

Teaching in Tandem:

Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom

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Introduction

We just don't know was the response to the question *What can we expect from this child?* The year was 1972. The question was posed to a doctor holding a young child with special needs during the exposé of Staten Island's Willowbrook State School (Primo, 1972). How did anyone know the capabilities of children who were not exposed to any typical conditions of life, including basic hygiene and social interactions? Today, with the advantages of decades of federal and state legislation, research, and the devoted practices and advocacy of educators and families, life for a child with special needs is quite different than it was in the 1970s.

But we still have the same answer to the same question: *What can we expect from this child? We don't know.* And we won't know unless we relentlessly push ourselves to remember that all children are entitled to experience the rhythms and conditions of life that most of us enjoy (Wolfensberger, 1972), including an education at a neighborhood school, in typical classes, with highly qualified teachers who are teaching standard curricula.

To reach that goal, schools are adopting the practice of co-teaching. Simply defined, co-teaching is the pairing of a general education teacher and a special education teacher in a classroom filled with diverse learners. We've seen

it work. We've seen students with special needs thrive in classrooms where co-teachers create amazing opportunities for learning.

Admittedly, the stakes are high. Learning doesn't automatically happen when two teachers are put in a classroom. If co-teaching is done poorly, instead of getting more intensive instruction, increased opportunities to learn, and reduced stigma, students with special needs get just the opposite. Having experienced many successful co-taught classes, we are committed to supporting those co-teachers who are striving and succeeding in their quest to improve the teaching and learning of all students. Co-teaching is difficult and complex and dependent on a host of interwoven conditions (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010), but success in a co-taught inclusive class for many students with special needs is eminently possible.

As with any educational setting, there is a wide variance in co-teaching techniques, and it's typical for administrators, teachers, students, and parents to have questions about the program. *What does it look like? How does it work? Is it effective? Why are we doing this? Are we doing this right?* Answers to these questions are crucial to the effectiveness of the program, yet most of the questions are rarely satisfactorily answered and may be baffling to practitioners. Although some teachers and administrators may attend workshops, seminars, and college courses on co-teaching, the professional development on co-teaching is often haphazard. Teachers and administrators are involved in the program one year, but not the next; groups of teachers or administrators are trained one year, but the next group may not be given the same access to information or training. Other educators may be just interested in co-teaching but don't know where to find helpful information.

Administrators, teachers, and parents have asked where they can find reader-friendly information on co-teaching. And, now, we're giving you (and them) the answer. *Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom* gives concise and informative answers to a comprehensive array of critical questions and provides a much-needed resource for teachers, administrators, parents, and paraprofessionals. Written in a question-and-answer format, readers can quickly learn about the components of co-teaching. The questions are authentic, culled from the queries of active teachers and administrators, as well as from preservice teachers and parents. The information is useful to those already involved in co-teaching programs who want to make the programs more effective, and to those yet to embark on the effort. We will describe co-teaching, show you how to solve problems when new areas of difficulties arise, and provide you with a

range of knowledge and tools. We've included short case studies about issues common to co-teaching situations for you to use in starting conversations and brainstorming your own solutions to day-to-day problems inherent to many co-teaching programs. In addition, each chapter addresses important and essential co-teaching components and includes voices from those involved in co-teaching programs—both positive and negative responses—as we work to dispel myths and build the scaffolds for an equitable education for all students.

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I know my child has significant learning problems but I want her to have as typical a life as others. That means having high expectations and being in classes with the kids from the neighborhood.

—*A parent of a child with learning disabilities*

It's taken me a while and it's a complex program but I'm seeing the benefits to all kids in the co-teaching classes. The co-teachers are really able to differentiate instruction to everyone in the class.

—*An elementary school principal*

In September, it was very overwhelming but my co-teacher and I kept trying different ways of getting the students to learn and behave. By June the students with disabilities were thriving. This experience made us realize how important it is to give students with special needs a chance in a general education class.

—*A general education elementary co-teacher*

Sometimes I really wonder if we are doing the right thing with co-teaching. I don't feel that we really address the learning needs of the students and maybe they could learn a lot more if they were in segregated settings. On a social level, I support inclusive co-teaching classes, but on an academic level I don't think the students can keep up.

—*A special education elementary co-teacher*

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Understanding the Basics

Ms. Bell, the middle school special education supervisor, is talking to the parent of a student (Ramond) in the self-contained class (a substantially separate, segregated class for students with disabilities) about the benefits of learning in an inclusive, co-taught setting. Ms. Bell knows that even 5 years ago she wouldn't have been having this conversation with this particular parent. But co-teaching has been established in the middle school, and teams of teachers have become more adept at understanding the diverse needs of students, as well as their often invisible strengths. Ms. Bell believes the time is right to include students with challenging learning needs in general education classes. Ramond's mother seems a bit apprehensive but hopeful; Ms. Bell knows that it will take true collaboration among the teachers, the parent, and the administration to support this new placement. In fact, this afternoon, Ms. Bell is meeting with the 6th grade team to discuss Ramond's transition into the inclusive, co-taught classes.

The 6th grade teaching team listens as Ms. Bell details the plan for Ramond to begin attending and learning in their classes. The teaching team is Ms. Rider,

special education; Ms. Simpson, social studies and language arts; Mr. Ross, science; and Ms. Levin, math. They have been working together for three years and they see how beneficial co-teaching is for all students. They listen as Ms. Bell describes Ramond. Yes, he does have difficulties with basic reading and writing skills, along with struggles in understanding and remembering content. Yet he is a hard worker, social, and eager to be part of a typical class. The teachers can see that they will really need to collaborate and plan lessons so that Ramond can learn the material. Although they are worried about the fast pace and scope of their various curriculums, they are up for the new challenges they will face while teaching Ramond. The teachers have learned through their experiences in co-teaching that together they can guide students to learn well beyond original expectations.



