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## Discovering Necessary Administrative Supports for Co-Teaching in Secondary Schools from Core & Special Education Teacher Perspectives

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Discovering Necessary Administrative Supports for Co-Teaching in  
Secondary Schools from Core & Special Education Teacher  
Perspectives

By

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## Abstract

### Discovering Necessary Administrative Supports for Co-Teaching in Secondary Schools from Core & Special Education Teacher Perspectives

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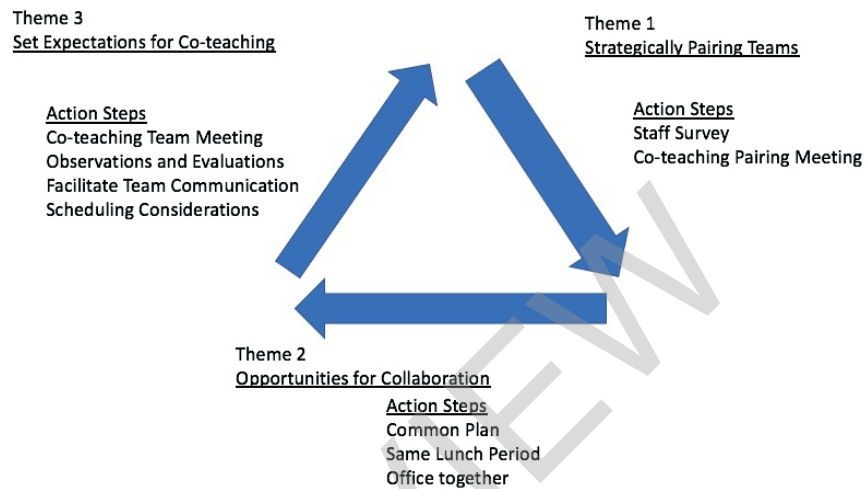
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Numerous amounts of research have been invested into secondary co-teaching. However, results show that secondary co-teaching is not effectively occurring despite volumes of research information. Increased assessments, scheduling difficulties, and a vast curriculum are factors making co-teaching difficult. Another phenomenon found in secondary teachers is called the knowing/doing gap. Secondary co-teachers are knowledgeable of what is needed to effectively co-teach but do not apply their knowledge into effective actions within the classroom. The purpose of this research was to identify what school leaders can do to overcome secondary co-teaching obstacles and close the knowing doing gap. The objective of this research was to develop steps school leaders can implement that will improve secondary co-teaching.

Capturing teacher's voices were important for this study. The action plan is validated from the experiences and ideas of those who work and have co-teaching experiences. Secondary co-teachers participated in semi-structured interviews that identified themes that impact co-teaching. Further constant comparisons of each theme targeted what school leaders can do to improve co-teaching. These conversations dug deep into experiences and actions that have overcome or greatly reduce co-teaching

challenges. As a result, this research revealed three essential themes necessary for co-teaching and action steps school leaders should apply in their buildings. Each of the themes below are described in detail along with action steps needed to ensure each theme is met.



Secondary co-teaching is not consistently occurring in classrooms. I respect and have experiences challenges teams face. This study has created a plan with specific actions that can be taken to improve secondary co-teaching. By closing the knowing doing gap and offering a systematic approach offered from this study I hope secondary schools are now provided means to improve teaching and learning in co-taught classrooms.

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prior to his passing. Our family values are reflected in what was needed to complete this study. Thank you.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction of the Problem

Due to an increase in student growth, I was given an additional prep co-teaching Physical Science. For the first time in my career, I would be working with another teacher in my classroom. I had been teaching for over 10 years, been a part of curriculum development, written district assessments, so a minor change in assignment seemed manageable. I was given the opportunity to co-teach in a physical science class along with a veteran special education teacher who had a strong math support background. Co-teaching was a new experience that, to my surprise, would become my favorite. Co-teaching presented new challenges like keeping on pace with curriculum guides, successfully delivering content, administering assessments, and correctly collaborating and utilizing the skills of another instructor.

These personal challenges instilled a desire to discover how to effectively co-teach. As I transitioned into a leadership position and chose to further my education, my research focus continued to be in co-teaching. I have learned that co-teaching is the delivery method adopted by schools to offer specially designed inclusive instruction. Co-teaching consists of a team of educators: one a subject endorsed teacher and the other a special education teacher. Together, they share instructional responsibilities for the planning and delivery of instruction to meet the needs of all students. In theory and clearly defined by the U.S. Department of Education under the IDEA, the co-teaching team should provide, “specially designed instruction at no cost to parents, to meet students’ unique needs in the least restrictive environment, or as instruction focused on individual need that is carefully planned, intensive, urgent, relentless, and goal directed”

(Sec.300.39). Based upon my own experiences, co-teaching is not as simple as it may sound. As I started my research, I was curious if implementing effective co-teaching practices was as difficult as I had found it to be.

