

Challenges to the use of Co-teaching by Teachers

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Abstract

A total of 77 teachers working in inclusive settings in North Eastern USA were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the barriers that may hinder the use of co-teaching. Results indicated that (a) teachers lack the necessary skills required for implementing co-teaching, and (b) co-teaching may require a lot of resources for its successful implementation. Limitations and recommendations for future research are addressed.

Keywords: Co-teaching, Inclusive education, students with disabilities, school based practices

Introduction

Inclusive education has garnered momentum across the globe over the past decade. This has resulted in a large number of students with disabilities who were historically educated in separate settings being moved into general education settings with their non-disabled peers (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010). In addition, English Language Learners (ELL) are now included in mainstream classrooms (Pappamihiel, 2012). As a result, classrooms are now made up of students with increasingly diverse learning needs. This learner diversity has prompted teachers and other practitioners who work with students with or without disabilities to identify effective instructional delivery approaches that can meet the needs of all students including those with disabilities (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & Mcculley, 2012). In the United States, this search has also been strengthened by legislative mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (Friend, 2008). This mandate made it explicitly clear that all students with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible with appropriate supplemental aids and services. This implies that school personnel should determine and select supports and services that ensure students with disabilities receive education that meets their immediate needs in regular education classrooms to the greatest extent possible. Murawski (2008) and Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007) suggested that this can be achieved through the adoption and use of co-teaching.

Co-teaching is a practice that is rooted in the philosophy of inclusive education and it involves two teachers collaborating in delivering instruction to a group of students with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities, in a single classroom (Friend, 2008). So, rather than pulling out certain students for instruction in separate classrooms, in the co-teaching model, students remain in general the education classroom, receiving collaborative instruction by general education and special education teachers for one or more content areas. The teachers share instructional responsibilities and this includes working together in delivering instruction, designing student assessments, and classroom management. This collaboration relieves the instructional burden from either the general education teacher or the specialist teacher. General education teachers can be viewed as the content specialists or providers while special education teachers provide access to the content in the instructional process (Weiss & Loyd, 2002).

Co-teaching can take different formats depending on the instructional needs of the students. These formats include station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, teaming, and one teach-one assist (see Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010) for a description of these co-teaching formats). In the U.S., there has been a sharp increase in the number of schools that have adopted co-teaching as their service delivery model and it is now one of the most commonly used school based practices (Friend, 2008).

Research on co-teaching is still emerging, but its intuitive appeal for meeting the needs and enhancing the academic outcomes of students, including those with special needs, cannot be denied. Although the research base on co-teaching is still growing, studies thus far have demonstrated that it can have positive impact on student outcomes. For example, Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas (2002) reported that students with learning disabilities in co-taught classes performed better on measures such as report card grades and attendance than

students in single-teacher classes. In another study, Murawski and Swanson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis to establish the effectiveness of co-teaching and found that the strongest positive impact of co-teaching was on reading/language arts with moderate effects on mathematics. Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, and Hughes (1998) found co-teaching to have a positive impact on reading achievement for all students. They also found a positive relationship between co-teaching and the development of more positive social relationships for students with disabilities. Gray (2009) found that students with disabilities in co-taught classes improved homework completion from 43% to 100% weekly. Besides enhancing student outcomes, co-teaching has also been shown to benefit teachers involved. Austin (2001), interviewed 12 K-12 New Jersey teachers after being involved in co-teaching assignments and found that, general education teachers developed an appreciation of inclusive education while special education teachers cited an increase in content knowledge. In another study, Walther-Thomas (1997) found that 119 teachers who participated in co-teaching assignments reported appreciation of collaborative teaching as well as inclusive education.

