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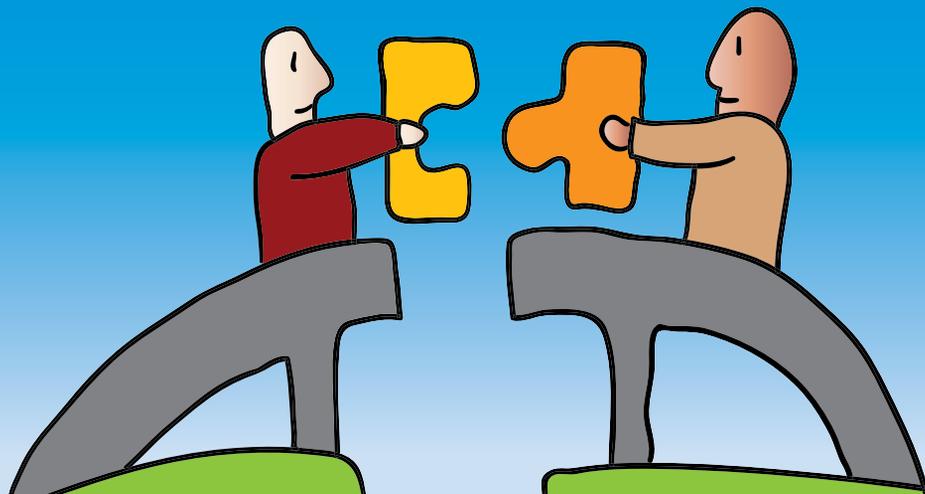
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Middle School Co-Teaching: Effective Practices and Student Reflections

Greg Conderman

“In this class, I get more attention and more help.”

“I get more time with both teachers.”

“They have different stories to tell, so it seems more interesting with two teachers in the class.”

“I get help whenever I need it.”

“I understand the subject more.”

These comments from seventh grade students in co-taught language arts and social studies classes suggest some of the potential benefits of co-teaching. These benefits did not occur by accident; the teachers of these classes spent considerable time co-planning, implementing evidence-based practices, and reflecting on their instruction. This article provides an overview of co-teaching, highlights effective practices used by a middle school co-teaching team, and presents reflections from students in their classroom.

What is co-teaching?

One way to meet the unique challenges in diverse classrooms is co-teaching. Friend and Cook (2010) described co-teaching as an approach that provides specialized services to individual students in a general

education classroom. Specifically, co-teaching involves two or more educators working collaboratively to deliver instruction to a heterogeneous group of students in a shared instructional space. In this environment, teachers blend their expertise, share materials, and develop common instructional goals (Friend & Cook, 2010). Generally, co-teaching team consists of a general educator and another licensed professional such as a special educator, speech/language pathologist, reading specialist, language specialist, or other general educator. Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2008) noted that co-teaching assumes teachers agree on a goal, share a common belief system, demonstrate parity, share leadership roles while completing tasks, and practice effective communication skills. These principles provide the foundation for creating a fulfilling, professional co-teaching relationship.

Co-teaching has gained popularity for a number of reasons. First, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) encourages schools to hold high expectations for all students and ensure students have access to the curriculum in general education classrooms to the maximum extent possible. Most professional educators acknowledge that, given appropriate supports and services, most students should be held to the same

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Multiple Learning Approaches — Professional Development — Organizational Structures

academic standards (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007). Co-teaching is one viable, effective strategy to serve the needs of all students in general education settings, as required by IDEA (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008).

Similarly, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) includes provisions that all students receive instruction from highly qualified teachers. Because some middle and high school special educators are not highly qualified in all academic subjects as defined by NCLB (Rice, Drame, Owens, & Frattura, 2007), this mandate has caused school administrators to reconceptualize how to best use the skills and expertise of all instructional and support faculty (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). Co-teaching can help schools comply with the spirit of these NCLB provisions by arranging for teachers with content expertise to jointly plan and deliver instruction with special educators to ensure the success of all students. Such efforts may increase academic outcomes for all students while ensuring that students with disabilities receive necessary adaptations (Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

Finally, teacher roles have become more collaborative than in the past. No longer do teachers work in isolation as they did just a few decades ago. For example, general educators now assume a more active role in developing individualized education plans (IEPs)

Co-teaching involves two or more educators working collaboratively to deliver instruction to a heterogeneous group of students in a shared instructional space.

by helping determine the appropriate accommodations and modifications students need to access the general education curriculum (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006). Consequently, general and special educators now collaboratively discuss students' needs, solve problems, demonstrate instructional techniques, lead or participate in professional development initiatives, share resources, and network with other professionals and outside agencies (Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, & Dyck, 2009). Further, both general and special educators must collaborate to meet accountability standards for students, design professional development plans, and address issues associated with teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Gerber & Popp, 2000).

