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The Benefits and Drawbacks of Co-Teaching in an Inclusive Middle School

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This study was designed to determine the benefits and/or drawbacks of co-teaching.

Three educators participated in this study including two general education teachers and one intervention specialist. The study was designed to utilize an interview format, however, one participant chose not to be interviewed so, the study was revised to utilize a questionnaire covering the same questions designed for the interview. All three participants were educators in a rural middle school.

Results indicated that two of the participants (the intervention specialist and general education teacher enjoyed co-teaching and have worked through many of the drawbacks together, which has made them stronger teachers for themselves and the students in their classrooms. The other participant did not go into great depth with responses and choose not to answer critical questions involving one's most memorable experience or what was learned from that experience.

	4 Co-teaching
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The Benefits and Drawbacks of Co-Teaching in an Inclusive Middle School

While completing student teaching, the researcher was placed in a co-teaching situation and had an opportunity to work with two different general education teachers in a co-teaching environment as an intervention specialist. One general education teacher was not especially helpful in the co-teaching environment and didn't seem to be enjoying being in the environment versus a second general education teacher in a similar co-teaching environment. This situation led to the purpose of this study, to determine the benefits and/or drawbacks of co-teaching.

The study was conducted in a rural region of the Midwestern United States at a middle school with an enrollment of 383 students in grades six through eight. The district covers approximately 169 square miles.

#### Review of the Literature

Co-teaching a strategy for meeting the needs of students with disabilities who are included in the general education classroom is becoming more and more accepted across the country in districts, regardless of whether teachers, administrators, or parents accept the idea. Due to limited resources, co-teaching is a becoming a necessity being faced in education today. The results of this small case study will help to illuminate three teachers' opinions about their co-teaching experiences.

This topic is particularly important for many reasons. Ever since 1975, when Public Law 94-142: The Education of All Handicapped Act, mandated that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment (Waldron, 1996) and when President George Bush passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001.

NCLB has many parts to it, one major requirement being that all students across the nation are required to take standardized tests, regardless of their disability or standing. Included in the list of standardized tests is a Graduation Test (GT) which is required of all seniors in the state in order to successfully graduate from high school. Districts are also beginning to implement co-teaching in order to help them meet the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990), a law that eliminated the exclusion of children with disabilities from the education systems (Waldron, 1996). Definition of Co-Teaching

Co-teaching can be defined many different ways, but the one most appropriate for this study is "two or more teachers who are equal in status located in the classroom together, working together, and providing instruction" (as cited in Bouck, E. C. (2007). Characteristics of Successful Co-Teaching

Lodato Wilson reports that when co-teaching is successful, it is compared to a strong marriage that includes planning, sharing, reflecting, and collaborating with one another. When co-teaching is done poorly it is compared to a blind date and co-teachers just waiting for the year to end. If co-teachers do not get along in the classroom, it can be a very long and hard year for both teachers involved. This can happen when teachers have different teaching styles, conflict of personalities, or one teacher not feeling as useful as he/she wants to be in the classroom.

Teachers' Impressions of Co-Teaching

The literature indicates co-teaching special education teachers have felt more like an aide in the classroom, rather than a teacher and often feel students view them as aides as opposed to a second teacher. Many special education teachers don't feel as useful as they wish to be in classroom with a content teacher. They worry about stepping on the content teachers' toes, pushing boundaries, and overstepping their limits. Content area teachers often feel they do more in preparation as well as during the lesson than their coteaching partner.

## Foundations of Co-Teaching

Co-teaching can bring a lot of tension such as constraining one's existing roles, and devaluing another's role or making individuals feel not important or needed in the classroom. Before beginning a co-teaching relationship in a classroom, teachers must discuss a variety of things such as: grading, student participation, principles of behavior and classroom management and accommodations (Austin, V. L.). By going over these topics first, before co-teaching in front of students, can prevent any tensions and apprehensions the co-teachers may have about the situation, as well as making the two teachers more comfortable around each other in the classroom while teaching.