Considering the results presented above, co-teaching has been labelled a promising school based practice and it has become a widely implemented instructional model (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). However, there is a need for more research on the practice. An area of research about co-teaching that is important to study pertains to its implementation, specifically, the factors that may hinder its successful execution. Existing research on the implementation of school-based practices (i.e., co-teaching) reveals that there may be different environmental or individual barriers that hinder their use (Chitiyo & May *in press*). Environmental barriers may be defined as school policies or procedures that impede the use of a practice and they may include the characteristics of a school (i.e., its routines and systems, availability of resources, competing priorities, policies, and senior leadership support). On the other hand, individual barriers occur at the personal level and they may include: lack of knowledge about a practice and lack of motivation or staff buy in. Collectively, individual and environmental barriers may lead teachers to fail to adopt co-teaching and they may resort to using other practices that may not be grounded within the philosophy of inclusive education. For example, teachers may remove certain students (i.e., students with disabilities) from regular education classrooms and place them in separate classrooms or settings. This move might be considered a violation of students' right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Additionally, existing research on the academic status of students educated in separate settings shows that such settings do not enhance educational outcomes of students (Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2008). It is also important to study the barriers that hinder the successful implementation of co-teaching as it might lead to the development of strategies aimed at addressing the barriers that, in turn, lead to improved implementation. Existing research demonstrates that improved implementation of a practice leads to better outcomes (McIntyre, Gresham, DiGennaro & Reed, 2007). With this background in mind, the primary purpose of this study was to identify the specific barriers that may hinder the use of co-teaching by teachers.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of 77 teachers in northeastern USA. The sample comprised of 67 (87%) general education teachers and 10 (13%) special education teachers. Sixty-three participants had a master's degree, 14 had a bachelor's degree and all the teachers worked in inclusive classrooms. A total of 35 (45%) participants worked in elementary schools, 17 (22%) in middle schools, 23 (29%) in high schools, and two participants did not indicate the level of school they worked in. The participants' experience with co-teaching ranged from 0 years to 25 years, with six participants not indicating their experience with co-teaching. Finally, the range of the participants' teaching experience was from two years to 28 years.

Instrumentation

Data were collected via a questionnaire categorized into four sections. The first part collected participant demographic information (i.e., participants' gender, level of school participants worked in, experience with co-teaching, and years of working experience). The second section asked participants how they learned about co-teaching and there were five response options participants could choose from (i.e., university coursework, read a published article in a journal, presentation at workshop/conference, and school training program). Space was also provided for participants to scribe a response if the other response options did not capture how they learned about co-teaching. The third section asked participants if they had used co-teaching as part of their instructional practice or not. The fourth section examined participants' perspective on the barriers to using co-teaching. There were seven statements representing the barriers to using co-teaching categorized as either environmental barriers (policies in my school prevent change s, co-teaching requires more resources for implementation, colleagues do not support the use of co-teaching, co-teaching is not feasible in my daily work routine) or individual barriers (no advantage in using co-teaching, lack of knowledge and skills needed for using co-teaching, does not meet the needs of my students). These statements were derived from literature regarding potential barriers to the use of evidence-based practices (i.e., Scott, Plotnikoff, Karunamuni, Bize, & Rodgers, 2008; Cook & Odom, 2013) and were each measured on a five point Likert type scale (i.e., 5 = *Strongly Agree*, 4 = *Agree*, 3 = *Neither Agree Nor disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 1 = *Strongly Disagree*).

Data Collection

An online platform *Qualtrics*® was used to collect data. The researcher obtained the contact information of potential participants from an existing database provided by the district administration and a total of 128 email addresses were obtained. After obtaining the contact information, an email was sent out to the participants. The email was sent out three times with a two-week interval in-between. The email contained an explanation of the study and a link which when clicked automatically directed participants to the online questionnaire.

Results

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies were computed to ascertain how participants learned about co-teaching. A total of five options were presented to the participants. Almost half ($n = 34$, 44%) indicated that they learned about co-teaching through university coursework, 17% ($n = 13$) through a school training program, 22% ($n = 17$) through a presentation at a conference, and two participants had read a published manuscript in a journal. The remaining eleven participants indicated they had learned about co-teaching through other means (i.e., on the job). These findings are plotted in Figure 1.

