

Evaluation of Co-Teaching in Three High Schools Within One School District: How Do You Know When You Are TRULY Co-Teaching?

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Abstract

Friend (2000) describes effective co-teaching as a special educator and a general educator teaching together in the general education classroom during some portion of the instructional day to accommodate the needs of students with and without disabilities. District administrators invited two University faculty into secondary co-taught classes to determine if effective co-teaching was truly taking place at all three high schools within the school district. Using the Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching (Magiera & Simmons, 2005), 10 classroom observations, and 22 teacher interviews, researchers found varying degrees of implementation of the co-teaching model in each high school. Based on these findings, the authors' initial suggestion was to provide updated training for all of the teachers to more consistently apply the co-teaching model within the classroom. Other logistical recommendations included keeping effective co-teaching pairs together, providing common planning time, encouraging special education co-teachers to become part of content departments, and tracking student outcomes.

Keywords

co-teaching, secondary special education, inclusion

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Introduction

With the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (<http://www.ed.gov/idea/>), Congress stated that the preferred placement for students with disabilities is in general education classrooms. Students with disabilities were not only mandated to have access to the general education curriculum, but the act reiterated the requirements for students with disabilities to participate in statewide assessments. This most recent reauthorization of the federal special education law dovetails with the No Child Left Behind's requirements of greater accountability for student performance including students with disabilities.

Co-teaching is one service delivery model that shows promise for improved student outcomes as demonstrated by the Murawski and Swanson (2001) meta-analysis of co-teaching research. They calculated an effect size from a limited number of studies which indicated that co-teaching had a positive effect on student achievement, particularly in the areas of reading and language arts. Half of the studies used in the meta-analysis were at the secondary level.

Rice and Zigmond (2000) verified these academic gains in secondary classroom observations and interviews of co-teachers in two different countries, Queensland (Australia) and Pennsylvania (United States). Both researchers concluded that "well-implemented" co-teaching could be beneficial for secondary students with and without disabilities. Later in a national study in the United States, Wallace, Anderson, and Bartholomay (2002) found that co-teachers worked well together and readily shared their knowledge and strategies in four exemplary high schools with documented student success.

However, in a study of special education teacher roles at the secondary level, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) concluded that a lack of training and support resulted in the special education teacher taking on a monitoring role in the classroom. When placed in a more segregated setting, special education teachers assumed a more active instructional role in a resource room or self-contained class.

Driven by state and federal mandates to provide students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum leading to improved student performance, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have noted how co-teaching has proliferated in many school districts. Cook and Friend (1996) describe formats within the co-teaching model in which students learn within smaller groups (i.e., not whole class instruction). The power of the model is in the more intense, small group instruction provided to students with and without disabilities.

In later writings, Friend and Cook (2003) emphasized that co-teachers are peers with equivalent credentials and status in the classroom. These co-teachers are partners in the instructional process on behalf of all of their students. The authors explained the model in terms of a joint delivery of instruction to a diverse group of students, some of whom are students with disabilities.

Several researchers (Friend, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Cook, 2006; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002) have found variability in the implementation of co-teaching at the secondary level due to the lack of training and ongoing support. There are several constraints at the secondary level which affect the implementation of co-teaching including the intensity of the content, the tighter scheduling issues, and the pressure on secondary teachers to prepare students to perform well on exit exams (Rice & Zigmond, 2000). Magiera, Simmons, Ma-

rotta, and Battaglia (2005) also noted that teachers need time to ask questions and reinforce their knowledge of the co-teaching process, resulting in a consistent interpretation among educators at the secondary levels.

In training secondary English and special education teacher candidates, Dieker and Ousley (2006) have described the differences in background and language that even pre-service teachers bring to the classroom. According to these authors, only when secondary co-teachers find common instructional ground as teams in meeting the needs of students with and without disabilities, are they ready to effectively “embrace” a more diverse classroom.

How Do You Know When You Are TRULY Co-Teaching?

