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All Means All: Exploring Co-teaching Dyads Working with Students with Significant Support Needs

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ALL MEANS ALL: EXPLORING CO-TEACHING DYADS
WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT
SUPPORT NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

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Co-teaching is a framework that teachers utilize to support one another and actively include students with diverse learning needs. However, it is not frequent that special education and general education teachers use co-teaching to provide meaningful inclusion for students with significant support needs (SSN). This qualitative study explored effective general and special education co-teaching dyads who worked with students with SSN within the general education classroom. Participants included six teachers (three general education and three special education) who participated in semi-structure and dialogical interviews, virtual and verbal classroom walks, and provided artifacts and reflections. Interviews with participants were conducted separately and served as the primary source of data collection. A combination of case study and portraiture design was used to address the following research questions and sub-questions: What are the experiences of educator dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)? What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant needs? What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs? What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers)

perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Both within case and across case analysis were conducted to establish common themes among participants. Themes that emerged included meaningful inclusion for students, the importance of school leadership support, and the importance of having deep understanding of both co-teaching and communication needs. Additionally, participants demonstrated that shared goals and beliefs including having high expectations for students and believing they were general education students first and wanting them in the general education classroom were apparent. Themes surrounding vital elements regarding participants' intense co-teaching partnerships included flexibility, knowing and understanding each other's roles, communication and collaboration, trust and vulnerability, and achieving the mind meld. Themes around challenges included shared struggles around time and scheduling, individual challenges with stacking classrooms, and building wide responsibilities; and finally, perceptions of teacher benefits as well as both academic and social benefits for students. Findings were integrated with current research, lessons for implementation were provided, and recommendations for future research and limitations were discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> At the heart of this agenda is the notion that special education might better be viewed as experimental or innovative education than as a separate bureaucracy that serves a few children who are deemed eligible for its services and who are all too often disenfranchised from full membership because of their very eligibility. (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2013, p. 16)

Students with significant support needs (SSN) are "highly diverse learners with extensive needs in the areas of cognition and/or learning, communication, movement and social/emotional abilities. These individuals may also have concurrent health, sensory, physical and/or behavioral disabilities" (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2017, p. 1). Although conflicting perceptions surround what both practitioners and professionals believe to be the most beneficial approach to education for learners with SSN (Agran et al., 2020), access to classrooms, peers, and instruction continues to be a significant concern. Interestingly, these elements of education are what most children anticipate when they go to school (Friend & Cook, 2013; Turnbull et al., 2013). However, to date, many individuals with SSN are not included in classrooms or provided access to appropriate instruction with their typically developing peers. The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) pushed for schools to "provide effective teaching methods and ensure that those with additional needs benefit from strong teaching and instructional methods that should be offered to a child through general education" (p. 9). In addition to providing effective instruction, policy statements from a variety of professional and advocacy agencies also encourage inclusion of students with SSN (e.g., American Association on Mental Retardation/The Arc, 2002; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000;

TASH, 2000). Yet, individuals with SSN are still faced with systemic and systematic practices that impede their access to strong instruction as well as the general education curriculum—so much so that Bock (2013) made reference to general education and special education as existing as separate entities and experiences. This notion both encompasses and reinforces the idea that excluding individuals with SSN from best practices and academic instruction has been (and continues to be) a common trend in schools (Agran, 2011; Erickson et al., 2009). This assertion emphasized the idea that students with SSN had a completely alternative school experience than that of their typical peers (Bock, 2013). Furthermore, legislation, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), mandated that students with disabilities are provided access to public schools and pushed schools to implement increasingly inclusive practices including providing students with SSN access to general education settings and curriculum. Although simply including students with SSN with typical peers and providing them with access to instruction is a challenge, there continues to be an apparent social assumption that students who require special education intervention differ so greatly from their typical peers that there is a necessity to educate them with separate curriculum, in separate classrooms or spaces, and with separate instruction (Zigmond et al., 2009).

