Co-Teaching: Creating Effective Classroom Teams

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Session Overview

The *No Child Left Behind Act* and the reauthorization of federal special education legislation have brought increased pressure for educators. School reformers have set higher standards and teachers are responsible for ensuring that students meet them. Simply put, students with disabilities and other special needs generally are expected to achieve the same success as other learners, and so there is an increased emphasis on educating them in general education settings. And all educators are finding that an increasing number of students come to school with any of a variety of problems that make them learners at-risk. Among the many ideas and options for meeting these diverse yet somehow related challenges, one that is receiving widespread attention, is co-teaching.

The purpose of this session is to provide both an overview of co-teaching as well as detailed information about critical topics that must be addressed if co-teaching is to be successful. This session is the first of two parts. Across the sessions these topics will be addressed: (a) key concepts for co-teaching, (b) the logistics and pragmatics of setting up and maintaining co-teaching programs, and (c) the details of who does what in a co-taught classroom. Together, the sessions are designed to assist those just beginning to co-teach to create successful programs for ALL students and for those who are experienced to take their co-teaching to the next level.

Objectives

At the conclusion of this you will be able to

1. Outline the definition and characteristics of co-teaching.

2. Describe the roles that paraeducators and others play in co-teaching.

3. Summarize the rationale for including co-teaching as part of students' programs and services.

4. Describe six specific approaches for structuring a co-taught class and provide examples of each.

5. Discuss issues that arise related to co-teaching as an inclusive service delivery system and strategies for addressing them.
Co-Teaching as an Inclusive Service Delivery Option

DEFINITION

Co-teaching is a service delivery system in which

• Two (or more) educators or other professionally certified staff

• Share instructional responsibility

• For a single group of students

• Primarily in a single classroom or workspace

• To teach required curriculum

• With mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability

• Although each individual's level of participation may vary.
What Co-Teaching Is Not

In the rapidly evolving world of special services and supports for students, terminology often becomes an issue. For clarification, these are some terms sometimes used in confusion with co-teaching:

• Team teaching

The term team teaching often is used to describe the situation in which two general education teachers combine classes and share instruction. In an elementary school, this might occur when two fourth grade teachers decide to open the retractable wall that divides their rooms and teach the entire group as one. In a secondary school, this might occur when an English teacher and a history teacher combine two classes to present an American studies course. Co-teaching is different from this type of team teaching in two important ways: First, in co-teaching the teacher-student ratio is drastically improved. Second, in co-teaching, two significantly different orientations toward teaching are blended. Finally, team teaching in the middle school literature often refers to a process for planning interdisciplinary instruction, but not sharing instructional delivery.

• Inclusion

Although co-teaching is integral to the inclusive practices in many schools, it is not a requirement for inclusion to occur. Inclusion refers to a broad belief system or philosophy embracing the notion that all students should be welcomed members of a learning community, that all students are part of their classrooms even if their abilities differ.

• Collaboration

Although generally it is preferred that co-teaching be collaborative, it might or might not be. Collaboration refers to how individuals interact, not the activity they’re doing. Thus, any activity—co-teaching, problem solving, consultation—may or may not be collaborative. Further, collaboration frequently occurs outside education, for example, in business settings. This topic will come up again later in the seminar.
Rationale for Co-Teaching

Why would the staff at a school decide to use co-teaching as a service delivery option? Here are some of the reasons experienced co-teachers provide:

1. Co-teaching is one way to deliver services to students with disabilities or other special needs as part of a philosophy of inclusive practices. As a result, it shares many benefits with other inclusion strategies, including a reduction in stigma for students with special needs, an increased understanding and respect for students with special needs on the part of other students, and the development of a sense of heterogeneously-based classroom community.

2. In co-taught classrooms, ALL students can receive improved instruction. This includes students who are academically gifted or talented, students who have average ability, students who are at-risk for school failure as well as students with identified special needs.

3. In co-teaching, the instructional fragmentation that often occurs in other service delivery options is minimized. Students benefit by not having to leave the classroom to receive services. At the same time, the special service provider or other co-teacher has a better understanding of the curriculum being addressed in the classroom and the expectations for both academics and behavior.

4. Co-teachers often report that one of the most noticeable advantages of sharing a classroom is the sense of support it fosters. Co-teachers report that when they have a spectacular lesson, someone is there to share it, and when they have a particularly challenging day, someone really knows just how difficult it was. They also share that co-teaching is a very effective form of staff development since the teachers involved learn from each other.
NCLB, IDEA, and Co-Teaching

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and the December 2004 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* combine to send a strong message that the instruction for students with disabilities is changing and must continue to change. Here are some of the provisions supporting this trend:

- All students in Grades 3 through 8 will soon be required to take annual achievement tests to ensure that their learning progress is systematically monitored.

