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Co-Teaching Considerations Packet

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Co-Teaching

This *Considerations Packet* provides basic information to professionals currently engaged in or considering adopting a co-teaching model to support students with mild/moderate disabilities in general education classrooms. Topics include defining characteristics, characteristics of effective co-teachers, getting acquainted with a co-teaching partner, developing a contract for co-teaching, variations of co-teaching, effective co-planning, communication issues, administrative issues (i.e., caseloads, planning time, team identities, and team continuity), and advantages of co-teaching.

Defining Characteristics

Schools that strive to be inclusive use a variety of models to serve students with disabilities, including consultation services, paraprofessional support, pull-out services, and co-teaching. Co-teaching is a model of delivering special education services to students with disabilities within the general education classroom. The following characteristics define the unique relationship of co-teachers.

- ❑ **Two or more professionally licensed teachers**
A co-teaching relationship may consist of some combination of a special education teacher, general education teacher, and/or a related service provider such as a speech-language therapist or a counselor.
- ❑ **Jointly delivered instruction**
In co-teaching, both professionals coordinate and deliver substantive instruction. They plan and use high-involvement strategies to engage all students in their instruction.
- ❑ **Diverse group of students**
Co-teachers provide instruction to a diverse group of students, including those identified with disabilities and others who are not identified. All students are considered members of the class.
- ❑ **Shared classroom space**
In a co-teaching relationship, the majority of the instruction takes place within the classroom in contrast to various pull-out models where groups of students receive instruction in an alternative setting (Friend, 2014).

Characteristics of Effective Co-Teachers

The development of a co-teaching relationship represents a significant change in the working conditions and day-to-day activities of school professionals, most of whom have historically worked independently. As they initiate co-teaching relationships, professionals should consider the defining characteristics of co-teaching and their own professional strengths. Specifically, general and special educators developing new partnerships should be willing to:

- Share their vision and commitment to co-teaching with colleagues
- Engage in collaborative planning with parity
- Identify clear roles and responsibilities
- Self-assess professional development needs related to co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning, and differentiation to establish teacher baseline data
- Actively participate in professional development related to the five approaches of co-teaching ... and other co-teaching practices, Universal Design for Learning, and differentiation
- Establish mutually agreed-upon classroom procedures; [and]
- Design lessons and assessments using Universal Design for Learning and differentiation strategies

(Maryland State Department of Education, 2011, p. 6)

Getting Acquainted: Questions for Co-Teachers to Consider

As teachers begin to co-teach, partners may wish to discuss their responses to the questions and statements below during an initial planning session. The information gleaned from such a discussion assists teams in getting to know each partner's teaching style and preferences.

1. What do you see as your greatest strengths as a teacher?
2. What are your classroom expectations? Positive consequences for following them? Negative consequences for not following them?
3. What are your daily procedures and routines for:
 - checking homework
 - sharpening pencils
 - dealing with students coming to class without materials or homework
 - dismissing for restroom, nurse, school counselor, or other related services
 - students requesting help
 - starting class
 - ending class
4. How would you describe a typical lesson?
5. How do you plan lessons, units, field trips, tests, etc.?
6. How closely do you follow your plans?
7. How do you provide for varied student needs during a lesson?
8. How would you describe the practice activities that you use?
9. What noise levels do you permit in your room?
10. How do you monitor and evaluate progress?
 - Tests
 - Quizzes
 - Homework assignments
 - Projects
 - Oral reports
 - Research papers
 - Sharing progress with students
 - Other (specify)
11. How do you grade?
 - Homework
 - Assessments
 - Projects
 - Participation

- Other (specify)

12. How do you maintain records of grades and progress?

- Grade book procedures
- Computer grade book
- Written feedback to students
- Other (specify)

13. How do you calculate grading period, semester, and yearly grades?

14. What assistance do you allow students to receive during tests, quizzes, seatwork, etc.?

15. How do you communicate with families? When?

16. What disciplinary action do you take without assistance from administrators, guidance personnel, or specialists? When do you request assistance? How do you involve families in discipline?

17. How will we find the time to plan for co-teaching?

18. How will we share planning, preparing, teaching, evaluating, and reporting responsibilities?

19. What are some of your “pet peeves” in the classroom?

20. How will we build trust and maintain confidentiality in our classroom?

Adapted from “Planning for Effective Co-Teaching: The Key to Successful Inclusion,” by C. Walther-Thomas, M. Bryant, & S. Land, 1996, *Remedial and Special Education*, 17(4), pp. 255-265.