Although Office of Special Education Programs (2011) data indicated a significant percentage of students with SSN received the majority of most of their instruction and education within separate classrooms and most students with SSN were subject to alternative instruction, it was not always clear that this was often due to the uncertainty experienced by educators of how to effectively instruct students with SSN due to the intensive nature of their disability. Special education and general education teachers often must consider teaching, behavior management, as well as a number of additional responsibilities such as managing individualized education

programs(IEPs), documentation (e.g., progress monitoring), instructional requirements, and collaboration with service providers and one another in addition to being prepared to address health needs, motor skills, access and positioning, assistive technology, and high/low tech communication devices (Eichinger & Downing, 2000). In addition to thinking creatively about addressing academic and accessibility needs for their students, educators working with students with SSN must also effectively instruct students in social-communication skills while recognizing and implementing strong levels of reinforcement (Downing, 2010; Westling & Fox, 2000). As instructional strategies become more ambiguous and special education teachers attempt to prioritize which of a student's needs should be addressed to meet their learning needs, teachers will frequently focus on what they believe is appropriate instead of what the student is actually capable of doing and achieving (Klehm, 2014). As a result, the complexity of instruction is frequently increased for educators working with students who demonstrate SSN and many educators struggle to implement effective instruction and indicate they feel ill prepared (Ainsworth, 2014). This struggle to know how to effectively meet the complex needs of students with SSN is confounded by the lack of evidence-based strategies around instruction. This, in turn, feeds perceptions of low expectations of students with SSN, especially when students also present complex communication needs (CCN; Ainsworth, 2014; Bailey et al., 2011; Browder et al., 2008; Keefe & Copeland, 2011).

According to Rainforth and Kugelmass (2003), "The choices teachers make about where and how students with severe disabilities will be educated have self-fulfilling and far-reaching implications for these students' lives" (Rainforth & Kugelmass, 2003, p. 244). Arguably, the content or what is taught also have implications. The impact of lowered expectations is frequently a byproduct of fear and uncertainty of adults. In turn, there is a tendency for teachers,

parents, and providers to be uncertain of what type of instruction to use and how it should and/or could be implemented for children with SSN (Fenlon et al., 2010). Many educators and special educators indicated they remained uncertain of how to develop and/or implement effective reading intervention for students with significant needs (Lemons et al., 2018). Israel et al. (2013) indicated that often new special educators struggle to make connections between the content they learned in their preparation coursework to their experiences as the teacher within classrooms and schools. Additionally, uncertainty is intensified when special education teachers find themselves working with students who have more extensive needs and struggle to quickly expand their teaching repertoire to implement strong and effective services for students with SSN (Israel et al., 2013; Jameson & McDonnell, 2007). Nevertheless, Spooner et al. (2017) encouraged researchers and practitioners working in the field of special education to move away from baseless practices, especially those that are "harmful, have contraindications, are controversial, or have insufficient evidence" (p. 15).

Collaboration is a vital skill for general and special educators who are working collectively toward effectively implementing instruction for all students within the general education classroom. Since the implementation of integration of services was first introduced and the roles of general and special education teachers shifted to that of working together, conversation surrounding collaboration between this dyad of educators including how the professional partnership would function, what roles and responsibilities would look like, and what type of impact collaborative practices would have on student achievement have become a significant focus for special education researchers (Cook & Friend, 1995; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001; Nevin et al., 2008; Rea & Connell, 2005; Rea et al., 2002; Scruggs et al., 2007). In an effort to find effective means to implement

strong instruction, provide access to the general classroom, as well as hold students with SSN to high expectations and facilitate both educator and student growth, it is vital to rethink the roles of general educators and special educators as separate and isolated entities. To be more specific, general educators are now legally responsible for students with disabilities as the teacher of record (Strieker et al., 2013) and special education teachers must play a more integrative role than what was previously expected of those teaching in self-contained classrooms of the past (Tremblay, 2013). Murawski and Lochner (2011) stated that in order to bridge the extensive needs of students with SSN and adequately provide them access to the general education classroom and curriculum, general and special education teachers must work collaboratively. Although the field of special education can appear divided surrounding the desegregation of schools for students with SSN, existing legislation supports the education of students with SSN in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which means collaborative and interprofessional collaborative practices for school-based teams have become increasingly urgent. Although it is clear teachers are being encouraged to think and work more collaboratively to meet complex needs in the general education setting, teachers can elect to use a number of methods and models to implement collaborative practices. A vital component identified by Carter et al. (2009) for successful collaboration was for general and special education teachers to set goals, plan, and identify agreed upon outcomes for students together. One method of collaboration for general and special education teachers that met this criterion was co-teaching. Co-teaching is a model of instruction that includes a number of designs that can be implemented with all students in the general education classroom including students with SSN. However, the only literature that currently exists surrounding this practice is with students with English language learning needs and/or students with disabilities that are perceived to be less intensive. Therefore, the information

used throughout this study focused on literature published surrounding the co-teaching model and implementation with students with less significant disabilities.

