

Co-Teaching

This Considerations Packet provides basic information to professionals currently engaged in or considering a co-teaching model to include students with mild/moderate disabilities in the general education classroom. Topics include defining characteristics, getting acquainted with a co-teaching partner, developing a contract for co-teaching, variations of co-teaching, effective co-planning, communication issues, administrative issues, and advantages of co-teaching. The following administrative issues are also addressed: caseloads, planning time, team identities, and team continuity.

Defining Characteristics

Schools that strive to be inclusive may utilize a variety of models to serve students with disabilities in general education settings. These models include consultation services, paraprofessional support, pull-out services, and co-teaching. Co-teaching is one model of delivering special education services to students with disabilities within the general education classroom. The following characteristics define the unique relationship of co-teaching.

- **Two or more professionals**
A co-teaching relationship may consist of some combination of a special education teacher, general education teacher, and/or a related service provider.
- **Jointly delivering instruction**
In co-teaching, both professionals coordinate and deliver substantive instruction. They plan and use high-involvement strategies to engage all students in the instruction.
- **Diverse group of students**
Co-teachers provide instruction for a diverse group of students including those identified with disabilities and others who are not identified.
- **Shared classroom space**
In a co-teaching relationship, the majority of instruction takes place within the classroom in contrast to various pullout models where groups of students receive instruction in an alternative setting.

(Friend & Cook, 2003, p. 45-46)

Characteristics of Effective Co-Teachers

The development of a co-teaching relationship represents a significant change in the working conditions and day-to-day activities of school professionals, most of whom have historically worked independently. As they initiate co-teaching relationships, professionals should consider the defining characteristics of co-teaching and their own professional strengths.

The following list includes common characteristics of professionals who make good co-teachers. Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams (2000) found effective co-teachers demonstrate:

- Professional competence
- Personal confidence
- Respect of colleagues
- Good communication and problem-solving skills

- Flexibility and openness to new ideas
- Effective organizational skills
- Previous experience teaming with other professionals
- Ability to invest extra time as needed
- Commitment to weekly planning with partner
- Voluntary participation in co-teaching. (p. 198)

Getting Acquainted: Questions for Co-Teachers to Consider

As teachers begin to co-teach, partners can discuss their responses to each of the questions and statements below during an initial planning session. The items can serve as a vehicle to assist teams in getting to know each partner's teaching style.

1. What do you see as your greatest strengths as a teacher?
2. What are your classroom expectations? Positive consequences for following them? Negative consequences for not following them?
3. What are your daily routines for:
 - checking homework
 - sharpening pencils
 - students coming to class without materials or homework
 - dismissing for restroom, nurse, guidance counselor
 - students requesting help
 - starting class
 - ending class
4. Describe a typical lesson.
5. How do you plan lessons, units, field trips, tests, etc.?
6. How closely do you follow your plans?
7. How do you provide for varied student needs during a lesson?
8. Describe practice activities that you use.
9. What noise levels do you permit in your room?

10. How do you monitor and evaluate progress?

- Tests
- Quizzes
- Homework assignments
- Projects
- Oral reports
- Research papers
- Sharing progress with students
- Other: specify

11. How do you grade?

- Homework
- Assessments
- Projects
- Participation
- Other: specify

12. How do you maintain records of grades and progress?

- Grade book procedures
- Computer grade book
- Written feedback to students
- Other: specify

13. How do you calculate grading period, semester, and yearly grades?

14. What assistance do you allow students to receive during tests, etc.?

15. How do you communicate with families? When?

16. What disciplinary action do you take without assistance from administrators, guidance personnel, or specialists? When do you request assistance? How do you involve families in discipline?

17. How will we find the time to plan for co-teaching?

18. How will we share planning, preparing, teaching, evaluating, and reporting responsibilities?

19. What are some of your “pet peeves” in the classroom?

20. How will we build trust and maintain confidentiality in our classroom?

Adapted from “Planning for Effective Co-Teaching: The Key to Successful Inclusion”, by C. Walther-Thomas, M. Bryant, & S. Land, 1996, *Remedial and Special Education*, 17(4), 255-265.

Contract for Co-Teaching

Co-teaching teams may want to formalize certain aspects of their relationships by establishing ground rules or contracts. The following items may serve as a starting point as team members agree on how they will work together.