Numerous research has been conducted in co-taught classrooms including specific studies that have analyzed what instructional practices co-teachers frequently use. Despite ample amounts of resources and proven instructional strategies made available, research overwhelmingly discovered that educators were not using proven effective co-teaching strategies. An example from a meta-analysis conducted by Murawski and Swanson (2001) identified only a few studies suggesting co-teaching was just moderately effective in influencing student outcomes. Another additional study conducted by Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Graetz (2005) concluded that effective co-teaching practices were still rarely evidenced in general education classrooms. Moreover, additional research by Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) discovered that after 201 observations of 41 co-taught classrooms in 14 high schools, only two instances of operationally defined effective co-teaching practices were noted.

What is happening in co-taught classrooms if research is telling us that effective strategies aren't being used? Investigations into what practices are commonplace within co-taught classrooms described the norm found amongst co-taught classes. Dieker and Murawski (2003) revealed there was no sustained instruction for students having difficulties, no reteaching for students who had not reached mastery, and no strategic instruction for students who tended to need explicit instruction in strategies. The special education teachers helped in the general education classroom and "chimed in" when they had something to add, but they did so without much thoughtfulness or preplanning. An

additional study led by Moin, Magiera, & Zigmond, (2008) indicated that even with a special education teacher present in the class, learning disabled students did not receive an education that met their needs. Volonino and Zigmond (2008) further hypothesized that if students with disabilities were mastering the content and earning passing grades in these high school courses, it was not because of something special that the special education co-teacher was doing.

After teaching for 14 years, I was fortunate to become an administrator. With my new role I would be responsible for evaluating and observing staff. On my evaluation team I had a small mix of teachers who co-taught. I have also witnessed a gap found in co-taught classrooms. My personal observations echoed results from researchers: teachers primarily used direct instruction or whole group strategies. Co-teaching instruction mainly used a primary instructor and the special education teacher as support. Assistance offered from the special education teacher was usually just individual, and only as needed. Both my own personal experiences and several studies show that co-teaching practices fall short from their goal of delivering “specially designed instruction.”

Despite my personal observations and an ample amount of research, I feel teachers are aware and knowledgeable of best practice but fail to act. The knowing doing gap explained in the conceptual framework of this study explains why this lack of action takes place. The lack of proper use of instruction is not intentional but a disconnect practice. This is the foundation and purpose for this study, to help identify how school leaders can find ways to best support co-teaching teams and enact measures that increase implementation of proper co-teaching instruction. Teachers’ feedback will be the source of data necessary to identify how to close the knowing and doing gap. The goal of this

study will be to learn firsthand from our co-teachers what administrators can do to provide resources or take actions that improve co-teaching in secondary schools. Implementing co-teaching without clear expectations and guidelines results in a “hodge-podge” of classroom structures and over-extended teachers (Weiss & Lloyd, 2003).

Secondary special educators may well have been placed in the position of implementing practices that are more widely promoted in the literature than are supported by research (Volonino & Zigmond, 2007). Simply placing two teachers in a classroom has not led to increased student success. Challenges found in secondary co-teaching like balancing co-teaching personalities and beliefs, plan time, curriculum pacing, and assessments have impacted the ability to deliver proven methods. I have heard staff comment that they can't keep up, struggle to meet all their students' needs, and they have to slow down or water down their content. Other educators have described co-taught classes as less rigorous than our regular on level classes.

There is a need to close the knowing doing gap and to learn how to properly support and ensure successful co-teaching at the secondary level. Co-teaching has yet to fulfill its purpose. This study will get ideas from those who face the day-to-day challenges in the classroom. These ideas will help educators identify and implement steps suggested by co-teaching teams to close the knowing doing gap and create a more effective co-teaching learning environment.

### Operational Definitions

Co-teaching – a team of a subject endorsed teacher and one special education teacher who share instructional responsibilities such as planning and delivery of instruction for all students in the class.

Inclusion – students with special needs should be provided the least restrictive environment possible, which involves placing special needs students in regular classrooms.

Knowing/Doing Gap – Pfeffer and Sutton define this concept as a phenomenon found where individuals have knowledge of what actions will lead to more successes, yet they fail to take action.

Co-Teaching Models – instructional methods used by both a core instructional teacher and a special education teacher designed specifically to deliver instruction that meets the needs of their classrooms.