As previously stated, because the integrative practices for students with disabilities have evolved, the need for both general and special education teachers to become a collaborative and cohesive team to meet the needs of all of their students has become vital (Friend et al., 2010; Malian & McRae, 2010; Robinson & Buly, 2007). Co-teaching has been defined broadly as both the general and special education teacher working collaboratively in the development and delivery of instruction, classroom management, as well as both the collection and analysis of student data in a deliberate effort to include those with disabilities in regular education settings (Friend, 2008). The practice of co-teaching not only accounts for the diversity of students with disabilities within a classroom and assists in providing them access to instruction but also accounts for the diversity of all learners with respect to their human differences such as ability, culture, language, etc. (Navarro et al., 2016). The implementation of co-teaching strategies should help to facilitate both integrative practices as well as provide access to effective instruction for all students including those with SSN.

Although limited and some conflicting research directly supports co-teaching as an intervention (Cook & McDuffie-Landrum, 2020), teachers are encouraged to use co-teaching as a framework or model for both inclusive practices as well as intervention. For instance, if both general and special education teachers are running groups during literacy and provide both guided reading as well as an intervention rotation for all students, the model provides all students with access to the general education curriculum and targeted intervention. By using the co-teaching approach to meet the needs of all students and individualize instruction to promote learning, teachers are able to create a more just approach to educating all students.

In addition to being a complete approach to inclusion for students with individualized learning needs, co-teaching also facilitates future learning for educators. Teachers working collaboratively in co-taught classrooms indicated utilizing this practice functioned as a real time and extended professional development by encouraging teachers to share ideas and expertise within the classroom in real time and providing increased opportunities to experiment with techniques and strategies with students in vivo (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Leat et al., 2006; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Additionally, Rytivaara and Kershner (2012) indicated the practice of co-teaching spoke to the advancement and changes in teachers' knowledge and practice stating that even "seemingly small events and experimentation can be significant steps towards a bigger change in a teacher's thinking, beliefs and practice - steps in their professional development" (p. 1007).

Statement of the Problem/Justification

Students with SSN demonstrate complex and extensive needs due to their disabilities. Additionally, they make up about 1% of the population. However, although they are a small portion of the population, they are still an important and valuable group and we care about every single one of these students. Although federal law encouraged inclusion and access for students with SSN in general education classrooms and instruction, the majority of schools continued to exclude this population of learners the majority of the time. Data sources at the federal level revealed that although there was an increased percentage of students receiving services under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) who spent 80% or more of their school day within the general education classroom, the majority of students identified within this field of service required fewer support needs while those with more significant needs continued to be segregated and excluded (McLeskey et al., 2012). Although

Murawski and Dieker (2008) indicated "recent studies have found that [co-teaching] can be a very effective method for meeting students' needs (e.g., Magiera et al., 2005; Murawski, 2006; Rea et al., 2002; Scruggs et al., 2007), there was a gap in the research on teacher collaboration, perception, beliefs, and methods of co-teaching with students who demonstrated significant support needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study and research design was to investigate the perceptions of special education and general education teacher dyads who co-taught with students who demonstrated significant support needs (SSN) in an inclusionary setting (the general education classroom). In addition to developing a better understanding of both the benefits and challenges teacher dyads encountered through the use of this inclusive teaching model, it was also hopeful that findings throughout this study would eventually add to and expand the current literature that focused primarily on perceptions and factors which develop effective co-teaching programs for students with less complex learning needs.

Research focused on teachers' perceptions of co-teaching was common (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Pratt et al., 2016; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). However, based on current literature, no research has been done on teachers' perceptions of their co-teaching practices within the general education classroom with students with SSN. According to Härkki et al. (2021), the practice of co-teaching has a strong history of driving change via an organic way of co-constructing "novel pedagogical practices and to teach reformed crafts" (p. 4). It would seem the model of co-teaching could be a means by which the inclusion and effective instruction of students with SSN could be implemented effectively whilst demystifying educational avenues

that appear to continue to keep integration of students with SSN inconsistent and uncommon throughout the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout this exploratory research, the guiding theoretical frameworks were social justice theory with an emphasis on the partisan of participation component (Mladenov, 2016) and social model of disability (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976). This model questioned traditional views associated with individuals with disabilities as those including pity, tragedy, or victims in need of care. Instead, through the lens of the social model of disability, individuals with disabilities are perceived as "complete and full human beings who can function effectively provided they are given necessary tools, alternative techniques, modern training and positive societal attitudes" (Joseph, 2007, p. 247). Also guiding this work was the theory of social justice which has been broadly defined as the equitable distribution of power, assets, and accountability for all people (Van den Bos, 2003). The fundamental components that drove this framework included beliefs and values of inclusion, collaboration, and access as well as opportunity for everyone (Sue, 2001).