- No more than 5% of the students in a state can be exempt from the grade level achievement testing. This number includes students with disabilities as well as though who are English language learners. Students with disabilities who are exempt from testing must have their progress monitored in another way, through a portfolio or other alternative assessment.

- In most schools, the scores of students with disabilities will be disaggregated and a school’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward achieving the goal of all students performing on grade level by 2014 will include progress made by those students (as well as other specified subgroups).

- NCLB requires that the teaching force be highly qualified. For secondary teachers, this means that they soon will be required to hold a license in the subject area in which they are teaching. IDEA has addressed this matter for special education teachers. And so, this means that special education teachers in secondary settings will not be permitted after the 2005-w006 academic year to teach subject area courses (e.g., English, U.S. History) to students with disabilities who take high stakes tests unless they hold a license to teach those subjects. One result of this interpretation of the current law is that special educators will increasingly be expected to co-teach in subject area courses in middle and high schools.

- Even now, students’ IEPs must include a clear justification for any time spent away from general education. The increasing emphasis on access to general education and the proposed intervention-based approach to identifying students as having learning disabilities all support increased differentiation in general education classrooms.

Taken together, these provisions suggest that one way to accomplish the requirements of both IDEA and NCLB is using co-teaching as a service delivery approach.
A Teacher’s Model for Co-Teaching

I. THE CORNERSTONE: A PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

The members of successful co-teaching teams share several common beliefs that constitute a philosophy or a system of principles that guide their practice.

II. INDIVIDUAL PREREQUISITES

Individual teachers voluntarily bring certain characteristics, knowledge, and skills to the co-teaching situation.

A. Co-teachers have personal characteristics that enable them to work effectively with another adult.
B. Co-teachers have sets of common knowledge and skills.
C. Co-teachers have discipline-specific knowledge and skills.
D. Co-teaching is voluntary (NOTE: This teacher perception is not recommended practice for long-term program success).

III. THE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

Co-teachers have unique professional relationships.

A. The professional relationship is built on parity, communication, respect, and trust.
B. Co-teachers make a commitment to building and maintaining their professional relationship.

IV. CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

The interactions in a co-taught classroom are unique to this teaching arrangement.

A. Co-teachers clearly define classroom roles and responsibilities.
B. Co-teachers’ instructional interactions reflect their professional relationship.
C. Co-teachers successfully maintain the instructional flow of the whole class by providing support to individual students.
D. The curriculum in co-taught classes explicitly addresses academic, developmental, compensatory, and life skills and reflects the needs of students in the class.
E. Co-teachers monitor their efforts.

V. EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

External support facilitates successful co-teaching.

A. Administrators support co-teaching
B. Appropriate professional development activities enhance co-teaching.

Co-Teaching in the Big Picture

In most schools, co-teaching cannot exist alone as the basis for inclusive practices. Instead, co-teaching should be one out of a wide variety of service delivery systems emphasizing collaboration that provide supports to students with special needs. These are some of the other service delivery options that should exist:

• **Consultation**

  In consultation, professionals skilled in working with students with special needs meet on a regular basis with teachers to problem solve. A school psychologist, behavior specialist, speech-language therapist, or special education teacher might serve as a consultant. By meeting to identify a problem, systematically developing an intervention, gathering data, and judging the intervention’s effectiveness, teachers and consultants can maximize student learning.

• **Teaming**

  Grade-level elementary teams (or primary-intermediate teams), middle school teams, and interdisciplinary or departmental high school teams meet regularly to discuss curriculum and problem solve about students. Special educators and other support providers can join these teams to help create strategies and interventions as well as to address issues related to curricular adaptations. This helps to make communication more consistent and more efficient.

• **Informal problem solving**

  Teachers in inclusive schools often need to meet one-to-one to proactively or reactively problem solve regarding students they share. For example, a classroom teacher and a special education teacher might meet to discuss whether a student with an IEP who has violated a school rule should receive special consideration or be excluded from the upcoming field trip.

• **Instruction in a separate setting**

  Although the goal in an inclusive school is for most instruction to occur in general education settings, occasionally student needs indicate this is not appropriate. Examples of situations in which instruction in a separate setting might be preferred include a student needing physical therapy that cannot be integrated into classroom routines, a student who needs highly specialized articulation therapy, and a student not learning as expected so that diagnostic teaching is needed.

• **Collegial staff development**

  A hallmark of inclusive schools is the sense that new information is always available that can help teachers better address student needs. If teachers and administrators attend workshops, classes, or other staff development opportunities, they share what they have learned with colleagues. Topics might include instructional techniques, responses to student behavior, and strategies for promoting staff collegiality.
Co-teaching Approaches: Overview

1. One Teach, One Observe. One of the advantages in co-teaching is that more detailed observation of students engaged in the learning process can occur. With this approach, for example, co-teachers can decide in advance what types of specific observational information to gather during instruction and can agree on a system for gathering the data. Afterward, the teachers should analyze the information together.

