

The Golden Key to Effective Inclusion: Co-Teaching!

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The Golden Key to Effective Inclusion: Co-Teaching!

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Abstract: Effective inclusion takes intentional practices which leverage every possible resource. Too often, instructional staff are underutilized in classrooms, or pulled out to work with specific children. This leaves the student-to-teacher group ratio too high to ideally individualize instruction. There are several co-teaching models which offer teachers clear pathways to tap in to all expertise in the room and maximize learning opportunities for all children. This paper outlines key structures and principles of using co-teaching to make inclusion work for children and teachers, highlighting four effective models: station teaching, parallel teaching, teaming, and split the class.

Keywords: Co-Teaching; Inclusion; Teacher Collaboration

Knowledge Focus: Best Practices Focus

Topic: Early Learning & Education

The Golden Key to Effective Inclusion: Co-Teaching!

Jamal slams his locker and runs down the hall. While a teacher loudly shouts, “walk,” Jamal moves into a fast shuffle as he makes his way to math class. Upon arriving, Jamal finds the board is directing him to find his group and get into stations. As Jamal does this Ms. Gray asks, “how are you this morning Jamal?” He mumbles and heads toward Ms. Rice and begins to ask about what they will be doing today. Ms. Rice directs him back to his seat and she gathers the class and starts the lesson. As class starts, Ms. Rice and Ms. Gray take turns telling the students about the stations they will be engaged in and directing them to the board to find out what they will need and where they will be. Jamal quickly recognizes his learning task and joins the group. He checks in with his team, and reiterates what he understands as the task. His peers affirm and clarify the expectations, and they seamlessly get started on their work. Their first station is with Ms. Rice, in a teacher-directed station focused on building a new calculation strategy based on last week’s unit. Other students are working on mastering prior skills, while another small group works with Ms. Gray on a new math game. This is all new for Jamal. Until this August, he had been placed in a special education classroom and was not in the general education classroom for any academic subjects. Jamal’s new

opportunity was a part of a district effort to respond to the intent of the Least Restrictive Environment clause of IDEA.

Many districts are delivering segregated special education services out of habit or outdated practices and are not carefully thinking about how to deliver special education services in the general education classroom efficiently and effectively. Committed to doing something different, Jamal's school district decided to dramatically change how they provide special education services. In doing this, they structured their special education staff so that they would be co-teaching with general education teachers and providing special education services through co-teaching in the general education classroom. It is through the district's commitment to co-teaching that June found herself thriving and experiencing new independence and opportunities.

Co-teaching is emerging as a highly effective practice to increase successful inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom, and to improve learning outcomes for all children (Friend, 2008). Co-teaching involves teaming teachers with complementary background, skill, and styles. This often involves pairing a special educator and a general educator as a teaching team for part of the day in the general education classroom (Friend, 2007). This article presents important structures and features of effective co-teaching initiatives to increase inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Why Inclusion?

Inclusion is a set of values, beliefs, and practices that recognize the naturally occurring range and diversity of learning and development, and validate the right of all students to be active and meaningful members of the same classroom community. Inclusive practices are specifically designed and implemented to increase access, full participation, and appropriate support for each child to achieve maximum learning and development (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Effective inclusive practices and settings are intentionally designed to leverage resources from therapeutic specialists, general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and assistants. In inclusive settings, the divisions between general and special education are reduced and resources and collaborations are maximized. Especially in today's resource-strapped school systems, using co-teaching to maximize staff is particularly beneficial.

In our work with schools and teachers, we often hear professionals express concerns about not having the time, experience, or skills to adequately meet children's needs in the general education classroom. In essence, there is a lingering belief that segregated special education classrooms are in some (or all) of a student's best interest and the best way to meet the student's identified needs or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals, and particularly that segregated learning settings are better for students in general education. However, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that inclusion, with teaming and partnership of complementary skills and expertise through co-teaching, is an effective way to meet children's needs, IEP goals,

social connectedness (Blazer, 2017) and increase achievement for all children (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013; Shogren et al., 2015).