Methodology

The research that took place throughout this work was investigative in nature as the gap in the literature was significant. Therefore, the methodology was qualitative in approach as indicated by the exploratory nature of the guiding research question and sub-questions. The frameworks implemented were a combination of both portraiture and case study in order to gain a deeper understanding of general education and special education dyads that co-taught in inclusive environments with students with SSN.

Context and Significance of the Study

This study has significance for educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to find new methods to build successful and constructive learning communities that include students with SSN. McDuffie et al. (2009) stated that co-teaching is a vital step toward the successful inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms. This statement should include all students including those with SSN.

The co-teaching framework holds multiple benefits for students, as well as general and special education teachers, and continues to be considered the most popular and effective method to promote equitable learning opportunities for diverse needs while providing access to the general education classroom and content. The results of this study could hopefully shift the practice of excluding students with SSN from the general education classroom based on perceived fears or limited capabilities of meeting complex learning needs. Additionally, I hypothesized that the results of this study would create new avenues for collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers working with students with SSN. By analyzing the perceptions, accomplishments, and concerns expressed by general education and special education teacher dyads, information could be disseminated to teacher preparation programs, educational leaders, and policy makers so the field might have a clearer understanding of how teachers perceived this inclusive practice with students who had SSN.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research question and three sub-questions:

Q1   How do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) describe their perceptions of co-teaching with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?

       Q1a   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with SSN?

Q1b   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have SSN?

Q1c   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Definitions of Terms

Collaboration. An ongoing process for instruction in which two or more members of an

educational team commit to work together in an ongoing process which includes sharing

areas of expertise and providing one another with effective feedback in order to best meet

student needs (Cook & Friend, 1991; Hord, 1981).

Co-teaching. A framework that involves one general educator and one special educator

"delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single

physical space" (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 2) as well as sharing responsibilities including

planning, monitoring behavior, and data collection. This model of instruction facilitates a

collaborative approach for educators so they are better able to meet the diverse needs of

students in a classroom by combining their expertise and by developing common

instructional goals (Conderman & Hedin, 2012; Cook & Friend, 1991; Hord, 1981).

Differentiated instruction. A pedagogical approach to instruction in which educators approach

students of differing skill levels with appropriately challenging content and high

expectations within the same classroom. This includes varying the difficulty, assistance

and prompting, and method of student engagement and demonstration of skills

(Tomlinson, 2014).

General education teacher (licensed/highly qualified). No Child Left Behind (2002) identified

highly qualified general education teachers as educators who hold a bachelor's degree or

higher, possess a current and full state certification or licensure, and demonstrate proficiency in the academic area that they teach [Section 9101(11)].

Inclusion. For this study, inclusion was defined as students with disabilities receiving academic instruction as well as access to social opportunities alongside non-disabled peers within the general education classroom with a general education teacher teaching jointly with a special education teacher (McCray & McHatton, 2011).

Least restrictive environment. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is an IDEA mandate which states that students with disabilities be educated inclusively with their non-disabled peers within the general education setting to the greatest extent possible (Katsiyannis et al., 2012).

Significant support needs. Students identified with significant support needs (SSN) or severe disabilities (SD) demonstrate unique needs. These labels work as umbrella terms that were once known as multiple disabilities for individuals who demonstrated extensive cognitive and learning needs in addition to combination of some or all of the following: speech and language or complex communication, orthopedic impairments or movement, other health or complex medical, sensory, social and or emotional challenges, deafness, and blindness (CDE, 2020).

Special education teacher (licensed/highly qualified). The IDEA (2004) identifies highly qualified special education teachers as having earned a bachelor's degree or higher and possess a current full state certification or licensure in special education.

Summary

Students with SSN frequently experience separate and segregated school experiences and lack of access to general education instruction. However, due to complex learning needs, inclusion and access for students with SSN should be approached per a collaborative framework that encourages general and special education teachers to share their individual areas of expertise. Over the years, co-teaching has been a popular framework that has been implemented to support educator collaboration for diverse student needs; however, data have not been collected surrounding the implantation of co-teaching with students with SSN. Using a theoretical framework including social justice theory and the social model of disability, I proposed a study exploring experiences and perceptions of co-teaching dyads working with students with SSN in inclusive settings.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The goal of the literature review was to explore students with significant support needs (SSN), instruction for SSN, and inclusion. This study investigated how collaborative practices, inclusion, and co-teaching (a collaborative framework) could benefit both students with SSN as well as teachers. It was important to understand that, although co-teaching is a common model that has been used by teachers to better meet their students' needs, no literature was available regarding the implementation of this model within the general education classroom with students identified as having SSN. Therefore, much of the literature cited throughout this review involved using this model of teaching with students who demonstrated diverse needs including English language learners, students with disabilities, etc.