2. Station Teaching. In this co-teaching approach, teachers divide content and students. Each teacher then teaches the content to one group and subsequently repeats the instruction for the other group. If appropriate, a third "station" could give students an opportunity to work independently.

3. Parallel Teaching. On occasion, students' learning would be greatly facilitated if they just had more supervision by the teacher or more opportunity to respond. In parallel teaching, the teachers are both teaching the same information, but they divide the class group and do so simultaneously.

4. Alternative Teaching: In most class groups, occasions arise in which several students need specialized attention. In alternative teaching, one teacher takes responsibility for the large group while the other works with a smaller group.

5. Teaming: In team teaching, both teachers are delivering the same instruction at the same time. Some teachers refer to this as having “one brain in two bodies.” Others call it “tag team teaching.” Most co-teachers consider this approach the most complex but satisfying way to co-teach, but it is the approach that is most dependent on teachers' styles.

6. One Teach, One Assist. In a second approach to co-teaching, one person would keep primary responsibility for teaching while the other professional circulated through the room providing unobtrusive assistance to students as needed.
1. **One Teach, One Observe**

One of the advantages of co-teaching is that more detailed observation of students engaged in the learning process can occur. When one teaches and one observes during co-teaching, the teachers should decide in advance what types of information are to be gathered during the observation and should agree on a system for gathering the data. Afterward, the teachers should analyze the information together. That is, observation should be a deliberate part of the lesson, not just teachers' incidental checks of student activity.

**WHEN TO USE**

- In new co-teaching situations
- When questions arise about students
- To check student progress
- To compare target students to others in class

**AMOUNT OF PLANNING**

- Low

**SAMPLE APPLICATIONS**

- Which students initiate conversations in cooperative groups?
- Which students begin/do not begin work promptly?
- Is Anne’s inattentive behavior less, about the same, or greater than that of other students in the class?
- What does James do when he is confused during an assignment?

**OTHER COMMENTS**

- If you use blank NCR forms or carbon paper, you can make two copies of your data at once--and share immediately.
- Once you're experienced co-teachers with a mutual sense of comfort, observation of each other can serve as a form of coaching (e.g., who do I call on most?).
Lesson Plan: One Teach, One Observe

Topic: 

Learning Objectives: 

Special Considerations: 

Teaching Strategies-Leading Teacher (___________________):

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

Observation Purpose: 

Observation Strategies (______________________):

Benchmarks for Success:
2. **Station Teaching**

In station teaching, teachers divide content and students. Students rotate from one teacher to another and also to an independent station so that each teacher repeats instruction three times and each student accesses both teachers and the independent station. If appropriate, the third station could be set up to require that students work in pairs instead of independently.

**WHEN TO USE**

- When content is complex but not hierarchical
- In lessons in which part of planned instruction is review
- When several topics comprise instruction

**AMOUNT OF PLANNING**

- Medium

**SAMPLE APPLICATIONS**

- During language arts instruction one station will address comprehension of a recently read piece of literature, one station will focus on editing of a writing assignment, and one station will consist of an activity related to a skill being taught.
- In social studies to examine the geography, economy, and culture of a region or country.
- In math, to teach a new process while reviewing applications of other concepts already presented.

**OTHER COMMENTS**

- Variations of station teaching, carried out across two days, are sometimes more appropriate in secondary settings with traditional (not block) class periods.
- If students cannot work independently, two groups can be formed. If a student teacher is available, four groups might be arranged.
Lesson Plan: Station Teaching

Topic:

Learning Objectives:

Special Considerations:

Teaching Strategies-Station One (___________________):

1.

2.

Teaching Strategies-Station Two (___________________):

1.

2.

Teaching Strategies-Station Three (___________________):

1.

2.

Benchmarks for Success:
Co-Teaching Approaches (continued)

3. Parallel Teaching

On occasion, students' learning would be greatly facilitated if they just had more supervision by the teacher or more opportunity to respond. In parallel teaching, co-teachers are both teaching the same information, but they divide the class group and conduct the lesson simultaneously.

WHEN TO USE

- When a lower adult-student ratio is needed to improve instructional efficiency
- To foster student participation in discussions
- For activities such as drill and practice, re-teaching, and test review

AMOUNT OF PLANNING

- Medium

SAMPLE APPLICATIONS

- More students would have a chance to share their alternative ending to the story if they are split into two groups.
- If each teacher took a group of students and presented environmental issues—one from the point of view of business and industry and one from the point of view of environmentalists—the class could later have a spirited discussion on the topic.
- Student use of the science materials could be more closely monitored if the group is divided in half.

