By Deborah Brady Ph. D
Ribasassociates.com

Co-Teaching: Developing High-Performing Teams

This monograph was published in 2017 as part of the book Instructional Practices That Maximize Student Achievement

Objectives for the Chapter

After reading the chapter the reader will be able to:

a. identify and describe each of the models of co-teaching

b. identify the strengths and challenges of each co-teaching model

c. list the observable behaviors that identify successful co-teaching

d. explain how co-teaching brings added value to the classroom

e. develop a plan with a co-teacher for supporting partnership and professional growth as educators in their use of data, their instruction, and their impact

f. develop a year-long plan and individual weekly lesson plans for co-teaching that select and use each teacher's capacity effectively, and that select models and instructional activities that support students' needs

g. develop a lesson plan with clear objectives for learning

h. explain the administrative support needed for co-teaching to the principal

i. develop a plan with a paraprofessional for working together for the year

What Is Co-Teaching?

Co-teaching has evolved since its origin as a part of a progressive movement in education in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the model was adopted to include a special educator in a general education class to provide education to all students "in the least-restrictive environment." The co-teaching model replaced the "pull-out" model for special education students to create a more inclusive learning environment and to provide equal access to the curriculum for all students, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. The Education Reform Movement then increased pressure on schools and teachers to improve student achievement. Recently, as the student population has become more diverse, the co-teaching model has been further expanded to include English language teachers and speech pathologists, gifted and talented specialists, and multiple paraprofessionals.

Essentially, **co-teaching refers to two educators who share equally in the planning, instruction, assessment of, and accountability for a class with diverse populations.** Chapman and Hyatt, in their 2011 book *Critical Conversations in Co-Teaching: A Problem-Solving Approach*, describe it as

> an effective, evidence-based instructional strategy in which two or more caring professionals share responsibility for a group of students and work collaboratively to add instructional value to enhance their efforts (Chapman and Hyatt 2011, p. 8).

Co-teaching can provide many positive changes to the shared general education classroom, including (1) decreased student-teacher ratios and more

opportunities for students to interact with teachers, (2) increased cooperative group work and more chances for students to interact with one another, (3) more authentic applications of students' learning, and (4) and increased use of research-based practices, including standards-based curriculum design that uses essential questions and big ideas, differentiated instruction, and direct instruction in learning strategies (Murawski and Goodwin 2014, p. 292). In addition, co-teaching often supports school and district initiatives that may include response to intervention (RtI), multiple tiered systems of support (MTSS), and inclusion, higher expectations for all students, data-based decision-making (DBDM), flexible grouping, and differentiated instruction (DI).

In addition, when a co-teaching team is effective and functions well, the collaborative relationship adds value beyond simply having two teachers present in one room. Their synergistic partnership can enrich the classroom and the whole school.

This chapter provides a step-by-step process that will support two educational professionals as they become a value-added team. Planning documents provide guidance for new and established teams from the first meeting—when the two teachers establish their partnership—to their weekly planning sessions as they address the ongoing development of their partnership (Chapman and Hyatt 2011).

Research Base for Cooperative Teaching (Co-Teaching)

Research on the effectiveness of co-teaching has been primarily qualitative and anecdotal, though a meta-analysis found that it resulted in moderately positive effects; however, the results were limited to the narrative descriptions in qualitative studies and included very few quantitative studies (Swanson 2001, pp. 258–259). Quantitative research has been complicated by the variations in co-teaching components. Jennings describes the difficulty of getting clear results: "The criteria for effective teaching teams are not discrete and easily identifiable; in fact, they are intertwined and often as hard to untangle as the backlash on a fishing reel" (Jennings 2007, p. 45). Successful teams may attain identical goals using different methods, and a successful technique may not be as effective when it is used in a different group (Jennings 2007).

> *Students in co-taught classrooms often develop more positive attitudes about themselves and their academic and social skills.*

Yet, Jennings concludes, based upon a review of quantitative research on student achievement, generally if the appropriate level of supports and services are provided, students' achievement as well as their attitudes improve.