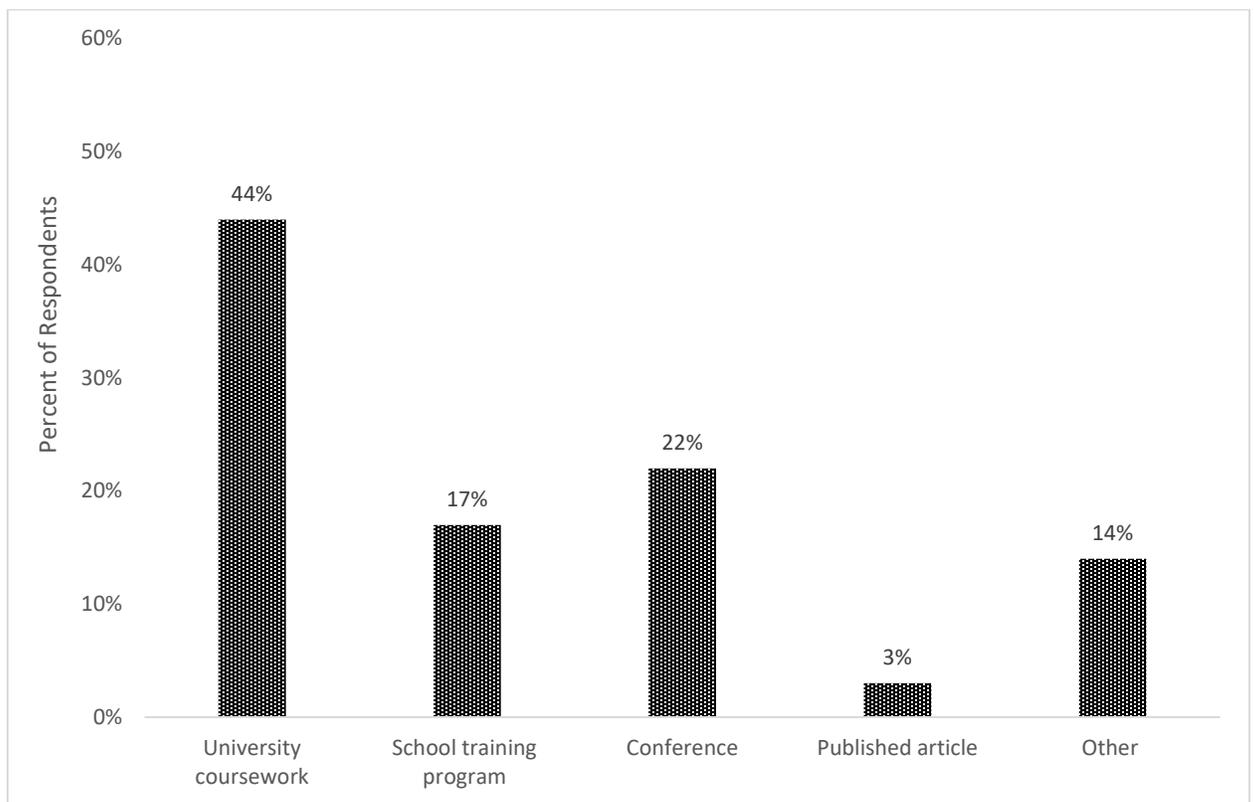


Figure 1: How participants learned about co-teaching

The second part of the questionnaire asked participants if they had used co-teaching as part of their instructional practice or not. Eighty percent ($n = 60$) indicated that they used it as part of their instruction and 22% ($n = 17$) had not used it.