Where do co-teachers begin?

Co-teaching requires a high level of commitment to a collaborative process involving open communication and interaction, mutual admiration, and compromise (Dieker & Barnett, 1996; Gately & Gately, 2001). Co-teachers may begin the process together as a team, or they may need direction from an administrator or other outside mentor to guide their initial efforts. Co-teachers should start by discussing their beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning, classroom management, and specific aspects of the classroom environment, including noise and their "pet peeves" (Friend & Cook, 2010). They should also note each person's areas of expertise and agree upon specific responsibilities and the research-based instructional methods they will employ (Conderman & Bresnahan, 2007). This discussion helps co-teachers develop a shared vocabulary, provides direction for lesson planning and reflection, and helps them focus on evidence-based methods, not just their favorite ones.

To guide these initial discussions, co-teachers can assess their skills and strengths using various published inventories (e.g., Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2008; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). They can also

complete charts outlining each person's expertise and associated responsibilities, take meeting notes as reminders of each partner's unique skills, and review the professional literature on effective instructional practices for their discipline or grade level. The proceedings from these initial discussions should be recorded, as this helps co-teaching teams articulate their views and provides a product they can revisit and revise when necessary. As the team members discuss their skills and complete the inventories, they must be honest with each other to avoid inaccurate assumptions about the knowledge and skills each partner possesses, and they must demonstrate a high degree of professionalism and trust because personal information is shared during this step.

Co-teaching components

Co-teaching consists of three components: co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing (Murawski & Boyer, 2008). Strategies associated with each of these unique components are described separately in this section.

Co-planning

In co-planning, both teachers actively contribute by suggesting instructional methods, materials, assessments, and accommodations and modifications for students with diverse learning needs. Friend and Cook (2010) suggested that planning meetings should have an agenda with discussion topics following a three-part sequence:

1. Before the meeting, the general educator prepares a brief overview of curricular topics to be addressed, such as chapters, stories, concepts, and projects.
2. During the meeting, co-teachers decide how they will address the content using the co-teaching approaches.
3. Co-teachers discuss individual students and their needs.

Additionally, Howard & Potts (2009) developed a co-teaching planning checklist that can serve as a helpful guide. They emphasized the importance of identifying learning standards associated with the lesson or unit, discussing assessments that address the standard, suggesting

evidence-based teaching methods, and agreeing on logistics, such as who will prepare the materials, take attendance, do the warm-up, and make necessary accommodations.

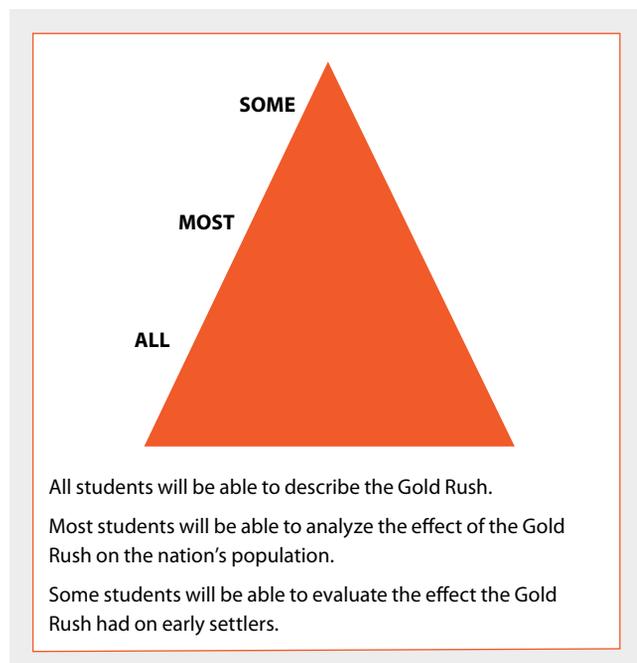
During planning meetings, Murawski and Dieker (2008) urged co-teachers to ask themselves the following questions.