Teachers who are involved in an inclusive environment and co-teach with other teachers need to be flexible, collaborate with one another on a daily basis, and be very open-minded to teaching styles, ideas in the classroom, and approaches. For co-teaching partners to be beneficial in the classroom for themselves and the students, they need to address issues such as their roles when in the classroom, provide instruction and handling classroom management and discipline, as well as issues such as loss of professional independence (Bouck, 2007). Some of these issues will arise the longer they teach and can be discussed more in-depth, allowing the teachers to become that much more comfortable in the classroom together.

Attitudes Toward and Against Inclusion

In every district, there are always people who are against inclusion and coteaching including teachers, administration, and parents. Research indicates that teachers worry about accommodating and modifying their lessons to meet the needs of children with disabilities in the classroom to the point where they consider that they have had to "dummy-down" their lessons to the extent that it is no longer challenging for the other students.

General education teachers often feel they do not have enough training, they already have enough "responsibility" in their classroom, and they might even be afraid to have children with disabilities in their classroom (insert citation). Some teachers feel children with disabilities disrupt the class more, get other children off task, and become just a "problem" in their classroom (insert citation). Parents often worry about the "normal" children not being challenged enough by the teacher because of having to modify lessons and activities in the classroom for the children with disabilities.

Administration is sometimes opposes inclusion because they do not want to fight with the parents/teachers about the issue in their school and district. Waldron (1996) outlines the perspectives of proponents and opponents of inclusion. First, Waldron outlines the arguments for inclusion:

- 1. Exclusion of students from regular education classrooms is morally indefensible.
- 2. The existence of a separate special education system discourages regular education from taking responsibility for all students.
- 3. Labeling students makes it appear that the student or the disability is the cause of educational problems instead of the regular education system's limitations.

Excluding students from the classroom supports this belief that nay difficulties are their fault.

- Regular educators have become increasingly threatened by students with disabilities in their classrooms. They need more exposure for both the teacher and student to experience success.
- 5. Years of separate problems have not demonstrated increased success in teaching academic skills to learners with special needs.
- 6. There is no need for all teachers to be trained to work with students with unique learning styles as long as these students are excluded from the regular classroom.
- 7. Good teaching methods are successful with all students. Students with disabilities may require adaptations of content or techniques, but can benefit from good teaching as much as typical students. Similarly, typical students can benefit from adaptations for students with disabilities.
- 8. Teaching all students in the same environment underscores the use of technology and expanded resources, benefiting everyone.
- 9. Separate systems require labeling of students. These labels are difficult to remove once they are assigned.
- 10. Far beyond original intentions, too many students have been labeled as "disabled." This excessive labeling has been true especially with students with learning disabilities.
- 11. Self-esteem of students is impaired by exclusion.
- 12. The ability of students to function in normalized adult environments in hindered by the lack of early interactions with typical peers.

- 13. Too much time is wasted in determining eligibility for services and too little time is spent actually serving students.
- 14. Special education programs are disjointed, often resulting in different administrators and funding sources based on categories of students served.
- 15. Pull-out programs fragment instruction for students, casing them to miss the very instruction they need in the regular education classroom. (Waldron, 1996, p. 38)
  These arguments reflect the discussions of Audette & Algozzine, 1992; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Skrtic, 1986; 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1984.

Next, Waldron (1996) outlines the opposing view from those who do not support inclusive practices:

- 1. Historically, needs of students with disabilities have not been met in regular education classes. This factor has underscored the special education movement.
- Some students requiring special education will be more restricted in the regular education classroom, where they are rejected by others and fail to learn necessary academic and survival skills.
- More than two-thirds of students with disabilities are already educated in regular education classes, often with support in a Resource class.
- 4. The long fought-after rights of parents and professionals may be lost by a reintegration of students into regular classrooms.
- 5. After years of effort and litigation, specific rights such as due process and individual education programs may be lost.
- 6. Special education funding is threatened by blending with regular education.