Before initiating a co-teaching relationship, I agree to:

- Value and respect the confidentiality of our relationship
- Meet weekly to plan our co-teaching
- Work to resolve conflicts that naturally occur.
- Do my fair share to ensure the success of our work together
- Other

Before the planning session, I agree to:

- Review curriculum and establish preliminary content goals
- Consider student needs and present levels of performance
- Reflect on previous lessons
- Other

Before the lesson, I agree to:

- Complete agreed-upon tasks in preparation for co-teaching
- Notify my partner of changes in the schedule
- Other

During the lesson, I agree to:

- Respect my co-teaching partner and give him/her an opportunity to lead the instruction
- Be willing to adjust plans to meet student needs
- Check with my partner before making major adjustments to lesson plans
- Other:

After the lesson, I agree to:

- Reflect on student outcomes
- Discuss the collaborative relationship with my co-teaching partner
- Fulfill follow-up responsibilities
- Other

Regularly during the year, I agree to:

- Discuss the co-teaching relationship
- Provide and accept suggestions that will enhance the co-teaching relationship and improve student learning
- Other

Co-Teaching Variations

Optimally, co-teaching teams use variations of the co-teaching model based on student, teacher, and content needs. Each member of the co-teaching team should take the opportunity to fulfill various roles. This helps reinforce to students the idea that both individuals are “teachers” and gives both teachers an opportunity to share in the joys and challenges of the classroom. Common variations of co-teaching are described below.

<u>Variation</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Example</u>
Interactive Teaching (Whole group)	Teachers alternate roles of presenting, reviewing, and monitoring instruction.	A general educator and specialist teach a whole group lesson on fractions. The specialist introduces the concept and provides initial instruction. The general educator directs the guided practice and evaluation. In future lessons, they may reverse roles.
Station Teaching (Small group)	Small groups of students rotate to various stations for instruction, review, and/or practice.	A specialist works with a small group of students on prewriting, while other students are working with the general educator on research skills. Another group of students is using the classroom computer to research a topic. Over the course of the week, all students work at each task/station.
Parallel Teaching (Small group)	Students are divided into mixed-ability groups and each co-teaching partner teaches the same material to one of the groups.	The class is divided in half and each teacher works with a group on creating a timeline of important events in history. At the end of the session, each group shares its timeline and reviews important concepts.
Alternative Teaching (Big group/small group)	One person teaches, reteaches, or enriches a concept for a small group, while the other monitors or teaches the remaining class members.	The specialist works with a small group of students on an enrichment project, while the general educator teaches the remainder of the students.

Adapted from “Planning for Effective Co-Teaching: The Key to Successful Inclusion”, by C. Walther-Thomas, M. Bryant, & S. Land, 1996, *Remedial and Special Education*, 17(4), 255-265.

Effective Co-planning

Co-planning is an important part of co-teaching arrangements that are viewed as positive and successful by both students and teachers. The following suggestions for co-planning should be considered as teachers initiate co-teaching relationships.

Setting the Stage for Planning

- ❑ Seek common planning time during the school day through your administrator.
- ❑ If planning time is not scheduled, consider other commitments and agree on a day and time to meet.
- ❑ Agree on the length of each planning session.
- ❑ Block out planning time in your calendar a semester in advance.
- ❑ Select a place for planning sessions that is free from distractions and interruptions.
- ❑ Make your commitment to co-planning a priority!

Before Each Planning Session

- ❑ Both teachers determine content/objectives to be covered, to include individualized education goals.
- ❑ Both teachers review content for the week and gather resource materials as necessary.
- ❑ Both teachers think about individual students who may need accommodations or modifications.

During Each Planning Session

- ❑ Clarify instructional objectives.
- ❑ Brainstorm possible teaching techniques and activities.
- ❑ Determine roles each teacher will play in instruction based on the variations of co-teaching to be used.
- ❑ Specify responsibilities for preparing materials.
- ❑ Stay on task.
- ❑ Adhere to the agreed-upon time limit.
- ❑ Provide a written copy of plans to both partners.

After Each Co-Taught Lesson

- ❑ Evaluate student outcomes.
- ❑ Reflect upon co-teaching relationships.
- ❑ Record notes regarding changes and suggestions for future lessons.

Adapted from “Collaborative Planning Tips,” by P. Parrott, 1992. Unpublished training materials.

Communication Skills

To be successful, professionals who work together closely as co-teachers interact must develop excellent communication skills. Co-teaching partners rely on each other's feedback to inform instruction and to develop as educators. With practice, teachers can learn to more clearly articulate to one another what they see, to better describe their students' strengths and what they believe students need in order to improve. When co-teachers reflect together on a lesson's success, they have the opportunity to develop effective communication skills essential to this kind of close collaboration in the classroom. Below are some specific strategies teachers can use to enhance their communication skills.