Contract for Co-Teaching

Co-teaching teams may want to formalize certain aspects of their relationships by establishing ground rules or contracts. The following may serve as a starting point for team members to determine how they will work together.

Before initiating a co-teaching relationship, I agree to:

- Value and respect the confidentiality of our relationship
- Meet weekly to plan our co-teaching
- Work to resolve conflicts that naturally occur
- Do my fair share to ensure the success of our work together
- Other (specify)

Before planning sessions, I agree to:

- Review curriculum and establish preliminary content goals
- Consider student needs and present levels of performance
- Reflect on previous lessons
- Other (specify)

Before lessons, I agree to:

- Complete agreed-upon tasks in preparation for co-teaching
- Notify my partner of changes in the schedule
- Other (specify)

During lessons, I agree to:

- Respect my co-teaching partner and give him/her an opportunity to lead the instruction, as appropriate
- Be willing to adjust plans to meet student needs
- Check with my partner before making major adjustments to lesson plans
- Other (specify)

After lessons, I agree to:

- Reflect on student outcomes
- Discuss the collaborative relationship with my co-teaching partner
- Fulfill follow-up responsibilities
- Other (specify)

Regularly during the year, I agree to:

- Discuss the co-teaching relationship
- Provide and accept suggestions that will enhance the co-teaching relationship and improve student learning
- Other (specify)

Co-Teaching Variations

Optimally, co-teaching teams use variations of the co-teaching model based on student, teacher, and content needs. Each member of the co-teaching team should take the opportunity to fulfill various roles. This helps reinforce to students the idea that both partners are “teachers” and gives both teachers an opportunity to use their expertise and to share in the joys as well as the challenges of the classroom. Common variations of co-teaching are described below.

Variation	Description	Planning Time	Example
One Teaching, One Observing (Whole group)	One teacher teaches the lesson and the other observes students to gain an understanding of their academic and social functioning.	Low	A general educator teaches a whole-group lesson on writing complete sentences. The specialist collects data related to a single student or small groups of students. The data are used to compare targeted student behavior to the behavior of others during the lesson being taught. In future lessons, the partners may reverse roles when specific behaviors need to be observed.
One Teaching, One Assisting (Whole group)	One teacher provides instruction and the other supports the instructional process.	Low	A general educator teaches a whole-group lesson on the causes of the Civil War. The specialist walks around the classroom to assist students by answering individual questions or to redirect students who are not following the instruction. In future lessons, the partners may reverse roles.
Station Teaching (Small group)	Small groups of students rotate to various stations for instruction, review, and/or practice.	Medium	A specialist works with a small group of students on prewriting, while other students are working with the general educator on research skills. Another group of students is using the classroom computer to research a topic. Over the course of the week, all students work at each task/station.
Parallel Teaching (Small group)	Students are divided into mixed-ability groups, and each co-teaching partner teaches the same material to one of the groups.	Medium	The class is divided in half, and each teacher works with a group on creating a timeline of important events in history. At the end of the session, each group shares its timeline and reviews important concepts.
Teaming or Interactive Teaching (Whole group)	Teachers alternate roles of presenting, reviewing, and monitoring instruction.	High	A general educator and a specialist teach a whole-group lesson on fractions. The specialist introduces the concept and provides initial instruction. The general educator directs the guided practice and evaluation. In future lessons, the partners may reverse roles.
Alternative Teaching (Big group/small group)	One person teaches, re-teaches, or enriches a skill or concept for a small group, while the other monitors or teaches the remaining class members.	High	The specialist works with a small group of students on an enrichment project, while the general educator teaches the remainder of the students. In future lessons, the partners may reverse roles.

Adapted from *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*, 7th ed., by M. Friend & L. Cook, 2014, Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Effective Co-Planning

Co-planning is an important part of positive and successful co-teaching arrangements for both students and teachers. The following suggestions for co-planning should be considered as teachers initiate co-teaching relationships.

Setting the Stage for Planning

- ❑ Seek common planning time during the school day through your administrator.
- ❑ If planning time is not scheduled, consider other commitments and agree on a day and time to meet.
- ❑ Agree on the length of each planning session.
- ❑ Block out planning time in your calendar a semester in advance.
- ❑ Select a place for planning sessions that is free from distractions and interruptions.
- ❑ Make your commitment to co-planning a priority!

Before the Planning Session

- ❑ The general education teacher reviews and brings core curriculum resources to the meeting.