OTHER COMMENTS

- This approach gives each teacher an active—but separate—instructional role in the classroom.
- Any topic with multiple dimensions can be presented using this approach if the groups are then brought back together for discussion.
- Students can be strategically placed in the two groups.
Lesson Plan: Parallel Teaching

Topic:

Learning Objectives:

Special Considerations:

Teaching Strategies:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

Special Student Assignments:

Benchmarks for Success:
4. **Alternative Teaching**

In most classrooms, situations arise in which a small group needs to work with one teacher while the larger group works with the other teacher. In alternative teaching, the large group completes the planned lesson while the small group either completes an alternative lesson or the same lesson taught at a different level or for a different purpose. This arrangement might take an entire class period, or it might be used for just a few minutes at the beginning or end of a lesson.

**WHEN TO USE**

- In situations where students’ mastery of concepts taught or about to be taught varies tremendously
- When extremely high levels of mastery are expected for all students
- When enrichment is desired
- When some students are working in a parallel curriculum

**AMOUNT OF PLANNING**

- High

**SAMPLE APPLICATIONS**

- The large group completes an assignment or exercise related to the concepts just taught; the small group receives additional direct instruction.
- The large group checks homework; the small group is pre-taught vocabulary related to the day’s lesson.
- The large group is working on projects in small groups; the small group is being assessed. All students will be assessed across two days.

**OTHER COMMENTS**

- For this approach to be successful, the purpose for the small group and its membership should vary.
Lesson Plan: Alternative Teaching

Topic:

Learning Objectives:

Special Considerations:

Teaching Strategies-Large Group: (______________________):
1.
2.
3.
4.

Teaching Strategies-Small Group (______________________):
1.
2.
3.
4.

Benchmarks for Success:
Co-Teaching Approaches (continued)

5. Teaming

In team teaching, both teachers are delivering the same instruction at the same time. This implies that each speaks freely during large-group instruction and moves among all the students in the class. Instruction becomes a conversation, not turn-taking.

WHEN TO USE

- When two heads are better than one or experience is comparable or complementary
- The teachers have a high sense of comfort and compatibility
- During a lesson in which instructional conversation is appropriate
- When a goal of instruction is to demonstrate some type of interaction to students

AMOUNT OF PLANNING

- High

SAMPLE APPLICATIONS

- In science, one teacher explains the experiment while the other demonstrates using the necessary materials.
- In social studies, the teachers debate U.S. foreign policy issues.
- In language arts or English, the teachers act out a scene from a piece of literature.
- As the steps in a math process are taught, one explains while the other does a “Think Aloud” activity.
- One teacher talks while the other demonstrates note-taking on the board or an overhead projector.

OTHER COMMENTS

- This co-teaching approach is affected more than any other by individuals’ personalities and teaching styles.
- This is the most interpersonally complex co-teaching approach.
Co-Teaching Approaches (continued)

Lesson Plan: Teaming

Topic:

Learning Objectives:

Special Considerations:

Teaching Strategies-Teacher A (___________________):

1.

2.

3.

4.

Teaching Strategies-Teacher B (___________________):

1.

2.

3.

4.

Benchmarks for Success:
Co-Teaching Approaches (continued)

6. One Teach, One Assist

In some cases, the most effective use of two adults in one classroom is to have one person keep primary responsibility for teaching while the other circulates through the room providing unobtrusive assistance to students as needed. Although this approach to co-teaching has value, it is also often over-used, possibly because it makes few demands for change on the part of the teachers.

WHEN TO USE

- When the lesson lends itself to delivery by one teacher
- When one teacher has particular expertise for the lesson
- In new co-teaching situations—to get to know each other
- In lessons stressing a process in which student work needs close monitoring

AMOUNT OF PLANNING

- Low

SAMPLE APPLICATIONS

- “This is my absolute favorite topic to teach. Am I wrong to want to teach it myself?”
- How well do the students understand the steps to follow in long division?
- Are all students following as they learn how to take notes?
- “I’ve never taught geometry or worked with this teacher. I need to get a sense of the flow of the class.”

OTHER COMMENTS

- This approach is not particularly useful to help focus student attention. Instead, it has the risk of distracting students during large-group instruction and teaching them dependence.
- Each teacher should have the opportunity to lead instruction and drift if this approach is used.
Lesson Plan: One Teach, One Assist

Topic:

Learning Objectives:

Special Considerations:

Teaching Strategies-Leading Teacher (___________________):

1.

2.

3.

4.

Purpose for Drifting:

Strategies for Drifting (_______________________):

Benchmarks for Success:
References, Readings and Materials


Dieker, L. A. (2001). What are the characteristics of “effective” middle and high school co-taught teams for students with disabilities [electronic version]? Preventing School Failure, 46, 14-23.

References and readings (continued)


References and readings (continued)