Paraphrasing

Repeat in your own words small bits of information that the other teacher has relayed to you. For example, "So what you are telling me is that David is not yet at grade level."

Perception checking

Reflect back an emotion that may have been communicated in the conversation. For example, "From what I hear you saying, it is frustrating for you not to have all the materials you need."

Asking Clarifying Questions

Gain a clear picture in observable terms by clarifying what you have heard. For example, "Are you saying that today's lesson makes you think the students have not gained mastery of this skill?"

Requesting Clarification

Use statements that ask for clarification of what has been said. For example, "Tell me more about what you think we can change for tomorrow's lesson."

Summarizing

Near the end of a discussion, give back in a concise manner what you heard to check if it is what the partner meant to say. For example, "Let me summarize what you've said. You need to have accommodations made for the small-group reading lesson by Friday."

Asking Relevant Questions

Ask questions related to the topic at hand that expand the discussion further. For example, "What evidence or data do we have that the students are mastering the skill?" Expanding discussion is different from asking questions that can be answered with yes or a no.

Active/Attentive Listening

Use nonverbal cues to acknowledge what is being said so that the speaker knows that you are engaged in the conversation. This can be done by using attentive body language such as making eye contact or leaning toward the speaker.

Factors That Influence Effective Communication

Many factors influence a person's ability to actively listen, an essential component in effective communication. It is recommended that co-teaching partners pay attention to these factors and become aware of the influence they have on their ability to communicate. Listed below are several common practices that may interfere with effective communication.

- **Distraction from extraneous details:** At times attention is drawn away from the communication exchange to details extraneous to the message being conveyed. For example, we may be distracted by a person's physical appearance, his other verbal or gestural actions, or there may be something in the environment that interferes with our ability to listen and fully engage in the communication exchange.
- **Emotional block:** Because of personal issues related to the problem at hand, it is sometimes difficult to discuss the issue objectively. For example, the teacher may have a son or daughter with the same problem.
- **Selective perception:** Everyone uses selective perception. Consciously or unconsciously, we choose to focus on only some pieces of information while largely ignoring others. Since communication is extremely complex, selective perception is a necessary process to filter the large amounts of information we receive. However, we must remain vigilant to ensure that our personal biases do not inhibit our perceptions, and ultimately our understanding of the other person's situation and viewpoint. For example, the teachers may focus totally on what student does not know.
- **Frame of reference:** Each of us comes to a communication exchange with unique experiences, training, and beliefs. These combine to form our frame of reference when approaching situations and engaging in communications. Our frame of reference influences which aspects, if any, of the communication we will minimize or give preference to.
- **Hidden agenda:** The hidden agenda interferes when a person hears messages only in reference to his or her own needs rather than listening fully to what the other person is trying to communicate. For example, the teacher may be suggesting a lesson because of their comfort with the material rather than what the student needs.
- **Physical environment:** The location where meetings are held can contribute to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication. When possible, try to meet in settings that minimize disruptions and afford sufficient space to support positive communication.
- **Defensiveness:** A person's insecurity can make him or her distort questions into accusations and replies into justifications. When this happens, begin to clarify and check for accurate meaning. Tell the other person that you are feeling defensive about what has been said. For example, the teacher may feel her competency is being questioned when the co-teacher makes a suggestion to enhance a lesson.

- **Rehearsing a response:** At times, we allow ourselves to move ahead during the communication exchange, often thinking of what we are going to say or do after the speaker has finished. Such actions often mean that we are only superficially listening to the current message and likely to miss what the other person is saying. Make certain that you are listening closely enough to give a summary of what is being said.

(Adapted from “Instructional Consultation Team Training Manual,” by T. Gravois, S. Rosenfield, & E. Gickling, 1998.

Common Co-Teaching Issues

As teachers begin to co-teach they become aware of each partner’s professional practices, and conflict sometimes ensues. Although the conflicts and their solutions differ from team to team, at a minimum, the following issues should be reflected on and articulated so a clearly defined, thriving partnership may begin.

Which Students Are Mine?