Students with Significant Support Needs

Students identified with SSN or severe disabilities (SD) demonstrate unique needs. These labels work as umbrella terms once known as multiple disabilities for individuals who demonstrated extensive cognitive and learning needs in addition to combination of some or all of the following: speech and language or complex communication; orthopedic impairments or movement; other health or complex medical, sensory, social and/or emotional challenges; deafness; and blindness (CDE, 2020). Intervention and instruction for students with SSN oftentimes was intensive and might span throughout the individual's lifetime due to the extent of their disabilities. However, this disability tended to be of low prevalence, impacting

approximately 1% of the population. A label of significant cognitive disability was typically used to refer to students who had disabilities that precluded them from easily accessing grade-level standards regardless of the quality of instruction or adaptations provided (Erickson, 2013). Students identified with cognitive needs represented a diverse group of learners who typically demonstrated needs for (a) instructional support that was extensive, repetitive in nature, and included highly individualized instruction and adaptations; (b) materials that had been adapted specifically to meet individual needs and learning; and (c) varied opportunities and presentation styles to facilitate effective access to learning and preserving information as well as generalizing and demonstrating said skills across a variety of situations and settings (Erickson, 2013).

According to the CDE (2020), to work with students with SSN, educators must implement diverse and thoughtful approaches to learning in order to provide access and allow students to demonstrate their understanding and skills. It is also critical that educators provide intensive instruction in all core areas and problem solving, thoughtfully and deliberately adapt materials and physical settings, as well as support learning to provide meaningful access to grade level curriculum (including the use of low, medium, and high-tech tools for communication and demonstration of skills). Finally, teachers must actively and effectively progress, monitor, and collect data, and provide support across environments including school, community, etc. (CDE, 2020).

Inclusion and the Law

Inclusive education for students with SSN has been and continues to be a polarizing topic of debate for well over three decades (Sailor & McCart, 2014). In the past, students with SSN attended separate schools or institutions to be managed or receive services and instruction. In fact, individuals with severe disabilities were deliberately excluded from most public schools

until parents and families pursued legal action that eventually led to landmark passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975 (Vaughn et al., 2007). Eventually, through persistence and determination, families and advocates initiated the movement toward mainstreaming students with disabilities. The act of mainstreaming, a term that is no longer commonly used in the field, encouraged students with disabilities to be educated in general education classrooms for a portion of their school day. However, students with disabilities were rarely included in general education classrooms full-time until the landmark case Sacramento Unified School District v. Rachel H. in 1994 that made it possible for students with mild disabilities to participate in the general education classroom with their peers (Osborne & Russo, 2006). As the movement for inclusive practices progressed, students with mild disabilities became more included in regular classes and students with more severe disabilities were finally allowed to attend public schools (Hallahan et al., 2012).

As previously mentioned, in 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was revised and expanded to grant students with special needs access to general education classrooms and instruction. This extension of IDEA was helpful in promoting access for most students to the general education classroom and instruction but was not entirely successful as the proposed changes were poorly enforced. Despite growing evidence that placement in general education produced positive learner outcomes for students with SSN (Shogren et al., 2015), students with more complex and significant needs continued to be placed mostly in segregated settings (Morningstar et al., 2017). In short, although law and policy had slowly advanced to promote inclusion and access for students with disabilities to both the general education classroom and content, access for students with SSN to the least restrictive environment continued to be inconsistent and rare.

The Least Restrictive Environment

The federal government had little involvement in the education of students with disabilities in the earlier half of the 20th century (Abeson & Zettel, 1977; Heward et al., 2017). As a result, students with disabilities (more specifically, those with known or more obvious or visible disabilities like SSN, deaf, blind, cognitive and or multiple disabilities) were often provided with education in a separate setting from their non-disabled peers or they were simply not educated at all (Fisher et al., 2003; Heward et al., 2017). In 1965, funding was finally implemented for special education programming to be implemented into schools operated by the state through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; Heward et al., 2017). Nonetheless, it took nearly 10 more years for legislation to directly support and mandate education for students with disabilities within a public-school setting.