Co-teaching is the pairing of a special education teacher and a general education teacher in an inclusive general education classroom for the purpose of providing high-level instruction to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of students. The inclusive classroom has students with and without legally classified disabilities. For example, the short vignette portrays Ramond, a student with significant learning difficulties, who will attend co-taught classes in which co-teachers can address his learning needs.

Co-teaching is not *team teaching*, the practice of two general education teachers combining their classes and teaching some or many lessons. Nor should co-teaching be confused with the practice of adding a paraprofessional to a general education teacher's inclusive classroom.

What led to the co-teaching movement?

The growth in co-teaching can be traced to the changing dimensions of special education in the United States. Until 1975, there was no federal mandate regarding the education of children with disabilities and millions of children were denied an education because educators felt they couldn't meet the needs of students with disabilities. That year, landmark legislation provided the legal basis for educating children with disabilities with the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. From that historic point on, every school district in the country was mandated to provide a free and

appropriate education to all children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Under the new federal legislation, students exhibiting difficulties needed to be classified as having a disability and also deemed in need of special education services to qualify for an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) that specified placement, related services, and testing modifications, as well as goals for academic and social improvement.

Despite the good intentions of the 1975 act, many students with special needs remained forever in separate special education placements with social and educational ramifications. Although students with special needs now had access to special education services, many were taught in segregated settings that were not always in their neighborhood schools and had restricted access to typically achieving peers and learning environments. Both social and academic performance gaps (Deshler, n.d.) between students with and without disabilities became apparent, and achievement levels of both groups became increasingly disparate throughout the school years.

A call for reform ensued with the first major effort being the Regular Education Initiative proposed by Madeleine C. Will, former assistant secretary of education (Will, 1986). Will advocated for the merging of special and regular education through what is now known as the Inclusive Movement. Both the Regular Education Initiative and the Inclusive Education Movement expect that many, if not most, students with disabilities will be taught in the general education setting.

Co-teaching, the pairing of general and special educators in a general education classroom, is one of the supportive structures to ensure an appropriate education for a student with disabilities in an inclusive setting. Co-teaching is the most popular inclusive educational model to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities previously enrolled in exclusive, segregated settings (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005).

What services are available to students with special needs?

Children with special needs are taught in a wide variety of settings from the least restrictive (general education class with related services) to the most exclusive (homebound or hospital facility), with integrated co-teaching as part of the continuum. Here is a description of the continuum of services available to students with special needs:

- **General education class**, which includes students who receive the majority of their education program in a typical classroom and receive special education and related services in pull-out sessions.
- **Consultant teacher services**, which provide direct and indirect services to students with special needs who attend regular education classes, including career and technical education classes.
- **Resource room** provided outside the general education classroom for the purpose of providing support and remediation for students with special needs.
- **Integrated co-teaching**, which provides specially designed instruction and academic instruction to a group of students with and without special needs in an inclusive classroom.
- **Separate class**, which includes students who receive special education and related services outside the regular classroom.
- **Separate school**, which includes students who receive special education and related services in separate day schools.
- **Residential facility**, which includes students who receive education in a public or private residential facility, at public expense.
- **Homebound or hospital environment**, which includes students placed in and receiving special education in hospital or homebound programs.

In fall 2007, some 95 percent of 6- to 21-year-old students with special needs were served in neighborhood schools; 3 percent were served in a separate school for students with disabilities; 1 percent were placed in regular private schools by their parents; and less than 1 percent each were served in one of the following environments: in a separate residential facility, homebound or in a hospital, or in a correctional facility (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Why co-teach?

The effective teaching of students with special needs is a major educational and social issue in the United States. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation clearly targets students who have difficulties learning and the educational systems responsible for growth in learning. Why is this important? As compared with typically achieving students, students with special needs are more likely to be retained for at least one year (26 percent), have a lower graduation rate (41 percent drop out), are less likely to go to college, have less earning potential, and are more likely to be involved in our penal system (Bowe, 2006). The United

States classifies nearly 7 million students, from 3 years old to 21 years old, as being in need of special education services (Aud et al., 2011). The need for an effective education program for these students is clear.

To provide an intensive educational environment for students with significant learning needs, many districts are increasingly opting to institute co-teaching models. Many students who would have been in self-contained special education classes or in special settings are now part of inclusive classrooms—thus, the need for two teachers, one of whom is a special education teacher. As co-teachers, the special education teacher and the general education teacher share the responsibility of educating all students in the class. Together, they understand the needs of each student, plan effective instruction, exchange roles and responsibilities, and employ flexible teaching practices to create opportunities for student learning.

What is the difference between mainstreaming and inclusion?

There is a fundamental difference between mainstreaming and inclusion. Mainstreaming is the practice of integrating students with disabilities into a general education setting, moving them from a special education setting. Mainstreamed students “earn” their way into the general education class by demonstrating academic and behavior levels considered to be within the accepted range of the general education classroom. Mainstreaming puts the onus on the student to make the grade, so to speak, in order to be included in the general education setting. In addition to academic mainstreaming, social mainstreaming is also done in nonacademic classes so that students with special needs in segregated settings can interact with typically achieving peers. Traditionally, students from special education classes are mainstreamed for periods such as lunch, recess, and art.

Inclusion, on the other hand, assumes that the general education setting is the most appropriate setting for most, if not all, students. Students do not have to earn their way into the general education classroom, and supports are put into place to ensure their needs are met. These supports take on a variety of forms (as outlined in the IEP) and may include co-teachers, paraprofessionals, curriculum adaptations, accommodations, test modifications, specifically designed materials, and technology and supportive services from counselors, social workers, and psychologists.