Teachers are often concerned about who is responsible for which students. When co-teaching partners begin to share responsibility for teaching, they shift their thinking from “my” students and “your” students to “our” students. Partners must discuss their roles as they co-plan. Switching roles and dividing responsibilities equitably allows teachers the opportunity to work with the entire class. Historically, the general education teacher was responsible for all the students in the class and the special educator took the lead in dealing with special education issues. However, many co-teaching teams determine their roles by looking at the strengths each partner brings to the classroom and how they can professionally best support each one another. One benefit of the co-teaching model is that no one teacher has to make decisions about student progress in isolation.

How Will We Grade?

Determining who will give grades and how students will be graded is a common dilemma. Teachers can develop guidelines for grading based on data-driven decisions about how much new learning is taking place. When students are given a pretest to determine how much prior knowledge they have on a subject, co-teachers can best decide how to differentiate instruction and grades. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson (personal communication, June 2003), an example of differentiating grades is to assign students both a letter and a number grade. The number indicates if students are working on grade level. For example, number 1 indicates a student who is working on above-grade-level material. Number 2 indicates a student who is working at grade level, and number 3 indicates that a student is working below grade level. The letter grades show the degree of mastery of concepts a student demonstrates, and reflect how we traditionally assign grades. Using the combined system proposed here, if a student earns a 1 C grade, it means that, although he or she is able to handle above-grade-level material, the student is working at an average level. Similarly, a student who earns a 3 A is mastering below-grade-level curriculum. This is one example of how collaborative teachers can show the unique abilities of their students.

(See [Considerations Packet](#) on Grading in Inclusive Classrooms.)

Who Is Responsible For Creating Classroom Expectations?

Typically teachers agree on the types of behaviors that support learning in the classroom. Co-teaching teams can discuss the rules and consequences that have been most effective for them. In general, it is important that students understand that both teachers have equal authority for all students in the classroom. Together, they can decide the role that each person will play in ensuring that class routines run smoothly.

How Do We Assign Classroom Space?

Everyone needs a place to call his or her own in the classroom. Thinking about how much time the special educator will be spending in the general education setting will help determine the amount of space each teacher will need. It is important to show students that each teacher has an equal amount of authority in the classroom. One way this can be done is by having designated teacher areas that look the same. Some administrators decide that both teachers move to a new classroom to begin fresh without one teacher encroaching on another's traditional territory.

What Do We Tell the Students and Families?

Teachers may be unsure of how much information to provide students and their families regarding the reasons for co-teaching arrangements. Some students may already have experienced having two adults in a classroom, but many have not. Students should be informed that they will have two teachers with equal authority. Teachers can generate excitement about the co-teaching model by conveying to parents and students that all students will receive extra help and that, working together, the teachers can be more effective. Families have to be brought in early, during the planning process, if co-teaching is new in your school. Sometimes the special education teacher can be introduced as the learning specialist for the entire class. Parents of average to high-achieving children may express concerns that their children's education will be hampered because students with special needs are placed in the classroom. Teachers may need to explain that these students fare as well or better academically and socially, when students with special needs are in the general education classroom and that all students benefit from the support provided by the special education teacher (Argüelles, Schumm, & Vaughn, 1996).

How Will We Divide Responsibilities?

During co-planning, teachers decide who is responsible for preparing each part of the lesson. It is important to divide the responsibilities equally and to vary the roles of each partner so that one person is not responsible for the same duties or students every week. Both teachers must grade papers, construct tests, create classroom accommodations, develop IEPs, and design lessons. Partners who have shared responsibilities for all facets of the classroom and take ownership of every child show dedication to the co-teaching variations.

Administrative Issues

The building administrator has an important role in supporting the creation, development, and maintenance of effective co-teaching teams. With an understanding of special education and schoolwide issues, the building administrator can develop schedules, teaching assignments, and policies and routines that enhance co-teaching relationships throughout the building. The following are among the important administrative issues related to co-teaching.

Caseload Distribution

Individual student placement decisions are ultimately a function of the student's IEP. Best practice requires that a continuum of services be available to meet IEP goals. Administrators can provide critical leadership and support for a co-teaching model by creating and supporting fair and equitable caseload distributions. Too often, effective co-teaching teams receive more than their fair share of challenging and difficult students. For example, students with 504 plans, students who are at risk but not eligible for special services, and others who need a little extra support are often placed in a co-teaching classrooms. In spite of good intentions, this limits the effectiveness of co-teaching and can be unfair to teachers and students. Thus, administrators must avoid overloading co-teaching teams.