- How will we break up the load so that we both will benefit?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- What are some strategies that can help our students increase their behavioral and learning skills?
- How can we address students who are high-, average-, and low-achieving?
- How does the lesson meet the visual, auditory, kinesthetic, processing, and behavioral needs of students?

Teachers should also consider various methods to differentiate learning outcomes during co-planning. Some teachers use the pyramid planning tool (see Figure 1), which indicates what *all*, *most*, and *some* students are expected to achieve as a result of the lesson or unit (Schumm, Vaughn, & Harris, 1997). Each pyramid level describes a different outcome, often based on Bloom's taxonomy. The base, or what all students will learn, represents the big ideas of the lesson or unit. The middle level represents supplementary facts and information about ideas and concepts from the base that most students will learn. The top level represents information that enhances basic concepts and facts. In addition to the planning pyramid, or as a substitute for it, teachers can complete a three-column table with students' names, the learning task, and needed accommodations or modifications.

Alternately, during co-planning, teachers can consider various ways to differentiate materials while maintaining the same objective for all students. For example, while planning to accommodate a variety of reading levels, background knowledge, and language levels, co-teachers agree on the "big idea" from the district critical content or state standards that they expect all students to achieve through a particular unit or lesson. In a sixth grade language arts class, the big idea may be to identify setting, characters, and plot elements including conflict, climax, and resolution. This objective would remain the same for all students; however, rather than expect all students to read and analyze the same novel (same material), co-teachers would guide students to novels or short stories that match their interests and reading levels and

Figure 1 Planning pyramid



will simultaneously help them attain the objective. The expected outcome remains the same for all students, but the materials have been differentiated. Having a co-teaching team of two teachers allows for increased individualization and more meaningful feedback for all students during the planning process.

5. *Alternative teaching.* This model allows a small group of students to receive preteaching, reteaching, review, or accelerated instruction from a co-teacher while the other teacher leads the remaining large group. This approach is appropriate for students who have been absent or who need skill enrichment or remediation.

Co-teachers need to use the approach that best matches the instructional objective and the teachers' areas of expertise, and each teacher should experience both the lead and passive instructional roles.

Co-instructing

During co-instructing, the team implements instructional approaches agreed upon and designed during co-planning. Six basic co-teaching models (Friend & Cook, 2010) have been described in the professional literature, often ascribing lead and passive roles to the two co-teachers. Co-teachers need to use the approach that best matches the instructional objective and the teachers' areas of expertise, and each teacher should experience both the lead and passive instructional roles. The co-teaching approaches include:

1. *One teach, one observe.* In this approach, one teacher leads instruction while the other strategically observes individual students, a group of students, or even the co-teacher for the purpose of gathering data that will inform future instructional practices. For example, the observer might collect on-task data on students, note leadership roles during cooperative activities, or tally whom the teacher questions.
2. *One teach, one assist.* In this model, one teacher assumes the active teaching role while the other circulates and assists individuals or small groups by answering questions, clarifying directions, redirecting students, or reexplaining the assignment.
3. *Station teaching.* During station teaching, students rotate among several different learning stations. Each co-teacher leads one of the stations, and the remaining stations are completed independently by students or with supervision from a paraeducator or other volunteer.
4. *Parallel teaching.* In parallel teaching, the class is divided into two heterogeneous groups, and each teacher instructs his or her group using the same lesson plan.

For this model especially, co-teachers should frequently vary the purpose and group composition.

6. *Team teaching.* In team teaching, an approach often cited as the end goal of co-teaching, both teachers equally share instructional delivery.

During co-instruction, teachers can ask themselves: What nonverbal sign can we give to the other that indicates we need a quick break? Are students enjoying and benefiting from the activities we planned? What are some actions that one of us can do while the other is leading an activity or giving a lecture? (Murawski & Dieker, 2008). Clearly, instruction can look much different with two certified teachers supporting all students.