Descriptive statistics were also used to answer the research question guiding the study. Eight statements representing the barriers that may hinder the successful use of co-teaching were presented and they were categorized as either environmental or individual barriers. Regarding

individual barriers, it was found that more than half of the participants ($n = 47$, 62%) affirmed that they lack the necessary skills needed for the implementation of co-teaching. However, although most teachers indicated they lack the necessary skills required for the use of co-teaching, most of them ($n = 63$, 82%) disagreed that they do not see any advantage in using co-teaching. This finding suggests that a majority of the participants perceive co-teaching to be beneficial for their students. To support this assertion, ($n = 53$, 69%) of the participants also denied that co-teaching does not meet the needs of their students.

Regarding the environmental barriers, over half ($n = 44$, 57%) of the participants disagreed that the use of co-teaching is not feasible in their school settings. However, although most participants perceive co-teaching to be feasible in their schools, it is important to note that, 21% ($n = 16$) of participants acknowledged that colleagues do not support the use of co-teaching. Also, 24% ($n = 18$) indicated that co-teaching requires a lot of resources for its successful implementation. A detailed summary of the participant’s responses on the barriers that may hinder the successful use of co-teaching is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Percentage of Participants Responses on the Barriers to using Co-teaching

| Item | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Co-teaching requires a lot of resources | 9% | 36% | 31% | 21% | 3% |
| Co-teaching is not feasible in my school | 17% | 40% | 16% | 21% | 6% |
| I lack the necessary skills needed for the successful use of co-teaching | 14% | 1% | 23% | 42% | 20% |
| Policies in my school prevent the use of co-teaching | 21% | 35% | 26% | 10% | 8% |
| Co-teaching does not meet the needs of my students | 25% | 44% | 21% | 8% | 3% |
| I see no advantage in using co-teaching | 27% | 55% | 14% | 3% | 1% |
| My colleagues do not support co-teaching | 13% | 35% | 31% | 17% | 4% |

Discussion

The findings from this study have important implications for researchers, teacher educators, school administrators, and other practitioners who work with students with or without

special needs in public school settings. The following section provides an interpretation of the study findings.

First, only 44% of the participants learned about co-teaching through university training. This means that more than half of the teachers surveyed had no university training in co-teaching. This raises some concern considering that many classrooms are now inclusive classrooms, hence, teachers are supposed to be adequately trained in practices that promote inclusive education such as co-teaching. In addition, this finding is worrisome since there are federal mandates in place (i.e., IDEA) that call for teachers to have adequate academic training in school based practices (i.e., co-teaching) that promote inclusive education. This finding is also consistent with previous research on the lack of professional preparation of teachers in co-teaching (Vesay, 2004) and other school based practices (Chitiyo, 2016). Academic or professional preparation of implementers in a practice is identified as one of the factors necessary for its successful implementation (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Stickland-Cohen, 2015).

Regarding the main question guiding this study, some participants indicated that co-teaching requires a lot of resources for it to be successful. Although this study did not measure the specific resources, some of the resources documented in literature include time needed to: plan instruction, plan classroom management, plan and administer student assessments (Friend et al., 2010; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Existing research on the implementation of school based practices reveals that teachers are more likely to commit to using practices that are less demanding (McIntosh et al., 2013). With the current demands placed on teachers to raise student achievement, attend staff development meetings, and committee work, if co-teaching is perceived as time consuming, teachers may opt for instructional delivery models that are less demanding. However, as previously discussed, some of the alternative practices are not grounded in the philosophy of inclusive education.

Some participants indicated that their colleagues do not support the use of co-teaching. Co-teaching requires collaboration between two teachers in sharing instructional responsibilities and decision making, so, if some teachers are not in support of the practice, it will not be successfully implemented. Collaboration has been consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors for the implementation and sustainability of different school based practices such as co-teaching (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Pinkelman et al., 2015). Some teachers consider their classrooms as their 'turf' and having an additional teacher might be considered as an invasion of their professional space. Murawski and Swanson (2001) found that some teachers were opposed to using co-teaching because they were not willing to share instructional responsibilities. These differences might also stem from philosophical standpoints. For example, some teachers might not support the use of co-teaching because they are opposed to the philosophy of inclusion (i.e., including students with special needs in regular education classrooms). Students with special needs may present characteristics that place them outside of teacher tolerance and they may also need extra attention from the teacher thereby slowing instructional pace. It is demands such as these that make the use of co-teaching complicated.