- Additional monies to make the Regular Education Initiative work will not be available.
- 8. There are justifiable concerns regarding equity vs. excellence, wherein the education of average and gifted learners will become "watered-down" to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.
- Regular educators have been missing from Regular Education Initiative planning.
   The majority of advocates have been vocal researchers and scholars from special education departments at universities.
- 10. The movement has been a "top-down" attempt at control from federal, state, and local agencies hoping to save money. Regular and special education teachers have not been included in planning efforts.
- 11. Most regular educators and administrators are not ready to meet the needs of students with special needs.
- 12. Regular educators are already overburdened.
- 13. Special educators are threatened by a lack of direction; Whom will they teach?

  Where will they instruct students? Will they be equal members in collaborative planning and implementation?
- 14. Community anger is continuing to accelerate at the perceived favoritism granted to students with special needs. Programming for these students is viewed as being at the expense of students in regular education.
- 15. Administrators and teachers are forced to defend special education students; participation in regular education classes to the broader community. (Waldron, 1996, p. 44)

These arguments reflect the discussions of Cruickshank, 1977; Davis, 1989; Hallahan, & Kauffman, 1991; Kauffman, Gerber, & Semmel, 1988; Skrtic, 1991.

Research indicates that students involved in the inclusion process bloom and really enjoy it more than being in a self-contained classroom. Being with their peers creates a higher self-esteem, improves confidence in themselves, and many other aspects children need to help them become successful (Kohler-Evans, P. A.). The social interaction of being in a classroom with their peers does more than any teacher can teach in a classroom and gives the child a sense of belonging.

While completing my student teaching, I was very curious to why one of the general education teachers was more forward and very open about being in the classroom co-teaching and the other general education teacher was not at all, but in fact the complete opposite. In my research I found many general education teachers did not like co-teaching or inclusion in their classrooms. Many intervention specialists did not like co-teaching either I found, but the intervention specialist I had the pleasure of working with enjoyed the co-teaching environment.

#### Methods

The purpose of my study was to show how general educators and intervention specialists feel about inclusion in the classroom. I did my student teaching in a middle school and involved a co-teaching environment with three teachers. One of the general education teachers was very easy going and I could very easily tell he/she enjoyed having the inclusion students in the classroom. The other general education teacher was a different story. This situation led to the purpose of this study, to determine the benefits and/or drawbacks of co-teaching.

## Location

This study was conducted in a rural middle school in the Midwestern region of the United States. The researcher was a student teacher in this environment and worked with all three of these teachers for five weeks in a co-teaching relationship. After the student teaching experience was completed, these three teachers were recruited to participate in this study as a relationship was already established and a level of trust was already built. Participants

Participants included in this study included two general education teachers and one intervention specialist. All three participants range in age from thirty to fifty and have been in a co-teaching setting for a few years.

## Instrument

All three participants were invited to independently complete an 8-item questionnaire. (See Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire.) The questionnaire consisted of eight questions regarding how long they had been co-teaching, their teaching experience, and their experiences with co-teaching with the teachers as well as the students. The researcher believes that the participants' responses are reliable and valid due to the relationship that was developed with the researcher during the earlier student teaching experience.

The questionnaire was administered after the student teaching was completed to prevent bias of any kind. For confidentiality reasons, individuals' responses were not shared with the other participants or with any other teachers/students/staff/adults to ensure their complete honesty in their responses about co-teaching and their past and present experiences.

My method was effective and showed in my results. The location, instrument, and participants are all something to consider in the results I received. My results would have had a different outcome if the location, participation, and instrument were different, but I am very happy with the results I received.

#### Results

This section describes the findings from questionnaires completed by three middle school teachers who worked in a co-teaching environment.

The first general education teacher (GT-1) had been working in a co-teaching environment for ten years and reported to enjoy it. However, GT-1 reported it can be frustrating at times.

Some problems identified with co-teaching is that it can be frustrating, too many identified students, not enough staff, difficult to plan ahead, developing or thinking about how to teach something to special education students is challenging, and it can be hard to communicate plans and ideas with the other co-teacher involved.