Team teaching occurs when both teachers equally share instructional delivery during a lesson. photo by Ken Clutsam

Figure 2 Completed planning form

State-Mandated Curriculum Goal	Lesson Objective	Class Activities
Identify characteristics and authors of various literary forms (e.g., short stories, novels, drama, fables, biographies, documentaries, poetry, science fiction).	Identify prose, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, biography, and autobiography.	<p>Quick review of concepts—teacher gives definition, students write type of literature on their dry erase boards.</p> <p>Teacher writes the page number of a selection from the students’ literature book on the overhead.</p> <p>Teacher models identification of literary forms of several pieces for students.</p> <p>In groups, students locate the selection, read the first few lines, decide what type of literature it represents, provide a rationale, and write the answer on their dry erase boards.</p>

Co-assessing

In co-assessing, the team gathers information from multiple sources to reflect upon the effectiveness of their instructional efforts. Co-teachers can assess their co-teaching efforts by frequently meeting for the sole purpose of reflecting on lessons; gathering and analyzing student academic or behavioral data; and soliciting input from administrators, parents, and students. Co-teachers can discuss the following: Does evidence indicate that successful learning is occurring in the class? What data are important to us? How will we collect our data, and who will do the collecting? (Murawski & Dieker, 2008). As co-teachers reflect on their professional partnership, they can discuss what went well, areas for future improvement, surprises that occurred, next steps in the curriculum, students who need more assistance, and the most appropriate way to divide responsibilities for upcoming lessons (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2008).

A middle grades co-teaching team

General educator Mr. Edwards and special educator Miss Carroll (pseudonyms), who recently completed their first year of co-teaching seventh grade language arts and social studies, provide an exemplar of a middle school co-teaching team. Although they faced several challenges, their year was successful. Their students performed well, and, as colleagues, they grew professionally. As they reflected on their first year of co-teaching, they realized that these outcomes occurred because they purposefully and proactively planned for success.

Before they began co-teaching, the team openly discussed their strengths, weaker skills, views on teaching, grading practices, classroom management, preferred communication styles, effective teaching methods, and goals for co-teaching. They established regular co-planning times. They agreed to maintain confidentiality and bring concerns back to their partner rather than gossip or complain to other staff members or their administrators. They also agreed to focus on the needs of their students and to put their egos aside.

During planning meetings, Mr. Edwards came prepared with a chart (see Figure 2) that included the state learning standard, daily learning goals, and associated classroom activities. This advance preparation documented critical learning connections and saved time, allowing the pair to quickly discuss lesson details and agree upon each teacher’s responsibilities.

During instruction, the team used parity signals such as “we” and “our class.” All students were considered the responsibility of both teachers. Both teachers’ names appeared on the door, whiteboard, website, and parent letters. Each teacher had a desk and work space. Both teachers graded students and assumed responsibility for report cards and discipline. Both teachers also assumed active and passive instructional roles and were committed to using evidence-based practices appropriate for middle school students (see Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2007). The team began each class by sharing the agenda and indicating to students what they would be learning, why that skill or topic was important, and how they would be assessed on their learning.

Because the team had developed a common language, communicated their expectations, and agreed to focus on the improvement of each student, they were able to provide ongoing and immediate feedback to each other while they were teaching. This classroom dialogue was based on mutual trust and respect, ensured that each teacher's contributions were validated, and allowed the teachers to make on-the-spot changes in their teaching.

For assessment, the team began the semester by informally assessing each student's reading skills. Miss Carroll had expertise in informal assessments, so she initially developed and administered a cloze reading test, conducted short (one-minute) individualized oral reading assessments, and developed additional informal formative assessments throughout the semester, such as unit pretests, probes, short quizzes, and one-minute papers. Initial reading assessments indicated that the text was too difficult for many students; therefore, the team brainstormed other options such as taped materials, assistive technologies, peer readings, and alternative readings.

These co-teachers also collected formative assessment data from students. For example, when one teacher provided a question and directed students to use their dry erase boards to respond, the other noted which students responded correctly and which students needed more review. One of the co-teachers used this data to review confusing material with a small group, while the other teacher engaged the class in whole-group instruction. Similarly, the two teachers reviewed material with small groups before and after a test, often through station teaching, to better identify and immediately correct student misunderstandings. Providing systematic, ongoing feedback to students in these ways was greatly facilitated by having two teachers.

The team implemented additional strategies that would be difficult for a single teacher to conduct in a diverse general education classroom. For example, the team developed a proactive parent communication strategy to engage parents as much as possible. They made positive phone calls when students excelled, immediately informed parents of poor student grades on tests or assignments, called parents when students misbehaved in class, and offered homework tips and assignments on the school website. Being proactive paid off, as parents were not surprised if their child brought home a poor midterm report card. When other teachers at the school experienced parental complaints, this team experienced none due to these proactive communication techniques.