Several researchers (Friend & Cook, 2003; Dieker, 2001; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Salend, Gordon, Lopez-Vona, 2002; Wallace, et al., 2002) have described common elements leading to effective co-teaching. The following attributes emerged from the literature indicating that teachers were “truly” co-teaching: personal and professional compatibility among the teaching pairs, equity of the teaching roles for both teachers, and more active individualized student instruction.

As part of one school district’s review of their co-teaching program at the secondary level, the decision was made to seek an independent external evaluation of their co-teaching practices to determine if secondary teachers were *truly* co-teaching. Therefore, the district’s special education office invited two university faculty who conduct research in the area of co-teaching, to take a “snapshot” of co-teaching at the secondary level. This independent external evaluation was designed to provide district administrators with a picture of what co-teaching looked like at

the classroom level. This information was intended for use by building level administrators to design a more effective co-teaching program. The focus of the independent external evaluation was to study the instructional process of general and special educators in co-taught secondary classes throughout the district.

There were three high schools in this suburban school district involved in co-teaching. For our purposes, the high schools were identified as high school A, high school B, and high school C. Each high school served a population ranging from approximately 1,000-1,400 students. Within the school district, high school A was described as the “traditional” high school, high school B was representative of a “large suburban” high school, and high school C was characterized as the “open classroom” high school.

High school A was the smallest high school in the district. In this school, department chairs are frequently the general education partner in the co-teaching pair. High school B was the largest high school in the district and had varying interpretations of co-teaching. High school C was constructed as an open high school with no permanent walls in the classrooms. This school had the least consistent interpretation of co-teaching.

The university researchers presented their findings based on the following critical questions/issues:

1. What does co-teaching in action look like at the secondary level in this school district?
2. How are teachers co-planning and making instructional decisions at the secondary level?

Based on the district's identification of selected co-taught classes and co-teaching pairs, the external reviewers observed co-teaching in all three high schools in the school district. In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted with the general and special educators in those classrooms.

Examining Co-Teaching Practices: A Reflective Process

From the work of several researchers (Caron & McLaughlin, 2002; Dieker, 2001; Salend et al., 2002), there has been a call for a process to reflect on best practices among co-teachers. In particular, Caron and McLaughlin (2002) have noted a need for "measurable indicators" of quality co-teaching.

As noted by Nevin (2006), the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* (Magiera & Simmons, 2005), offered a different view of reflecting on the co-teaching model. The 25 measurable quality indicators provided by this tool guides co-teachers in the study of their classroom practices. A follow-up teacher survey helped teachers explain their planning, decision-making, and the thinking behind the lesson. Together, the observation and survey data serve as the basis of the discussion between co-teachers and mentors or administrators to help teachers become more collaborative in the classroom. The *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* can also be the basis for a self-study of teacher practices.

The school district and the University faculty agreed to use the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* as the tool for the independent evaluation. To look at the implementation of co-teaching in these high schools (Grades 9-12), one day of observations and interviews was conducted at each high school for the purpose of gathering

qualitative data. Twenty co-teachers were observed and/or interviewed about their co-teaching practices. See Table 1 for a summary of the classes.

At high school A, 10th grade English, 9th grade Social Studies, 9th grade Mathematics, and 9th grade Science classes were observed. All eight co-teachers were interviewed. Two of the classes (Mathematics and Science) were considered Regents level classes which included a statewide assessment. Students are required to pass the statewide assessments at particular grade levels in order to receive a high school diploma. The 10th grade English teachers focused on both reading and writing about literature. The 9th grade Social Studies class was the first half of a survey of global cultures requiring students to read and write about various topics. The Social Studies class required all students to participate in a cumulative state assessment at the end of 10th grade. The 9th grade Mathematics class was based on Algebra and required students to take a state assessment at the end of the academic year. Finally, the 9th grade Science class was a Living Environment class with a state assessment at the end of the academic year.