Differentiated Instruction – Differentiated instruction is an instructional strategy in which teachers monitor what and how students are learning and adapt the classroom as needed to better meet student needs.

Modifications – Modifying curriculum means that teachers review and plan lessons incorporating teaching strategies that will accommodate all learning needs.

Conceptual Framework – The Knowing/Doing Gap

The framework for this study will engage participants in an active dialogue. Co-teaching teams have a unique insight and understanding acquired by their first-hand experiences and reflections on those experiences. A constructivist approach will aim to discover what teachers have learned from their experiences. Specifically, what concepts can be developed from their experiences and once discovered how can they be used by educational leaders to help support co-teaching?

Moreover, conversations will address the issue of the knowing/doing gap found in secondary co-taught classrooms. The knowing/doing gap is a concept discussed by

Pfeffer and Sutton that identifies why knowledge of what needs to be done doesn't lead to action. Implementing what teachers say and know is a problem. Time after time, teachers understand the issues and understand what needs to happen to positively improve their performance but don't take action that they know they should. This research will provide leaders with actions they can take to produce effective co-teaching environments. (Pfeffer and Sutton) Great companies get extraordinary results from average talent. Poor companies take extraordinary talent and manage to lose the benefits of their talents. This applies not only to businesses, but any other organization or in this case, a school system.

As administrators what can be done to generate and facilitate known effective co-teaching practices? How do we put co-teaching best practices into action and close the knowing/doing gap? Pfeffer and Sutton write leaders must overcome a fear of failure. This fear leads to distrust and team members then exhibit a feeling that they will get punished trying something new, so they play it safe and do what is the norm. Leaders can drive out fear by openly communicating, offering an open-door policy, and decentralizing decision making. There is no learning without error.

How can we change actions where teachers work collaboratively and implement teaming instructional strategies? What can be done to develop teams that consider individual student abilities, modify curriculum, and design proper assessments? Pfeffer and Sutton suggest schools emphasize collaboration not competition. School administration should create a team of people and support systems where everyone and everything is geared toward what needs to get done. Everyone should understand why

and how to take action, and everyone should collaboratively work together to ensure it gets done.

By closing the knowing/doing gap, schools can find what is needed to create action and properly foster successful secondary co-teaching. Co-teaching should be done together utilizing the skills and expertise from both parties. Successful organizations learn by transforming collaborative learned experiences into operating procedures and practices. The same should be true of schools.

Research has shown that there is a significant difference between theoretical best co-taught instructional strategies and what is actually happening in co-taught classes. The use of research-based, effective instructional methods used in secondary co-taught classrooms is not commonplace. Lack of administrative support and a defined instructional model have been found to be one cause related to ineffective co-teaching. According to Weiss & Lloyd (2003) appropriate administrative support could be a better way to meet the objectives for students in co-taught classrooms.

Co-teaching is not something that just happens (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). For it to be a productive use of the special education teacher's talents and training, co-teaching must be dynamic, deliberate, and differentiated. (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2011) Administrators must assume responsibility for communicating the importance of collaborative planning and teaching. Leaders need to provide resources such as planning time and professional development. Administrators also must evaluate the co-teaching teams' teaching practices at their school sites.

This study will capture what administrative actions or supports help facilitate co-teaching teams. These results will offer insight to administrators by revealing what co-



taught teams deem necessary and beneficial. Administrators and program planners will be able to better prioritize and design effective resources as they implement a co-teaching program that meets all student needs.

#### Purpose Statement

Therefore, the purpose of this grounded theory will be to discover what administrators can do to provide support needed for co-taught teams in secondary high schools.

#### Central Research Question

What can administrators do to effectively support co-teaching in secondary high schools?  
What can school administrators do to close the knowing/doing gap found in co-teaching at the secondary level?

#### Assumptions

It is assumed that all participants in this study will be open and honest when offering their perspectives. Feedback from participants will be assumed to be genuine suggestions that staff feel can be impactful. It will be assumed that staff will have a growth mindset and be willing participants in the research offering unbiased views on how to improve their craft.

#### Limitations

This study involved capturing teacher perspectives about co-teaching supports. The limitations of this study may be due to sample selections made all from the same district. There may be a lack of experiences that would allow greater opportunities for comparison or opportunities to think of suggestions beyond our district practices.

Another limitation that may occur could be due to the demographics within our district. As a suburban community, our students are not as diverse and have dissimilar socio-economic backgrounds in comparison to other school districts.