Parent communication was also an effective classroom management tool. If a student broke a rule multiple times and other interventions were unsuccessful, one co-teacher took the student in the hall with the portable phone, and the student called his or her parents and informed them of what happened. Then, the teacher got on the phone and explained to the parent what had occurred and planned with the parent what to do next. Students quickly learned that the co-teachers were serious about enforcing classroom rules and expectations. The telephone process was effective and was rarely repeated with the same student (see Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2008).

Finally, for additional review, at least one co-teacher was available twice a week after school to reteach material or help students with writing. These review sessions became very popular and participating students' grades improved.

Student reflections

In addition to student achievement data and their own reflections of their co-teaching experience, Mr. Edwards and Miss Carroll desired student feedback to guide instructional changes the following year. Toward the end of the school year, they developed a short survey to elicit student feedback about the co-taught course. The survey included three open-ended questions and ten Likert-



Effective co-teaching teams frequently discuss student work and collaboratively assess student performance. photo by Alan Geho

Figure 3 Scores from student surveys

Question	Mean	Median	Percentage that scored item with 4 or 5*
Did you receive more teacher assistance than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.73	4.0	56%
Did you learn more than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.86	4.0	68%
Did you enjoy coming to this class more than typical non-co-taught classes?	3.43	3.0	49%
Did you work with other students more frequently than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.70	4.0	61%
Did you observe different teaching methods more often than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.81	4.0	66%
Did you feel you could ask the teacher questions more than in typical non-co-taught classes?	4.00	4.0	75%
Do you feel you participated more than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.65	4.0	62%
Did you receive better grades than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.99	4.0	66%
Did you have more fun than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.78	4.0	65%
Do you feel you knew your teachers' expectations more often than in typical non-co-taught classes?	3.98	4.0	70%

* A score of 4 indicated "agree"; a score of 5 indicated "strongly agree".

style questions to which students responded on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The three open-ended questions asked students to write about their favorite part of having two teachers in this class, what they wished the teachers would do, and their least favorite part of having two teachers. The ten Likert-style questions asked students to rate their co-taught class as compared to non-co-taught classes in various areas, as shown in Figure 3. All 97 students from two sections of co-taught language arts and two sections of co-taught social studies completed the survey.

As shown in Figure 3, the mean scores for the ten Likert items ranged from 3.43 in "Enjoyed coming to class" to 4.0 in "Felt I could ask for help." The low score for the item "Enjoyed coming to class" was not a surprise, as

the language arts and social studies classes were rigorous academic classes, and several students struggled with their reading and writing skills. In all but one category (Enjoyed coming to class), more than 50% of students rated each item as agree or strongly agree. These ratings validated that students found promise with the co-teaching model.

The most frequent favorite aspect of co-teaching, as noted by 57 students, was the amount of help they received. Student responses included, "I can ask one teacher if the other is busy," "There is more availability of a teacher, so my questions are answered earlier," "I get more help with my problems," and "I get more time with teachers." Learning more was the second most frequently noted advantage of a co-taught class, as students wrote, "I understand the subject more," "We learn twice as

much,” and “The other teacher has another explanation.” The most frequent response regarding changes in the co-taught class, as reported by 18 students, was “do more fun things.” Students also desired more partner work and opportunities to pick their own partners. Finally, 30 students reported that the least favorite aspect of a co-taught classroom was that they could not get away with anything. Students wrote comments such as: “I have two teachers watching me,” “They can catch what we try to get away with,” and “When one is teaching, the other can see what we are doing.” Students also wrote that sometimes the two teachers explained things differently, which could be confusing.

Student feedback, along with other assessment measures such as student pre- and post-test scores, administrators’ observations, parent comments, and teacher journal entries validated the success of the co-teaching experience. The feedback also revealed areas for future refinement.

Summary

Some school districts are now employing co-teaching as an instructional approach to support learning in diverse classrooms and use the expertise of two licensed teachers. Co-teachers can begin their partnership by openly discussing their views on classroom issues and their individual goals for the co-teaching experience. This open and honest dialogue is critical for developing a trusting relationship. It allows co-teachers to actively engage in the three components of co-teaching: co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. Gathering student feedback is one avenue for assessing the co-taught model. Adolescents typically like being consulted to share their thoughts on their learning environment. When co-teachers take the time to attend to details, act proactively, and use the skills of each teacher, co-teaching can realize its potential of reaching all students.

Extensions

How well is your school meeting the needs of diverse learners, especially students with special needs? To what extent is your school using co-teaching as a way to reach and teach every student? Discuss as a faculty potential benefits and challenges associated with this instructional approach.

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