Making Inclusion Work: It Starts with ‘They’re All Our Kids’

Often, teachers report not knowing how, when, or where to begin the journey to inclusive teaching. Even when children with IEPs are physically placed in the general education classroom, general education teachers don’t always view children with disabilities as their responsibility. Many teachers share feeling underprepared to utilize a wide and effective array of individualized teaching strategies and specific interventions. Special education teachers also report not feeling valued and welcomed to integrate teaching in the general education classroom. These feelings can lead to the general education teacher providing instruction to most of the class, with the special education teacher or paraprofessional teaching just the children with disabilities in some part of the room. In essence, both types of teachers can have a perspective that ‘these are my kids, those are your kids.’ The challenge with this is that simply placing children with disabilities within the general education classroom is not necessarily offering an inclusive education. It also does not effectively maximize the staffing resources and expertise, and is not effective at improving education outcomes for students.

In contrast, when special education and general education teachers are equally responsible for co-creating instruction and classroom environments, they take on the perspective that ‘they’re all OUR kids.’ Through careful design and intentional planning for instruction, grouping, and teacher responsibilities, like the models outlined in this article, the message is that there are two equal teachers in the room and all children are a shared responsibility. By reducing the divisions between general and special education towards a unified inclusive education model, the false narrative that a narrowly defined ‘typical’ is the only student welcomed in the classroom can be dismantled. Parents have long been advocating for inclusion, and as one parent put it; “Real life doesn’t have a ‘special room’ for my son. There isn’t a ‘special ed’ section of the supermarket, or the airport, or the neighborhood. My child lives within the natural diversity of the world, and their school should reflect that; for his sake as well as for all the students. We all live in a diverse world, how do our children ever learn to function there if schools persist in creating a false divide between them?” (J. Harmon, personal communication, Dec 19, 2018).

Effective Models of Co-Teaching

Four models of co-teaching are particularly effective and serve to increase the teacher-student ratio and allow for more individualizing. When a special education teacher pulls a student, or few, for intervention, the general education teacher remains with a large group and less opportunity for student contact. Pull out interventions also don’t provide any opportunity for general and special education teachers to learn from each other and improve their practice. But when both teachers are in the classroom and taking responsibility for all children, they are able to engage more deeply with a smaller group of students, allowing for stronger relationships and

more tailored instruction. An essential factor to making co-teaching successful is the co-planning that both teachers go through collaborative preparation. Station teaching, parallel teaching, teaming, and splitting the class —outlined below— offer excellent opportunity for differentiating and individualizing to address all students’ learning needs and strengths.

Station Teaching

In the station teaching model of co-teaching, each teacher works with a small group of children who rotate among various stations to complete the different activities related to the same instructional content/objective. Station teaching is an efficient use of time that allows all students to experience multiple related instructional activities in the lowest student-to-teacher ratio. A key in the planning of stations is that the two teacher-directed stations integrate essential individualized learning goals (potentially meeting IEP service minute requirements), and remaining stations be based on student-directed or independent stations in which students reinforce learning or practice skills. Station rotations allow all children to work equally with both teachers, thereby solidifying the shared authority and equal responsibility of both teachers.

Figure 1. Station Teaching Model of Co-Teaching

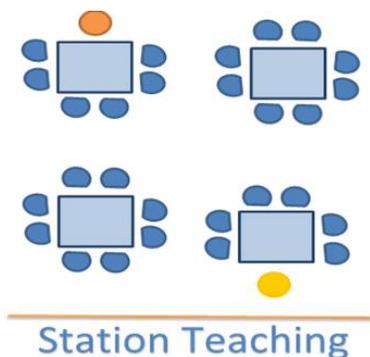


Figure 1 Image Description: “Station Teaching” representing four stations of 6–8 students with two teacher directed stations. Teachers create small group learning stations to provide tailored instruction.

Parallel Teaching

In the parallel teaching model of co-teaching, the class is split into halves with each co-teacher responsible for implementing the same lesson to one group. These lessons are more teacher-driven, but also integrate more opportunity for facilitating interactions among students than in a whole group single-teacher lesson. Parallel lessons allow for more teacher-student engagement, while also providing peer-to-peer interaction, modeling, and support. Teachers switch groups to develop relationships with all students and ensure that required interventions are being provided based on individual children’s IEPs.

Figure 2. Parallel Teaching Model of Co-Teaching

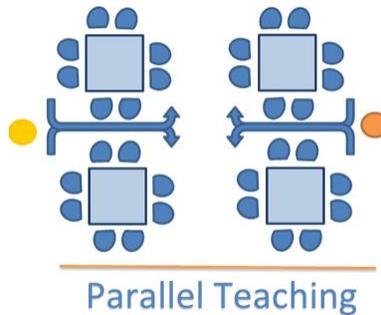


Figure 2 Image Description: “Parallel Teaching” representing four stations of 8 students with two teachers, each pointing to two different stations.