During the Planning Session

- ❑ Both teachers use student data to plan all elements of instruction (e.g., student groupings, co-teaching approaches).
- ❑ Both teachers reflect on past instruction and their partnership.

After the Planning Session

- ❑ The specialist prepares materials and strategies needed to meet the IEP goals of students in the class.
- ❑ Both teachers complete agreed-upon tasks.

(Friend, 2014)

For more in-depth information on co-planning, see the T/TAC W&M *Considerations Packet* entitled [Co-Planning for Student Success](#), updated 2/20/2015.

Communication

Positive communication is an important element of collaborative partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006), and is vital for effective co-teaching (Friend, 2014). Below are some strategies teachers may use to enhance their communication skills (Turnbull et al., 2006).

- ❑ **Furthering responses:** Use verbal and nonverbal cues, such as head nodding, gestures, and responses such as “I see” “And then?” that encourage the speaker to expand on what he/she has stated.
- ❑ **Paraphrasing:** Repeat in your own words small bits of information that the other teacher has relayed to you. For example, “So what you are telling me is that David is not yet at grade level.”
- ❑ **Responding to affect:** Reflect back an emotion that may have been communicated in the conversation to allow the speaker to “see their feelings and attitudes” (p. 191). For example, “From what I hear you saying, it is frustrating for you not to have all the materials you need.”

- **Questioning:** Gain a clearer picture in observable terms by clarifying what you have heard or requesting additional information. For example, “Are you saying that today’s lesson makes you think the students have not gained mastery of this skill?” “Can you tell me more about what you think we could change for tomorrow’s lesson?” Additionally, ask questions related to the topic at hand that further expand the discussion. For example, “What evidence or data do we have to show that the students are mastering the skill?” Expanding discussion is different from asking questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no” by eliciting more specific information.

- **Summarizing:** Near the end of a discussion, concisely restate what you heard to check if that is what the partner meant to say. For example, “Let me summarize what you’ve said. You need to have accommodations made for the small-group reading lesson by Friday. They are having difficulty with staying on time, and you would like me to prepare timelines that will help keep them on schedule.” Demonstrate active listening by using nonverbal cues to acknowledge what is being said so that the speaker knows that you are engaged in the conversation (Turnbull et al., 2006). This can be done by using attentive body language such as making eye contact or leaning toward the speaker. Use of the strategies noted above also demonstrates active listening.

Dialogue to Strengthen the Partnership

All teachers have a vision of what their classroom will look like and may vary widely in their preferences (Murawski, 2009). Consequently, it is important that co-teachers address the following issues so that a clearly defined, productive partnership may begin.

Which Students Are Mine?

Teachers are often concerned about who is responsible for which students. When co-teaching partners begin to share responsibility for teaching, they shift their thinking from “my” students and “your” students to “our” students. Partners must discuss their roles as they co-plan. Switching roles and dividing responsibilities equitably allows teachers the opportunity to work with the entire class. Historically, the general education teacher was responsible for all the students in the class whereas the special educator took the lead in dealing with special education issues. However, many co-teaching teams determine their roles by looking at the strengths each partner brings to the classroom and how they can best support one another professionally. One benefit of the co-teaching model is that no one teacher has to make decisions about student progress in isolation.

How Will We Grade?

Determining who will give grades and how students will be graded is a common dilemma. Teachers can develop guidelines for grading based on data-driven decisions about how much new learning is taking place. When students are given a pretest to determine how much prior knowledge they have on a given subject, co-teachers can best decide how to differentiate instruction and grades. Carol Ann Tomlinson (personal communication, June 2003) suggests differentiating grades by assigning students both a letter and a number grade. The number indicates if students are working on grade level. For example, number 1 may indicate that a student is working on above-grade-level material. Number 2 may indicate that a student is working at grade level, and number 3 that he or she is working below grade level. Letter grades, in turn, show the degree of mastery of concepts a student demonstrates, and reflect how we traditionally assign grades. Using the combined system, if a student earns a 1 C grade, it means that, although he or she is able to handle above-grade-level material, the student is working at an average level. Similarly, a student who earns a 3 A is mastering below-grade level curriculum. This is one example of how collaborative teachers can show the unique abilities of their students.

Who Is Responsible for Creating Classroom Expectations?

Typically, teachers agree on the types of behaviors that support learning in the classroom. Co-teaching teams can discuss the rules, consequences, and routines or procedures that have been most effective. In general, it is important that students understand that both teachers have equal authority for all students in the classroom. Together, co-teaching partners can decide the role that each person will play in ensuring that class routines run smoothly.