The 9th grade English, 10th grade Social Studies, and 10th grade Science co-taught classes were observed at high school B. The six co-teachers were all interviewed. The 9th grade English co-teachers focused on both reading and writing about literature. The 10th grade Social Studies class was the second half of a survey of global cultures requiring students to read and write about various topics. All students are expected to take the cumulative state assessment at the end of the academic year. The 10th grade Science class was a Biology class that had a state assessment at the end of the academic year.

Table 1
Co-Teaching Observations in Three Suburban High Schools

Content Area	High School A	High School B	High School C
English	10 th	9 th	10 th -12 th **
Social Studies	9 th	10 th **	9 th *
Math	9 th **	---	---
Science	9 th **	10 th **	9 th **

* No co-taught lesson available for observation
 ** State Assessment Exam at the end of the Academic Year
 ---No co-teaching in content area

Lastly, a 10-12th grade single English class and a 9th grade Science class were observed during a co-taught lesson at high school C. One pair of co-teachers was not available for observation on their designated day. All six of the co-teachers at high school C were interviewed. The 10-12th grade single English class combined students, from all three grade levels including Advanced Placement students. The co-teachers focused on reading and writing about literature. Students in 11th grade are expected to take the state assessment at the end of the academic year, and the Advanced Placement students take the placement exam at the end of the calendar year. The 9th grade Science class was an Earth Science class with a state assessment at the end of the academic year.

The observations were documented and rated using the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching*, a tool that systematically looks for trends and patterns in co-teaching. This was designed for use as a *reflective* tool and not an *evaluative* tool. The purpose of the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* is to help co-

teachers improve their practice, not to grant teachers tenure. The tool provides the foundation of the discussion between teachers and administrators, teachers and other teachers, or as a self-study.

The *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* defines standards for examining co-teaching skills via 25 quality indicators and a rating scale. Based on this tool, teachers were observed by the researchers simultaneously for one class period. Each researcher rated the co-teachers independently. Later, ratings were compared and the means of the ratings were calculated. This data provided a “snapshot” of the actual co-taught instruction.

The researchers also used the survey protocol from the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* to conduct structured interviews with the co-teachers, lasting between 20-30 minutes for each interview. A total of 20 co-teachers (10 pairs) were interviewed regarding their co-teaching practices. Each teacher was interviewed separately using the structured format from the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of*

The rating scale for the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* is defined according to the following categories:

- An emerging skill rarely occurs during an observation and would be rated as a 0 or 1.
- A progressing skill is defined as occasionally occurring during an observation and would be rated as 2 or 3.
- A developed skill is defined as consistently observed and is imbedded within the instruction. This skill would be rated as 4 or 5.

Co-Teaching. One researcher always interviewed the special educators and the other researcher always interviewed the general educators. Both co-teachers were asked the same survey questions, which also corresponded to the observational data. Responses were recorded by handwritten notes made during the interviews.

Findings: Observations and Teacher Interviews

What does co-teaching look like at the secondary level in this suburban school district? Answers to this question are based on observations of selected co-taught lessons and interviews with co-teaching pairs identified by the district. The observation findings are represented in Table 2 and followed by summaries from the teacher interviews, based on the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching*.

Many authors (Friend & Cook, 2003; Dieker, 2001; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Wallace, et al., 2002) have highlighted particular themes in effective co-teaching: personal and professional compatibility among the teach-

ing pairs, equity of the teaching roles for both teachers, and more active individualized student instruction. Much of this research is focused on the instructional process of co-teaching.

The following four instructional process quality indicators from the *Magiera-Simmons Quality Indicator Model of Co-Teaching* were selected to emphasize the instructional themes in the co-teaching literature at the secondary level:

- Quality Indicator # 8 – Both Teachers Clearly Are Responsible For Group Instruction
- Quality Indicator # 11 – Accommodations For Students With Disabilities Are Observed In The Classroom
- Quality Indicator # 14 – Both Teachers Provide Substantial Instruction To All Students
- Quality Indicator # 17 – The Process Of Learning Is Emphasized Along With The Content Being Learned

It should be noted that the average number of years that the teachers reportedly have been “co-teaching together” was 3.3 years. The range of co-teaching for the pairs was from one year to six years.