Planning Time

Administrators can support co-teaching teams by providing them with adequate planning time on a regular basis. In some schools, administrative staff covers classrooms on a periodic basis to provide teachers with longer blocks of co-planning time. Finally, once planning time is built into the schedule, administrators should avoid scheduling meetings during that time or calling on teachers to cover "emergency" situations within the school, thereby defeating the purpose behind the special time set aside.

Identity Issues

Administrators can assist co-teachers in creating strong team identities. For example, by including both names on class rosters, classroom doors, and in the school handbook, students, parents and other staff members will begin to see the co-teaching relationship as a true partnership. While these identity issues may seem small individually, taken together they contribute much to the development of strong co-teaching teams.

Continuity

As with any relationship, co-teaching teams take time to develop. Beginning teams deal with issues of getting acquainted with each other's styles, preferences, and strengths. For example, general education teachers may need time to get used to sharing the classroom and the spotlight with another adult. Specialist educators may need time to familiarize themselves with the content and the routines of a general education classroom. Administrators should consider these issues as they make decisions regarding teacher placement. Co-teaching teams note that the learning curve is steep during the first year of co-teaching. However, many teams report a rise in satisfaction and effectiveness during the second year and greatly increased effectiveness and student outcomes during their third year. By providing teams the time to become efficient and effective, administrators can greatly increase the benefits of co-teaching to students and teachers.

Advantages of Co-Teaching

For Teachers:

- Opportunity to problem-solve with another professional and receive additional support within the classroom (Gerber & Popp, 1999)
- Both teachers viewed as "real" teachers
- Shared classroom responsibilities such as completing progress reports and conducting parent conferences (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczyński, 2002)
- Higher quality teaching and classroom practices

- Shared expertise to reach all students
- Growth in knowledge sharing and skill development
- Increased confidence in teaching students with diverse academic and social needs
- Improved attitude toward students with disabilities
- Enhanced personal support
- Effective approach for student learning and professional development

For Students:

- Extra support through the use of accommodations and modifications (Gerber & Popp, 1999)
- Lack of stigmatization
- Students with disabilities benefiting from appropriate peer models and higher performance expectations
- Benefiting from strategy instruction
- Strong participation rate and pass rates near or above the 70% target for accreditation in reading and math for students with disabilities (Gerber & Popp, 1999)
- Academic success of students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances comparable to that of the students without disabilities (Cawley et al., 2002)
- Decreased number of discipline referrals
- Students with disabilities enjoying a higher level of social acceptance in the general education setting (Cawley et al., 2002)
- The cognitive competence perceptions of students with disabilities increasing over time (Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999)
- Significant posttest increases in social skills development for younger and older students with disabilities (Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999)
- Improved grades and deeper understanding of the material for students with disabilities
- Improved student behavior
- More student questions answered and more feedback given on assignments
- More on-task time
- Acquisition of previously undeveloped social and communication skills
- Increased interaction with peers
- Achievement of more numerous and higher-quality IEP goals
- Better preparation for post-school experiences
- Improved school attendance (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002)
- Greater acceptance and valuing of human differences
- Improved self-concept
- Development of capacity for warm and caring friendships
- Low-achieving students benefiting from review, clarity, and feedback (ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 1998)

References

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Additional Resources

The following resources on co-teaching are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Call 1-800-323-4489 and select the library option to request material. Visit the website at <http://www.wm.edu/ttac> for a complete listing of all materials. Select the "Library" link and enter grading as the subject of the search.

Title	Author	Call letters
Collaboration: A Key to Effective Inclusion	LRP Publications	IN50
Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey	Winer, M., & Ray, K.	CC5
Cooperative Teaching: Rebuilding the Schoolhouse for All Students	Bauwens, J., & Hourcade, I.	CC2
Creating Inclusive Schools: A New Design for All Students	Dyck, N., Pemberton, J., Woods, K., & Sundbye, N.	IN73
Inclusion Strategies for Students with Learning and Behavior Problems: Perspectives, Experiences, and Best Practices	Zionts, P.	IN60.1
Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals	Friend, M., & Cook, L.	CC3.1
Planning Inclusive Classrooms	Lightner, L.	IN36
Secondary School Inclusion: Examples of Excellence	LRP Publications	IN48
Strategies for Teacher Collaboration	Aldinger, L., Warger, C., & Eavy, P.	CC9
Working Together: The Art of Consulting and Communicating	DeBoer, A.	CC19.1
Working Together: Tools for Collaborative Teaching	DeBoer, A., & Fister, S.	CC20.1

This *Considerations Packet* was revised by Sue Land and Donni Stickney, March 2004.