How Do We Assign Classroom Space?

Everyone needs a place to call his or her own in the classroom. Thinking about how much time the special educator will be spending in the general education setting will help determine the amount of space each teacher will need. It is important to show students that each teacher has an equal degree of authority in the classroom. One way to do this is by having designated teacher areas that look the same. In some schools, both teachers move to a new classroom to begin fresh without one teacher encroaching on another's traditional territory.

How Will We Divide Responsibilities?

During co-planning, teachers decide who is responsible for preparing each part of the lesson. It is important to divide the responsibilities equally and to vary the roles of each partner so that one person is not responsible for the same duties or students every week. In other words, both teachers must grade papers, construct tests, create classroom accommodations, develop IEPs, and design lessons. Partners who have shared responsibilities for all facets of the classroom and take ownership of every child create a successful learning environment.

Administrative Issues

The building administrator plays an important role in supporting the creation, development, and maintenance of effective co-teaching teams. With an understanding of special education and schoolwide issues, the building administrator can develop schedules, teaching assignments, policies, and routines that enhance co-teaching relationships throughout the building. The following are important administrative issues related to co-teaching.

- **Caseload distribution:** Individual student placement decisions are ultimately a function of the student's IEP. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) requires that a continuum of services be available to meet IEP goals (34 CFR 300.115). Administrators can provide critical leadership and support for a co-teaching model by creating and supporting fair and equitable caseload distributions. Too often, effective co-teaching teams receive a high number of challenging and difficult students. For example, students with 504 Plans, students who are at risk but not eligible for special services, and others who need a little extra support are often placed in co-taught classrooms. In spite of good intentions, having too many students with extra support needs in one classroom limits the effectiveness of co-teaching and can be unfair to teachers and students. Thus, administrators must avoid overloading co-teaching teams.
- **Planning time:** Administrators can support co-teaching teams by providing them with adequate planning time on a regular basis. In some schools, administrative staff members cover classrooms on a periodic basis to provide teachers with longer blocks of co-planning time. Once planning time is built into the schedule, administrators should avoid scheduling meetings or calling on teachers to cover "emergency" situations within the school during that planning time, thereby defeating the purpose behind the special time set aside for co-teaching teams.

- **Identity issues:** Administrators can assist co-teachers in creating strong team identities. For example, when both names are included on class rosters, classroom doors, and in the school handbook, students, parents, and other staff members begin to see the co-teaching relationship as a true partnership. While these identity issues may seem small individually, taken together they contribute much to the development of strong co-teaching teams.
- **Continuity:** As with any relationship, it takes time to develop effective co-teaching teams. Beginning teams deal with issues of getting acquainted with each partner's styles, preferences, and strengths. For example, general education teachers may need time to get used to sharing the classroom and the spotlight with another adult. Special educators may need time to familiarize themselves with the content and the routines of a general education classroom. Administrators should consider these issues as they make decisions regarding teacher placement. Co-teaching teams may have a steep learning curve during the first year. However, teams generally report a rise in satisfaction and effectiveness during the second and subsequent years. By providing teams the time to become efficient and effective, administrators can greatly increase the benefits of co-teaching to students as well as teachers (Murawski, 2009).

Advantages of Co-Teaching

Numerous advantages of co-teaching have been noted when this delivery model is effectively implemented. Benefits to teachers and students include:

- More educational opportunities for all students.
- Reduced stigma for students with disabilities.
- Creation of a professional support network.
- More cohesive educational programs.
- Less lost instructional time.

(Friend, 2014)

As schools implement inclusive practices, more and more opportunities become available for successful collaboration between general and special educators.

Related *Link Lines* articles from T/TAC at the College of William and Mary:

- [*The Nuts and Bolts of Co-Teaching*](#)
- [*Co-Teaching: Moving Beyond One Teaching, One Assisting*](#)
- [*Remove the Barriers of Time and Space: Strategies for Effective Co-Planning*](#)
- [*Assessment, Flexible Grouping, and Research-Based Instructional Strategies: Powerful Tools for Co-Taught Classes*](#)
- [*Beyond Co-Teaching: Considering Supplementary Aids and Services*](#)

Additional Resources

Resources on co-teaching are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Visit the website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php> for a complete listing of all materials. Select the "Library" link and enter co-teaching as the subject of the search.

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