Overall Impressions

Co-teaching holds great promise in this school district. There are varying interpretations of what constitutes co-teaching in the different buildings. However, a consistent interpretation of the co-teaching model could build on the foundation of co-teaching currently being implemented. By formalizing what co-teaching could look like at the high school level, special and general educators could enrich each other’s practices.

Overall ratings based on the “snapshot” observations and interviews with the

Table 2
Summary of Co-Teaching Observation Analysis
Three Suburban High Schools

Content Area	High School A	High School B	High School C
QI 8 Both Teachers Are Clearly Responsible For Group Instruction			
English	3.0	1.0	1.0
Social Studies	2.5	2.5	*
Math	2.5	---	---
Science	3.5	3.5	1.0
QI 11 Accommodations For Students With Disabilities Are Observed In The Classroom			
English	3.0	1.5	2.0
Social Studies	3.5	2.5	*
Math	3.0	---	---
Science	4.0	1.5	0.5
QI 14 Both Teachers Provide Substantial Instruction To All Students			
English	2.5	1.0	1.5
Social Studies	2.5	2.5	*
Math	2.0	---	---
Science	3.0	3.5	1.0
QI 17 The Process of Learning Is Emphasized Along With The Content Being Learned			
English	3.0	2.0	2.5
Social Studies	2.5	3.5	*
Math	2.5	---	---
Science	4.0	2.5	2.0
* No co-taught lesson available for observation --- No co-teaching in content area			
QI Rating Scale: Emerging = 0-1; Progressing = 2-3; Developed = 4-5			

co-teachers were 4.3 (developed) for high school A, 2.0 (progressing) for high school B, and 1.7 (emerging) for high school C. A developed model of co-teaching (range = 4-5) indicates that quality co-teaching was consistently observed and imbedded within the instruction. A progressing rating (range = 2-3) points to quality co-teaching occasionally observed within the school. Finally, an emerging rating (range = 0-1) means that quality co-teaching is rarely observed. See Table 2 for a summary of the co-teaching observation analysis on selected quality indicators.

The interviewees at high school A described how co-teachers have “fully reciprocal” roles, including sharing student grading and the grouping of students within the classroom. There is also an emphasis on mapping out the curriculum together, especially through summer planning. Teachers reported how both instructors alternated taking the lead during their co-taught classes. This consistently “progressing” form of co-teaching is reflected in the observational data.

In the interviews at high school B, teachers described how the general education teacher was primarily the lead teacher, while the special education teacher’s role was primarily to review material. One teacher noted that the general education teacher always lays the groundwork of the content. Another teacher described the general education teacher as the content specialist and the special education teacher as the learning specialist. One co-teacher indicated that the general education teacher says, “this is what we are going to do” and the special education teacher tweaks the information to fit the lesson.

At high school C, one interviewee reported that both co-teachers are viewed as instructors in the class with the special education teacher attending content department meetings. Another teacher mentioned that the

general education teacher was responsible for planning the lessons with minimal involvement from the special education teacher. Other teachers noted that the special education teacher primarily focused on developing student skills, such as writing.

Most of the co-teachers interviewed remarked that test accommodations should be provided to students with disabilities. Other kinds of accommodations that were mentioned included “clinics” outside of class to provide more individualized instruction and support. In particular, at high school C, both general and special educators described how teachers needed to be mindful of differences in student learning styles and the adaptation of instruction to meet student needs.

Teachers who were interviewed at high school A described how both co-teachers plan together, give each other feedback on the lessons, and frequently share instructional roles. One teacher commented on how instruction should “move from being content-centered to being student-centered.” The high school A teachers more frequently mentioned how content and process roles were shared between the teachers, while providing help to all students.

At high school B, most teachers noted that the general education teacher is the primary instructor with roles of the co-teachers as “not equitable.” The special educator was viewed as a teacher who reviews content material.

