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Research to Practice

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Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research

This is a structured abstract of a metasynthesis conducted by Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie, published in *Exceptional Children*. The full citation for this metasynthesis appears on page 4.

Abstract (from source)

Thirty-two qualitative investigations of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms were included in a metasynthesis employing qualitative research integration techniques. It was concluded that co-teachers generally supported co-teaching, although a number of important needs were identified, including planning time, student skill level, and training; many of these needs were linked to administrative support. The dominant co-teaching role was found to be "one teach, one assist," in classrooms characterized by traditional instruction, even though this method is not highly recommended in the literature. The special education teacher was often observed to play a subordinate role. Techniques often recommended for special education teachers, such as peer mediation, strategy instruction, mnemonics, and training of study skills, self-advocacy skills, and self-monitoring, were infrequently observed. (Contains 1 table.)

Background

In inclusive classrooms, students with and without disabilities are taught together. As inclusion has become more common, teachers have sought ways to meet the diversity of their students' needs. One popular arrangement in inclusive classrooms is **co-teaching**, where a general educator and a special educator work together to address the needs of all students.

Co-teaching can take a variety of forms. The most common co-teaching variations are:

- **One teaches, one assists** | One teacher leads the lesson for the whole class, while the other teacher provides support and behavioral management to individual students or small groups.
- **Station teaching** | The co-teachers provide individual support to students at learning stations set up around the classroom.
- **Parallel teaching** | Co-teachers present the same or similar material to different groups of students in the same classroom.
- **Alternative teaching** | For a limited period of time, one teacher provides specialized instruction to a smaller group of students in a different location.
- **Team teaching** (or interactive teaching) | Both co-teachers share curriculum planning, teaching, and other classroom responsibilities equally.

Previous reviews of co-teaching have found that teachers generally view co-teaching favorably, but that research into the efficacy of co-teaching is limited. Several reviews have suggested that the success of co-teaching is contingent on a number of factors, including:

- teachers participating voluntarily,

- co-teachers being given sufficient training (including mastery of content by special educators),
- teachers being given adequate planning time and planning periods in common, and
- administrative support.

Research Question

Although a considerable amount of qualitative research of co-teaching has been conducted to date, findings from the body of that research have not been systematically synthesized or summarized. To guide this meta-synthesis of co-teaching, the researchers developed the following questions:

- How is co-teaching being implemented?
- What are perceptions of teachers?
- What problems are encountered?
- What are the benefits perceived to be?

Research Design—Qualitative Research Synthesis or Metasynthesis (see discussion of metasynthesis in the box on page 3)

Number of Studies—32

Years Spanned—1996-2005

Research Subjects

454 co-teachers, 42 administrators, 142 students, 26 parents, and 5 support personnel

Specified Disability

Students with disabilities were discussed as a group, but the specific disabilities of students in these studies were not listed. The specific disabilities of students mentioned in interviews with co-teachers included learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, behavioral problems, physical and/or medical disabilities (e.g., children with tracheotomies or feeding tubes), and hearing impairments.

Intervention

Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms

Duration of Intervention

While the duration of co-teaching arrangements was not explicitly stated in the synthesis, most of the interviews indicated they were in effect for at least one school year. The co-teachers in one study had been together for at least 3-5 years.

- What factors are needed to ensure success of co-teaching?

Research Subjects

Co-teachers and others such as students, administrators, and parents participated in focus groups, were observed, or provided documentation in 32 qualitative research studies on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. Included in the data set were co-teachers teaching a variety of subjects to children from pre-kindergarten through high school, in all regions of the U.S., and in districts described as rural, suburban, and urban.

Age/Grade of Subjects

Of the 32 qualitative studies synthesized, 15 involved primary, preschool, or elementary school classrooms; 14 involved junior high, middle school, or high school classrooms; and 3 involved both elementary and secondary classrooms.

Findings

Benefits of Co-Teaching

Study participants reported benefits of co-teaching for students both with and without disabilities as well as for the co-teachers themselves.

When asked about *benefits for children without disabilities*, participants' comments mainly focused on the social benefits of co-teaching rather than the academic benefits. One perceived benefit for children without disabilities was the positive role-model co-teaching provides when co-teachers demonstrate successful collaboration. In addition, participants observed greater cooperation between students in co-taught inclusive classrooms. Some students also reported that, when co-teachers drift around the class assisting whoever needs help, the attention paid to all students increases, not just to students with special education needs.

Students with disabilities also reported benefiting from increased attention in co-taught classes. According to participating co-teachers, having positive peer models in an inclusive classroom also benefited students with disabilities.

As for the *benefits of co-teaching for the teachers themselves*, many teachers mentioned increased competence in their colleague's areas of expertise. Special education teachers often reported expanded content area knowledge after experiencing co-

teaching, and general education teachers remarked on learning new behavior management techniques and ideas for curriculum adaptation.

Requirements for Successful Co-Teaching

Many participants compared a co-teaching partnership to a professional marriage where flexibility, a desire to work together, and a willingness to compromise and handle complex and sometimes emotional issues as a team are paramount to the co-teaching pair's success. Across the 32 studies, teachers repeatedly stressed the importance of the following elements in creating strong co-teaching partnerships.

1. Administrative support, particularly support from the school principal. This topped many teachers' lists of requirements for successful co-teaching. A supportive administrator can ensure that teachers have the resources needed to make co-teaching a success (e.g., classroom space, planning time, and training).