Identified benefits include being able to bounce ideas off another and get a different perceptive on things. GT-1 reported that when co-teaching works—it can be very successful, the special education students feel part of their peer group, and when all teachers are involved in the lesson—all the students seem more "in tune" when its just not one teacher talking.

The intervention specialist (IT-1) in this study had been teaching for ten years as well in the co-teaching environment and enjoys the many aspects of co-teaching. IT-1 reported that co-teaching can be hard if you work with a partner for no more than a year and are not given the chance to develop a routine. It can also be difficult finding your role

in the classroom (who leads? who grades? how do we grade?). IT-1 states that not being able to "take control" of a behavior situation the way [IT-1] would like to—due to fear of stepping on the co-teacher's toes, and not being able to provide enough intervention to an extremely large group of students in a regular classroom.

IT-1 describes the benefits of co-teaching to include building a relationship with a colleague, working with each other's strengths and weaknesses, and building a routine with one another in the classroom. IT-1 feels students benefit from the expertise of two teachers who may choose different approaches to address the same content. Students are able to work with a variety of teachers and see the diverse teaching and behavioral approaches they implement. It gives IT-1 the benefit of seeing what works in which situations, creating an opportunity for students who are at-risk to benefit from intervention strategies employed in the regular classroom.

IT-1 has learned over the years [he/she] can make an impact on more students in the regular classroom than in a smaller pull-out environment, but there is a line where too many students can be detrimental.

The second general education teacher (GT-2) was very responsive in answering the questionnaire. GT-2 has been co-teaching for two years with the same intervention specialist. GT-2 has enjoyed the co-teaching experience, but reported it took some adjustments at the beginning. An issue arose with co-teacher input feeling more like interrupting, although it was done politely, it made GT-2 feel uncomfortable.

GT-2 pointed out some drawbacks including the co-teacher may not be able to get to the room for the beginning of class when GT-2 may have had something planned, and finding the time to communicate with one another can be very hard. GT-2 felt if more

time to discuss weekly plans was available, they would be able to be on the same page during class time.

While co-teaching GT-2 has benefited by helping [him/her] to look at learning and teaching in other ways for the students to grasp more. GT-2 called them "tricks" [he/she] has learned to satisfy the needs of students with IEP's much more.

GT-2 feels the students truly benefit from being in a regular classroom for many reasons that include: discipline issues, students can receive more help when needed with two teachers present, and students benefit a great deal by having two different styles the two different teachers may use to present the same topic.

I'm very happy with the answers I received from all three participants in my questionnaire. GT-1, GT-2, and IT-1 provided insight to what I found in my research literature. All were cooperative and answered the questions to the best of their ability for my research and lead me to answers of the benefits and drawbacks of co-teaching in the classroom from their experiences.

#### Discussion

The findings from this study confirm the findings in the literature in some areas. The teachers in this study worked together and all agreed that collaborating with one another is a big part of making co-teaching successful, although all admit it is hard at times.

Both general education teachers talked about challenges they experienced that were the similar to those reported in the literature. Specifically, the general education teachers reported that it was difficult to plan and hard to communicate ideas and plans. In addition, they both felt teaching student with special needs can be very challenging. In

the literature, it was reported that many general education teachers were afraid of not being able to modify their lessons for the students with special needs, and that they were "dummying" down the curriculum to a point that it was too simplified for the other students (Mastropieri, M. A.). This was also a concern raised by the participants in this study.

Other drawbacks similar to what was reported in the literature are the discussion of classroom management between the two co-teachers. Different teachers have different classroom management styles and if this is not discussed prior to a co-teaching experience, it may cause difficulty in the classroom, and confusion for the students.

Benefits identified in the literature were also evident in the participants' responses. Benefits of co-teaching that were identified include collaboration as being a very important key to successful co-teaching. Having special education students included helps them feel part of their peer group, and allows them to learn from other teachers. Co-teaching allows teachers to figure out each other's strengths and weaknesses to make a stronger relationship for the students to learn more effectively as well as different strategies used to approach a topic. When all teachers are involved in the lesson, this can make a lasting experience for the students as well as a huge impact on their learning in the classroom.