The qualitative research studies have found that students in co-taught classrooms often develop more positive attitudes about themselves and their academic and social skills because students who were formerly educated in separate classrooms worked instead in a general classroom along with their peers. Because the ratio of teachers to students is increased with the co-teaching, students have more opportunities for interaction with teachers and with their peers in smaller groups. Also, differentiated instruction and flexible grouping techniques are easier to support with two educators in the room.

Many co-teachers have reported in qualitative studies that the co-teaching partnership has had a positive impact on their experience of teaching. They say that co-teaching has given them an opportunity for professional growth and increased engagement because they are sharing their teaching with another professional (Villa, Thousand, and Nevin 2013, p. 18).

Co-teaching proponent Marilyn Friend sees the potential of co-teaching as an intervention that can address the multiple needs of a diverse classroom that includes at-risk students. She says,

> Most students with disabilities or other special needs can meet the high standards being set in today's schools, but professionals have to find ways to tap their potential. Co-teaching is one way to do this while bringing out the best in teachers and providing them with ongoing collaborative support as they meet the many challenges of contemporary public education (Friend 2007, p. 51).

The development of the co-teaching team requires ongoing support from administration as co-teachers expand their individual and team-based repertoire and expertise. This is achieved by sharing their respective expertise and actively seeking out research-based techniques that support their diverse student population.

One research-based teaching technique that is often a major part of the co-taught classroom is cooperative learning. This teaching technique has hard data to support its use if it is carefully planned, implemented, and assessed, as described in *Inclusion Strategies That Work!* (See the section on effective group work found in Chapter 3 of this book.)

Research about cooperative learning affirm[s] that it confers both social and academic advantages (Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, and Vadasy 2003; Johnson and Johnson 1975; Kagan 1994; and Slavin 1990). Socially, positive interactions increase as students work collaboratively toward a common goal. Academically, students are willing to spend more time learning from each other rather than from the teacher, resulting in better products with often challenging curricula. … Team skills, increased self-esteem, improved peer interaction, and higher task completion with learning assignments are some of the benefits that are yielded when structured cooperative groups heterogeneously work together in classrooms. Overall, cooperation is a functional skill for educators and peers in inclusive classrooms to repeatedly foster and model (Karten 2010, p. 17).

In addition to cooperative learning, other research-based techniques, including response to intervention, Universal Design for Learning, and differentiated instruction can have a positive impact on student achievement in the co-taught classroom (Beattie, Jordan, and Algozzine 2006; Damasio 2003; Karten 2007; LeDoux 2002; McNary, Glasgow, and Hicks 2005; and Sousa 2007).

Despite the fact that co-teaching has existed for more than 50 years, its purposes have changed many times. Because of the changes, often the required components that make up co-teaching differ from state to state and from school to school. Because of the confusion about precisely what makes up a co-teaching team, researchers consider the study of co-teaching and its impact on student learning to be in the formative stage.

Many quantitative studies have results that cannot be generalized because of the varied circumstances of co-teaching teams. In Murawaski's article, "Inclusive Schools and the Co-Teaching Conundrum," she attributes the conundrum to three C's: (1) confusion in precisely what makes up co-teaching, (2) contradictions in the research because an unclear definition of the components of co-teaching, and (3) "cautious optimism" based on the clearly positive impact of effective co-teachers (Murawski and Goodwin 2014, p. 293).

Clear quantitative data is rare because researchers are challenged in trying to compare co-teaching results when critically important elements of co-teaching may not be present in all classes. The vari-

ations include: ages of students, rigor of curriculum, differences in the number of days the teachers work together in the classroom, the time that they have to co-plan, school culture and climate, professional development availability, instructional practices of each co-teacher, and administrative support. Zigmond and colleagues say

> co-teaching may be a service, but it is not a "treatment" that can be imposed with fidelity on an experimental group and withheld with equal fidelity from a control group (Zigmond and Magiera 2013, p. 116).

To improve student achievement, researchers recommend that the co-teachers focus on the development of the co-teaching partnership and contend that the co-teaching team can provide added value and increased student achievement when that team becomes a high-performing team that uses a variety of research-based teaching techniques, collaborates to plan the curriculum and lessons carefully, sets clear goals and learning objectives for all students, and uses data to chart the progress of all students (Chapman and Hyatt 2011). See Chapters 1 and 6 for information on effective planning and Chapters 4, 5, and 11 for information on effective assessment and the analysis of assessment data.