### Delimitations

Delimitations of this study were confined to research conducted in one school district. The district is located in a midwestern suburban community of approximately 38,000 containing two secondary high schools and three secondary middle schools. The school district has a strong sense of community with strong professional relationships amongst school staff. The dynamics of this site and strong staff relationships allows for an open and honest investigation from this study. The study involves a grounded theory that will discover practices and supports that could better deliver effective co-teaching. This site and the staff are willing participants in curriculum development, classroom instruction training, and other similar change processes. These reasons make this site an opportunity for this investigation.

### Outline of the Study

This study will provide historical context of changes made within special education. In addition, the study will look at how inclusion has adopted co-teaching as the vehicle for delivering instruction. Lastly, I will provide an overview defining how to effectively co-teach.

Research conducted will provide solutions generated from co-teachers on how to close the knowing doing gap. Discoveries made will give school leaders suggestions on how to promote and facilitate effective co-teaching.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

This literature review provides and exploration into co-teaching. A brief history shows the progression of educating special education students in this country. Presenting a clear vision of effective education for all children with special education needs and disabilities involves developing an understanding of the theory behind the philosophies, policies, and practices of inclusive special education (Hornby, 2015).

Then a deeper explanation into various delivery methods instructors can use to both collaboratively and purposefully while co-teaching. Specifically, an outline of proven co-teaching models and research-based instructional strategies. Each area discussed is necessary for effectively educating a diverse student body found within an inclusive setting. In conclusion, we will also talk about additional resources identified important from collaborative co-teaching teams found to be successful. All of these components will help drive the questioning used during this research. Results from these semi-structured interviews will help school leaders identify how to support, generate, or foster the use of effective co-teaching instruction.

Inclusive education is a multidimensional concept that includes the celebration and valuing of difference and diversity and consideration of human rights, social justice, and equity issues, as well as the social model of disability and a sociopolitical model of education (Hornby, 2015, p. 1). An understanding of how special education has evolved today provides the context of founding principles that have constructed inclusive co-taught classrooms. Examining policies and legislative measures that led to the development of inclusive education provides a depth of understanding for the methodology and use of inclusive classrooms.

### Historical Evolution of Special Education

As our country developed into a nation, special education was almost nonexistent. During colonial times, families and communities shared responsibilities for the overall education of a student with disabilities. As our nation grew, so did our schools, and this growth led to the expansion for control of education at the state level. States then created a few disability-specific schools like schools of the blind or deaf in the 1760s and 1780s. It wasn't until around the 1830s that children with intellectual disabilities had schools specifically for them. Around 1900, most developed countries around the world started requiring that all children attend school. Educating special needs students identified with learning disabilities at this time involved practices grouping and even excluding special needs children away from mainstream classrooms. The mainstream building was the location of the special needs children but, they were in separate classes and rooms.

### A Move to Inclusion

(Brown vs the Board of Education, 1954) was a landmark decision that addressed racial segregation in schools. Years prior to this case courts ruled that segregated public facilities were legal. Jim Crow laws were enacted allowing “separate but equal” use of public facilities like restrooms, buses, and schools. In 1951, Linda Brown was denied the opportunity to attend an all-white school in Topeka. Brown sued and won her lawsuit when the courts ruled Brown was deprived of the equal protection laws guaranteed in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Brown vs Board did more than address inequalities for students of different race; the court decision led to a demand that all students be provided an adequate education.

At this point, alarmingly more than 1 million children with disabilities were not provided an education within public systems. Individual rights are guaranteed under the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

In his article written in 1968, Lloyd Dunn proposed questions about inclusive education opposing separation of students with special needs. Lloyd called for “mainstreaming” special education students. Mainstreaming meant placing students with special needs in regular classrooms. Eventually, this grew into what was referred to as “integration” and was at the core of what was termed the “regular education initiative.” Segregation of special education children involved many issues of concern; students’ academic achievement, detrimental effects of labeling, a racial imbalance in special education, and recent advances in curricula which made it possible to accommodate students with disabilities in the regular class (Dunn,1968). A growing push to use inclusive classrooms rather than pull out programs were viewed as a possible solution needed to serve students with disabilities.

In 1975 Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act or (EAHCA) or (EHA). This act made special education programs mandatory in the United States and addressed the need to not only provide an education but also provide an adequate special education program. Education for All Handicapped Children Act Amendments PL 101-476 changed the name to what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act or (IDEA). The IDEA Act states; “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature of severity of the

disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids cannot be achieved satisfactory” (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1975). Laws now mandated that students with special needs should be provided the least restrictive environment possible, which involved placing special needs students in regular classrooms.