From their responses, it is this researcher's impression that GT-2 and IT-1 enjoy co-teaching the most. GT-1 provided very short answers which mostly consisted of one sentence answers. GT-1 shared no specific experiences nor reported what was learned from the co-teaching experience.

Although all participants identified the same drawbacks, GT-1 did not identify as many benefits as the other participants. GT-2 and IT-1 also talked about overcoming the drawbacks as they have been co-teaching longer, unlike GT-1. IT-1 and GT-2 were also very positive in their answers and had a lot to share about what they had experienced while co-teaching.

## Limitations

Limitations for this study include using only one middle school and three teachers (two general education teachers and one intervention specialist). The small number of participants limited the perspectives of co-teaching. It is unclear if other teachers in a similar environment at other schools would have responded the same. More respondents would have helped establish the drawbacks and benefits of co-teaching with more substantial evidence.

Another limitation is only having one intervention specialist responding that worked with two general education teachers. For future research on this topic, it is recommended that more participants should be included, representing more than one coteaching relationship, as well as seeking the perspectives of teachers at more than one school.

#### Conclusions

Benefits of co-teaching/inclusion in the classroom are that students with disabilities are actively engaged with students in a regular education classroom which helps them socially. To have students with disabilities engaged with their typically developing peers helps them in the classroom with discipline and doing their classroom work. Their peers can model what is expected and help when it is needed as well.

Other benefits include communication for planning, multiple teaching styles, being able to help more students in the classroom with two teachers, and classroom management/discipline are very important for teachers who are involved in a co-teaching relationship. Discussing these issues in advance allows the teachers to build a stronger relationship and allows more teaching to go on in the classroom without stepping on one another's toes.

Some challenges to be aware of include finding the time to communicate with the co-teacher, disagreements about classroom management practices, and being comfortable with another teacher in the classroom, and being comfortable with being interrupted.

Many teachers are afraid of co-teaching because of these drawbacks and don't know how to make a co-teaching relationship work.

The three participants in this study said it has gotten much easier over time, than when they first started the relationship. They have learned from one another (styles and strategies used to approach/teach a subject), have become more patient with the students and their co-teacher, feel that discipline issues are dealt with more promptly, and they've found there is more time to help the students with IEPs or students who are at risk.

Overall, the results were very encouraging. The results of this study closely matched results from studies found in the literature. Based on the results of this study and from personal experience with co-teaching, this researcher feels the benefits of co-teaching outweigh the drawbacks.

Teachers can accomplish a great deal more in the classroom with two teachers, provided they plan together so both are on the same page. Co-teaching allows them to do smaller group or individual work, creating a more engaging classroom for the students.

Students with IEP's are able to be educated with their typically developing peers and are not losing the social interaction they need. In addition, it is the researcher's opinion that students with disabilities perform better in a general education classroom because they are being challenged and see their peers as models in the classrooms.

The drawbacks can be quite scary when a person first approaches a co-teaching experience, but the outcome is well worth working through the challenges. For a teacher to overcome these drawbacks, (Wischnowski, M. W.) suggested the need to be openminded and accepting of ideas and strategies that may come from the other teacher. It is this educator's opinion that co-teaching makes you stronger as a teacher in the classroom.

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## Appendix

## Co-Teaching Questionnaire

Please indicate whether you are a general or special education teacher

- 1. How long have you been in the co-teaching environment?
- 2. In what ways do you feel students benefit from being in an inclusion classroom?
- 3. Do you enjoy co-teaching? Why or why not?
- 4. What are some difficulties you have found while co-teaching in your classroom?
- 5. What kind of activities/lessons do you prefer the students with IEP's to be removed
- 6. How have you as a teacher benefited from co-teaching?
- 7. Do you have any cons of your own in regards to co-teaching?
- 8. What is one of your most memorable experiences since you have started co-teaching?
  - One of your least memorable?
  - What did you learn from these experiences?