At high school C, some teachers described the 1:1 instruction as being primarily provided by the special education teacher. The special education teacher needs to somehow “fit into the equation” of the general education classroom. Other co-teachers in this high school conduct long-term planning together and are looking to “strike a balance” in

the classroom concerning their instructional roles.

The teachers interviewed at high school A described how “learning is a process” which should be more skills based. Another teacher mentioned the importance of developing “lifelong learning” strategies in students. Co-teachers mentioned the power of having students learn in groups, and presenting content in varied formats. Repetition was a strategy mentioned as a way to increase learning, as well as talk alouds to understand student thinking. This consistently “progressing” form of co-teaching is reflected in the observational data.

Teachers at high school B described how important group work was to the learning process. The use of mixed ability groups was an important aspect of student learning that was frequently mentioned by the teachers.

At high school C, teachers mentioned a need for instructional support classes where material could be reviewed in a separate setting. Teachers also mentioned that being able to rewrite and redo assignments were important parts of the learning process.

Recommendations for Future Co-Teaching Practices

Based on the findings from these co-taught observations, the teacher interviews, and the research on co-teaching, the following recommendations are offered as the steps for co-teachers at the high school level:

Solicit volunteers. Co-teaching pairs should be established based on their interest in the collaborative process and the content area. As noted in the more collaborative pairs, it is important for the general and special education teachers to want to be part of a co-taught partnership.

Training for co-teachers. School district leaders should always provide training for co-teachers as a pair. General and special education teachers understand the model better and collaborate more effectively when joint staff development is provided to the team. This strengthens the co-teaching program by formalizing a consistent district interpretation of co-teaching, while allowing for individual teaching styles among co-teaching pairs.

Keep the pairs together. As long as co-teachers continue to be an effective team, keep the pairs together. There should be no limit on how long a co-teaching pair remains together, as long as student learning continues to increase. Many authors (Friend & Cook, 2003; Dieker, 2001; Rice & Zigmond, 2000, Wallace et al., 2002) have pointed to several characteristics of effective co-teaching, particularly personal and professional compatibility among teaching pairs and equity of the teaching roles. If co-teaching pairs demonstrate compatibility and instructional parity, they are on the road to being an effective team.

Co-teaching pairs should visit other co-teachers. Within the district in their respective disciplines, co-teaching pairs should observe other pairs in the classroom with time built in for follow-up discussions among the teachers. These visitations provide co-teachers with opportunities to exchange ideas on the instructional process of co-teaching.

Planning time. Co-teachers should be provided with regularly scheduled common planning time during the week. In the exemplary high schools studied by Wallace and her colleagues (2002), co-planning time was often mentioned by the teachers as an essential component of school-wide support. Longevity of co-teaching pairs does not ensure the effectiveness of the co-teaching pairs. However, quality co-teaching is predicated on common

co-planning time, which leads to more consistent and thoughtful implementation of co-teaching. In addition, the provision of summer planning time for co-teaching pairs, which allows for long-term curriculum planning with necessary accommodations built in upfront. Quarterly half-day planning sessions also encourage co-teachers to continue to plan an effective curriculum for *all* students throughout the school year, including students with disabilities.

Departmental membership. Special educators should be encouraged to become an integral part of a particular content department. This gives special education teachers an opportunity to network with other general education teachers in that content area and to consider the needs of students with disabilities more strategically when curriculum issues are discussed.

Summary

Co-teaching has been part of this school district's continuum of services for a number of years. To measure the effectiveness of the model, school personnel needed to ensure that general and special educators were consistently and effectively implementing the model before outcomes for students with disabilities could be closely examined. Friend, et al. (2006) stressed the importance of ensuring the integrity of the co-teaching model *before* examining achievement data on students with disabilities.

For this district, like many other districts, there were varying interpretations of what constituted co-teaching in the different buildings. However, a consistent interpretation of the co-teaching model could build on the existing foundation of co-teaching, currently being implemented in the district. By formalizing what co-teaching looks like at the high school level, special and general educa-

tors could enrich each other's practices, and together, address the needs of *all* students, including students with disabilities, knowing they are *truly* co-teaching.

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