Teaming

In the teaming model co-teaching, teachers provide instruction through interaction and collaboration, bouncing off of each other or taking turns. When teaming, teachers may volley comments, instructions, or prompts back-and-forth, extending and building on each other’s teaching. Teaming is dynamic and shifts student focus between two teachers, increasing learner engagement. This dynamic collaboration also allows for each teacher’s unique and complementary strengths to more effectively reach each student. Another unique benefit of this collaboration is that teachers each learn new strategies and techniques from the other. Team teachers often talk about how their teaching is improved by the modeling of the co-teacher.

Figure 3. Team Teaching Model of Co-Teaching

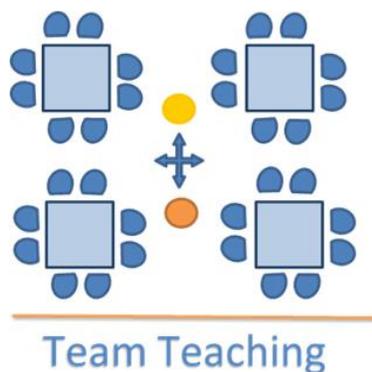


Figure 3 Image Description: “Team Teaching” representing four stations of 8 students with two teachers, each pointing to all four different stations.

Split the Class

The split the class model of co-teaching works during student projects or research work. When students are working independently or in pairs on a task, teachers each take half the class and rotate, providing help for their designated half. This allows teachers to provide consistent

support to a smaller group of students. This structure also allows teachers to provide specialized instruction for students with disabilities to work on their specific learning or IEP goal.

Figure 4. Split the Class Model of Co-Teaching

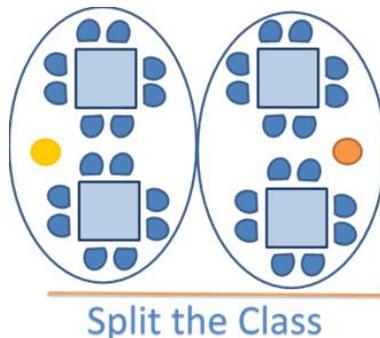


Figure 4 Image Description: “Split the Class” representing four stations of 8 students with two teachers, each teacher encircled with two stations. Split the class is when teachers divide the class in half and circulate among their group during students’ independent or team work time.

Conclusion

“Ever since Ms. Rice and I got teamed up as co-teachers, we’ve really seen a difference in the classroom community climate. But more than just kids being more tolerant and caring, I’ve noticed how I’ve learned a lot of new teaching techniques and tricks to reach kids. She makes me a better teacher,” Ms. Gray said, reflectively. “Once I started to see that my new teaching strategies were working, I really started to see all the students as ‘ours’. Before I left instruction and progress monitoring for some kids- Jamal, for one!- to the special ed team. But once I realized how effective I could be by learning from and with Ms. Rice, I’ve really found a lot more pride in my teaching. It’s a really good feeling- for me AND the students!”

Teaching is an increasingly complex practice that requires professionals to continuously engage in reflective learning and engagement with evolving best practices. Student groups represent vast diversity in terms of learning styles, strengths, support needs, and varying abilities. Commitment to upholding principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act—in particular educating children in the Least Restrictive Environment—is increasing the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Inclusive classrooms, in which teachers support individual children’s learning outcomes, demands specialized teaching skills and strategies. Structured models of co-teaching, including station teaching, parallel teaching, teaming, and splitting the class, hold the key to improving teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and differentiating strategies, while also improving outcomes for children with and without disabilities within a shared classroom community.

Authors



Lissanna Follari, Ph.D. has been working with young children and families for 23 years. She began her teaching career with infants and toddlers, and has worked in classrooms throughout the elementary grades. Lissanna has spent the past 16 years as an Early Childhood Development and Education university faculty. Her work focuses on diversity studies and innovative approaches to inclusive early care and education. She joined the College of Education at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs in January 2014.

Image Description: Photo of Lissanna Follari



Christi Kasa, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Colorado. Her teaching, research, and consulting are guided by her passion to create successful inclusive schools for all students.

Image Description: Photo of Christi Kasa

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