The critical factor for co-teaching is the professional partnership and the teachers' commitment to the team's ongoing development.

What Co-Teaching Is Not

When the role of the second educator or paraprofessional is limited to that of an untrained assistant or volunteer, this is not a collaborative teaching partnership. Duties that include duplicating materials, correcting objective exams, or other jobs that do not require training are not included as appropriate responsibilities in the true co-teaching relationship. In addition, if the second person provides educational services exclusively to one student—for example, a special educator who serves as a tutor for a specific student or a behavior specialist who observes specific students—this is also not co-teaching.

The second professional must be a partner in teaching the entire class. Thus, co-teaching requires equal participation of two educators whose partnership and shared leadership result in providing a more effective model as they both plan, instruct, and monitor the progress of all students than either could have accomplished alone. Again, the critical factor for co-teaching is the professional partnership and the teachers' commitment to the team's ongoing development.

A Value-Added Partnership

Chapman and Hyatt call this synergistic partnership a *value-added* relationship "that can serve as a means to better meet the increasing demands on schools to improve student achievement" (Chapman and Hyatt 2011, p. 8). To achieve this goal, the partners need to work to improve each of the essential components of the co-teaching partnership. Protocols and checklists for continual improvement are provided in this chapter. In addition, to become a high-performing team, the co-teachers need to share equally in making ongoing decisions about the classroom, the students, the models, assessments, and instructional strategies, and they need to work on what is sometimes called *distributed leadership* throughout their work together.

Essential Elements for Co-Teaching[1]

Many factors have an impact on the co-teaching team's success. The relationship between the teachers, the values of the entire school, administrative support for this intervention, and a classroom climate that supports inclusion are necessary for sustained success within the classroom. The essential elements include the following 10 qualities:

The Partnership of the Co-Teaching Teams

1. **Collaborative relationship**: The co-teachers have an open, collaborative relationship and share decision-making.
2. **Expertise of co-teachers**: Each teacher brings different areas of expertise: content, standards, differentiating instruction, modification, scaffolding, monitoring student progress, and teaching techniques.
3. **The partnership has equity**: Both teachers share in the planning, assessment, and instruction of the class.
4. **The partnership has a plan to resolve conflict:** They have set norms for their behavior toward one another and have a process for solving problems and conflicts within the classroom and between themselves.
5. **Time** is allocated for planning and collaboration.

Each teacher brings different areas of expertise: content, standards, differentiating instruction, modification, scaffolding, monitoring student progress, and teaching techniques.

---

1 These essential elements are a synthesis of the work of Beninghof (2012); Chapman and Hyatt (2011); Perez (2012); Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013); Murawski and Goodwin (2014); and Taylor (2008).
2 This percentage is a recommendation that is often given by experts in the field, but it is not based on specific research.

The Co-Taught Classroom

6. **The classroom climate supports co-teaching practices**, including flexible grouping, differentiating instruction, and supporting the achievement of all students.
7. **The classroom is heterogeneous**: No more than 30 percent[2] target students are clustered in the class.
8. **The classroom has appropriate space and materials**: These are provided for flexible grouping and re-grouping during class and for differentiating instructions to address the needs of all students. Space is provided so that co-teaching models can be varied and based on the needs of the students.
9. **The co-teaching models are varied** to support student needs. Whole-class and group models are selected to provide the best learning environment for students.

The Whole-School Climate

10. **The whole-school climate supports co-teaching, inclusion, and teaching all students**. Ongoing professional development is provided for co-teachers with the expectation that the team will evolve over time (Beninghof 2012; Chapman and Hyatt 2011; and Perez 2012). The team works in a school that supports co-teaching as an effective practice and intervention; is committed to educating all students to high standards; and supports inclusion with time, materials, and professional development.

Table 10.1 describes what each element looks like in the classroom and the consequences to the classroom, to students, and to the co-teachers if this element is missing.

Each component of the essential elements of co-teaching is supported in a step-by-step process in the "Planning for Co-Teaching" section found later in this chapter.

The Three Major Models of Co-Teaching

In the classroom, co-teaching generally follows four different models, based on how the classroom is grouped and the differential functions of the second teacher. Effective co-teaching teams will vary their use of the following models, based on the needs of their students.