Decades later, No Child Left Behind and the IDEA legislation passed in 2004 further removed barriers separating special education students from their general education peers. These initiatives aimed to close achievement gaps for all students in reading and math by 2014. Former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, “Special education is no longer a peripheral issue. The days when we looked past the underachievement of these students are over”. The commission submitted a report called the New Era: In the report, the committee made three recommendations:

- a) focus on results, not the process
- b) embrace a model of prevention, not failure
- c) consider students with disabilities as general education first.

The focus of inclusive special education is to provide young people who have needs with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to achieve as much independence and success as possible after they leave school (Hornby, 2014). The needs of special education students, children with disabilities needs were not met prior to the formation of laws. According to the United States Department of Education, in 1970 U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities. Even worse, several states had laws that completely excluded students who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or any other special needs.

Thanks to measures taken to ensure learning for all our students, recently over 200,000 pre-kindergarten and approximately 6.5 million students receive special education services. Linda Brown's fight against "separate but equal" ideals has paved the way for inclusion. Now schools accommodate and meet needs of all students, so they can now attend schools in their neighborhoods with their peers in an environment that is equal and not separate. The challenge to us as educators is to now do all we can to grow and learn how to deliver the best instruction to our diverse population of students.

### Defining Co-teaching

The objective of special education is to do whatever is possible to meet the various students' personalized needs. Special education is a service not a place (Sacks 2001). There is a focus on the academic success of every student, not just some of them. Inclusive classrooms are meant to prevent students from falling behind and falling between the cracks. Special education demands personalized attention centered on abilities and disabilities (Zigmond, 2008). Personalized needs will sometimes require the creation and arrangement of spaces and other facilities that meet the specific needs of students. These personalized needs also include academic needs and the social and vocational settings that might be adapted for each student. (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011) Ironically, the promotion of the delusion that being present in a school equates with being socially and educationally included, is one of the most dishonest and insidious forms of exclusion.

Schools have implemented the practice of co-teaching to accommodate students with special needs. Co-taught classrooms provide an unparalleled venue for the integration of the complementary skills of the general and special educators (Volonino

and Zigmond, 2007). The general educator brings content knowledge and group instructional skills, whereas, the special educator brings expertise in the diagnoses and remediation of individual learning problems or challenges. Both educators can also use more instructional practices via teaming models that allow and ensure diverse delivery methods all while providing students who are “at-risk” support. Co-taught classes provide more opportunities for students with IEPs and at-risk students to interact with a teacher and participate actively in class activities by reducing the student to teacher ratio (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006). As coteaching teams integrate instructional skills, instruction should be sufficiently enhanced such that the needs of students with special needs and those at-risk for educational failure can effectively be met.

After defining co-teaching, this literature review will now define how to properly instruct in co-taught classes. As mentioned previously, co-teaching has several challenges; however, effective instruction in co-taught classes can occur if two conditions are met: teams must collaborate and they must use differentiated/adaptive strategies that meet all students’ needs. Teams that can focus on and accomplish these objectives will be successful.

### Effective Instructional Strategies

Co-teaching in an inclusive classroom is extremely challenging. A diverse group presents a great challenge of meeting the learning needs of each student. Teaching a student with disabilities well is the same as teaching any student well and the belief that special education involves no specialized instructional skills is, in our judgment, a grotesque misconception of both students and their education (Kauffman & Badar, 2014).



## Collaboration

Collaboration is a key to properly co-teach. Co-teachers must have proactive discussions. Co-teaching is not achievable unless some provision is made for accommodations for some students outside of general education, or a special educator is required to try to provide special instruction in the general education classroom. Scruggs and Mastropieri's work discovered that co-taught classes work best when both educators collaborate to accomplish the following tasks: identify critical elements of background knowledge that will need to be pre-taught, choose the new skills that will likely need to be modeled, create and plan meaningful opportunities for guided practice, structure opportunities for independent practice and, lastly, provide immediate and corrective feedback and specific praise. In effective secondary schools, an emphasis on collaboration across the curriculum of general education and special education exists (Dieker & Murawski, 2003).

Conder & Hedin (2014) describe co-teaching as the use of three interconnected tasks: co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. During planning, teachers discuss learning objectives, select appropriate co-teaching models, and identify individual instructional tasks necessary to meet all students' needs. Teachers co-assess by identifying sources of informative feedback during lessons and ways to measure instructional effectiveness after the lesson. Co-assessing continues after lessons as teachers reflect on next steps and how to determine appropriate ways to provide additional assistance if necessary.

Mastropieri and Scruggs PASS acronym provides a single framework for co-teacher collaboration. The letter P means to prioritize objectives; A adapt the