Number of times you call on students of a specific gender --On-task behavior of specific student(s)
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher leads, the other offers help to individual students as needed.	Observer helps students by providing --Support with writing task --Signal for student to focus on instruction
Station Teaching	Instruction for lesson is divided into three non-sequential parts and students are in three groups where they move from station to station. Two stations are taught by the teachers and the third station is independent work.	Station One: Students work with teacher one to read story. Station Two: Students work with teacher two to practice decoding strategies. Station Three: Students complete independent work writing journal entries.
Parallel Teaching	Students are broken into two groups and one teacher leads each group. The same material is presented using differentiated instruction and smaller groups sizes increase student participation.	Teacher One provides instruction in multiplication using lattice method of instruction Teacher Two provides instruction in multiplication using manipulatives

Alternate Teaching	One teacher works with larger group and second teacher works with smaller group to provide remediation, enrichment, pre-teaching, or for other instructional purposes. Key Point: Do not always create the small group with students with disabilities and have the special education teacher work with them; base groups on student needs.	Large group instruction: students work with teacher to write 3 paragraph papers. Small group instruction: students work with teacher to develop strong topic sentences.
Team Teaching	Both teachers teach the large-group together taking turns sharing information and leading the instruction.	Teaming: --Teachers provide instruction on the water cycle and alternate leading the instruction as they work through the content. --The flow from one teacher taking the lead to the other is seamless and based on content expertise about the different areas of the water cycle.