It is also possible that some teachers do not support the use of co-teaching because the research base of the practice is still growing. Research shows that users are more likely to be

committed to the use of a practice when they see evidence demonstrating the utility of a practice (Pinkelman et al., 2015; Sanford DeRousie & Bierman, 2012; Rogers, 2003).

Regarding individual barriers, most participants indicated that they lack the necessary skills needed for the use of co-teaching. The extent of conceptual knowledge teachers possess regarding the core principles of a practice can enhance the implementation of a practice (McIntosh et al., 2013; Pinkelman et al., 2015). Therefore, when teachers lack the skills needed for the use of co-teaching, they may not adopt it or they may abandon it. In addition, when teachers do not have the necessary expertise in co-teaching, conflicts may arise concerning instructional responsibilities or decision making. Such conflicts may result in teachers not using or abandoning the practice. As previously discussed, when teachers do not use co-teaching, they may adopt other practices that may not be grounded within the philosophy of inclusive education (i.e., segregated education). However, segregated education has been shown to be detrimental for some students especially those with disabilities. For example, Lane and colleagues (2005) examined the academic profiles of students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD) in self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools and found that all students in both settings had lower academic achievement in all content areas across. Further, it was also found that students made limited academic progress in either setting on reading and math skills.

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that there is an urgent need for teachers to be adequately trained in the use of co-teaching. Teacher education programs need to develop and offer mandatory courses to prospective teachers focused on co-teaching. This will ensure that they have conceptual knowledge needed for the use co-teaching before they are hired. In addition, placement for student teachers should be made in classrooms where co-teaching is the primary instructional delivery model used. This will allow the prospective teachers to see co-teaching in practice, thereby, giving them the much needed practical experience. Research demonstrates that teachers benefit immensely from professional and academic preparation in school based practices (Bradshaw & Pass, 2011; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Pierson & Howell, 2006). For example, Austin (2001) found that general education and special education teachers who taught in kindergarten through 12th grade settings perceived their pre-service teacher training in collaborative teaching as very useful.

There is also a great need for teachers who are already on the job to be adequately trained in the use of practices grounded in the philosophy of inclusive education such as co-teaching. School and district administrators need to develop and offer professional development opportunities on a regular basis centered on the implementation of co-teaching to their teachers. Research on the implementation of school based practices reveals that professional development is a critical factor for the implementation and sustainability of practices (Baker, Gersten, Dimino, & Griffiths, 2004; Bradshaw & Pas, 2011) as well as improving teacher competency (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013).

Besides making sure that teachers have adequate training in co-teaching, the results of this study provides a basis to call on researchers to conduct more research on co-teaching to demonstrate its effectiveness. This might potentially change perceptions of some teachers who are not in support of the practice because of its limited research base. Finally, since co-teaching was found to be time consuming, it is crucial to explore ways to make the implementation of co-teaching less time consuming. This might include, having teacher aides who help with grading

assignments to give the co-teachers ample time to concentrate on planning and delivering instruction.

This study is not without limitations. First, it is important to note that the teachers surveyed in this study came from one school district; therefore, the sample is not representative of all teachers. It is thus, crucial to replicate this study with a larger sample size. Second, it is not known who among the teachers did not respond. An understanding of those who did not respond might provide further informative insights on the factors that hinder the successful use of co-teaching. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study shed light on the barriers that may hinder the use of co-teaching. Future researchers need to explore if addressing the barriers identified in this study leads to the successful use of co-teaching. In addition, there is a growing need to examine the effectiveness of co-teaching as the research evidence base of the practice is still emerging. Finally, researchers need to examine the most effective co-teaching approach(es) among the different co-teaching variations.

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