2. Voluntary participation in co-teaching and a choice of co-teaching partner. If a teacher is forced into co-teaching or paired with someone he or she has no desire to work with, the results can be disastrous.

3. Compatibility of teachers. Teachers spoke frequently of the importance of personal compatibility between co-teachers as well as similar philosophies toward teaching and students. Compatibility requires more than simply two teachers who are willing to be partnered as co-teachers. They have to share a motivation to make the partnership work and an agreement about how the class will be structured and each person's role in teaching, planning, and behavior management.

4. Adequate planning time. Teachers consistently reported the lack of enough planning time for co-taught classes. In one study, teachers had about 45 minutes of planning time a week but felt they needed almost three times that amount. Co-teachers also expressed concern that their planning periods often did not match up, requiring them to find moments between classes, at lunch, or after school to plan together.

5. A minimum level of academic and behavioral skill needed by students in the class. Some study participants who had witnessed or been part of unsuccessful co-teaching arrangements reported that the failure was directly attributable to one or

Reflecting on the Synthesis of Qualitative Research Studies

This metasynthesis is the first NICHCY abstract to summarize the findings of *qualitative research*. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that “[q]ualitative research is generally appropriate for describing and providing insights about attitudes, perceptions, interactions, classroom structure, and behaviors...” (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007, p. 394). Quantitative research, on the other hand, relies on statistical data and generates metrics such as “effect size.”

The synthesis of multiple qualitative studies is called a *metasynthesis*. The researchers' purpose was to integrate themes and insights of individual studies of co-teaching into a higher-order, integrated review that “promotes broad understanding of the entire body of research” (p. 395). NICHCY is pleased to share this research with you.

more students who continually disrupted the class and required constant attention.

6. Training. Teachers reported receiving very little training to prepare them for co-teaching. Many of them would have liked training in collaboration, co-teaching models, communication skills, and inclusive practices to help them work together and in each other's areas of expertise (e.g., content area instruction for special educators and information on various disabilities for general educators).

Co-Teaching in Theory and Practice

The authors contrast the idealized model of a co-teaching partnership with the reality documented in the research. In the idealized model, a general educator and a special educator team-teach as true collaborative partners and share equally in planning, in the presentation of content, in behavior management, and in responsibility for all students. Students with disabilities interact with the general educator as much as with the special educator.

In reality, co-teaching does not currently resemble this ideal. By far, the most common co-teaching model in practice is “one teach, one assist.” In this approach to co-teaching, one educator “takes the

lead” and is responsible for conducting whole class activities and presentations to impart content knowledge. The other educator plays a subordinate role and drifts around the class helping students, addressing behavior issues, and supporting the instruction.

While this approach to co-teaching can be effective for students and teachers alike, as it is currently implemented the general educator is typically the dominant, leading teacher, while the special educator typically assumes the subordinate, “drifter” role. Such lack of parity in the two teachers’ roles can cause problems between the teachers themselves as well as cast doubts on the authority of the subordinate teacher in the classroom.

Rather surprisingly, the individualized adaptations and accommodations that special educators typically provide in their own classes were rarely observed in co-taught classes. Even strategies with a strong research base—such as peer mediation (e.g. cooperative learning), strategy instruction, mnemonic instruction, or differentiated instruction—were rarely used in co-taught classes.

While this finding may seem puzzling at first, the authors note that it is congruent with other data from the studies—in particular, the dominant role that the general educator typically plays in the co-taught classroom and the general educator’s “affinity for whole class, homogeneous instruction.” These practices “place significant limitations” on the co-teaching arrangement.

Conclusion / Recommendations

The authors of this qualitative metasynthesis suggest that their findings are a good representation of current co-teaching practices. Across the studies included in the metasynthesis, participant reports were consistent regarding the characteristics of co-teaching classrooms, the role of special educators in co-teaching, and requirements for co-teaching success. However, the authors do point out that, while the participant teachers may be a good representation of co-teachers, they were not randomly

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selected to participate. In fact, 10 of the 32 studies were specifically focused on “outstanding examples of successful co-teaching.” Moreover, teachers who had negative co-teaching experiences could choose not to participate in the studies. Thus, it’s possible that findings provide a more favorable picture of co-teaching than would have been found in a random sampling of co-teachers.

Even with the probable slant in favor of co-teaching found in these studies, participants expressed concerns about how co-teaching partnerships were being implemented. The subordinate role that special educators often assumed in the classroom appeared to result from the general educator’s perceived status as the curriculum and content area expert and as the primary teacher for the majority of the students. The ideas that special educators shared for lesson plans, instructional strategies, and behavioral management were often disregarded for the same reason. The authors of this synthesis suggest that future research should examine the rare instances where truly collaborative co-teaching partnerships have been established, how those partnerships developed, and what specific gains teachers and students realize in such situations.

Despite disparities in the sense of classroom ownership between co-teachers, most people involved in co-teaching classrooms felt the practice provided benefits for everyone involved. Students reported receiving more help in co-taught classes; they also reported learning more. Teachers reported increased knowledge in their co-teaching partner’s area of expertise. Across studies, teachers described similar requirements for successful co-teaching, including voluntary and compatible teacher pairings, administrative support, minimum levels of student skill appropriate to an inclusive classroom, and adequate and mutual planning time.

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