This movement toward inclusive education in a less restrictive environment for individuals with disabilities continues to be difficult especially for students with SSN. Public Law 94-142 and all of its amendments including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004; IDEIA, 2004) provided additional support for students with disabilities and NCLB (2002) and the Every Students Succeeds Act (2016) stated that all students have the right to access to the same educational settings and curriculum. This notion of non-exclusive or separate education within public schools was reiterated in the Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District suit (2017), which required all students be included in and work toward high standards of learning as well as grade level expectations (Toews & Kurth, 2019). Although laws stated that students with SSN had the right to be provided with physical and instructional access to typical school buildings and general education content, students with SSN continued to experience a separate education from that of their peers.

Inclusion and Access to Learning

The concept of inclusion continues to be polarized in terms of perceptions and beliefs (Sailor & McCart, 2014). Although inclusion should be seen as a goal for all students with disabilities, it was important to note that the opportunity to participate fully in the school experience was not extended equally among students with disabilities (Stelitano et al., 2020). Albeit the number of students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom has increased, for many students, segregation continues to alter their learning experience due to confounding factors such as the extent or complexity of their learning needs, their race, and/or the socioeconomic status of the communities in which they reside (National Council on Disability, 2018). This was so apparent that Bock (2013) indicated students with SSN participated in a separate school experience to that of their typical peers as well as their peers who had milder to moderate disabilities including both academic experiences as well as social and extra-curricular opportunities. In turn, inclusion has been a continuous objective for students with SSN. The idea of desegregating school experiences and daily living (e.g., general education classrooms, extra-curricular activities, the community; Agran et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2016) endures for students who demonstrate SSN and increasingly complex learning needs. Although research continued to reflect the benefits of inclusion for students with SSN including social skills and belonging (Carter & Hughes, 2005), academic learning and achievement (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), and improved post-school outcomes (Ryndak et al., 2010), students with SSN continued to experience segregated school experiences. Additionally, the concept of inclusion was embedded in civil rights and social justice (Agran et al., 2014; Ballard & Dymond, 2018) as a goal is to ensure all students, including those with SSN "have access to chronologically age-appropriate school experiences, alongside their peers without disabilities,

through the provision of appropriate supports and services to meet individualized learning goals"
(Ballard & Dymond, 2018, p.427; Doyle & Giangreco, 2013). However, students with SSN were
frequently placed in isolated classrooms and provided with alternative social and academic
curriculum (Zigmond et al., 2009).

It was clear public education in the United States was intended to prepare individuals to
effectively participate and contribute to society both socially and academically (Jackson et al.,
2008). However, for the purpose of protecting both students with SSN as well as general
education peers, most public schools continued to instruct them as separate populations (Gerber
et al., 2011; Stainback & Stainback, 1996) even though policy and legislation as well as research
supported and encouraged inclusive education for individuals with SSN. Based on statistics
recorded in the U.S. Department of Education (2016), students with SSN spent less than 40% of
their day inside the general education classroom. This included students in the following
categories: cognitive disabilities, 49.2%; multiple disabilities, 46.0%; deaf-blindness, 34.4%; and
autism, 32.8%. This was a stark contrast to the inclusion rate of other disability categories as
only 4.3% of students with speech or language impairments experienced this degree of exclusion
in school and 5.8% of students with specific learning disabilities (LD) encountered such a
placement (Ballard & Dymond, 2018). The practice of including students with disabilities is
critical to the academic, social, and motivational development of students (Christenson et al.,
2007). The drive to improve student access to the general education curriculum, classroom, and
educators is guided by the understanding that students with disabilities have a right to be
included as well as participate in the least restrictive setting with peers (Artiles, Harris-Murri et
al., 2006; Kennedy & Ihle, 2012). However, simply placing students with disabilities in a general
education setting does not assure success. According to the 2015 National Assessment of

Educational Progress (as cited in National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), 92% of eighth grade students with disabilities struggled to read at a basic level and these achievement outcomes have not improved in over a decade. In short, individuals with more complex or significant needs continued to be denied access to meaningful instruction and social experiences (Kena et al., 2016).

Meaningful Inclusion

Even in the event of a student with SSN being included within the general education classroom, it was not enough to simply be physically present. In many cases, when students with SSN were placed within the general education settings, they were not provided with the appropriate interventions and support necessary for them to access or receive benefit from the general education curriculum (Stelitano et al., 2020). In turn, the notion of being physically present and exposed to the general setting and curriculum did not indicate that students with SSN were actually able to access it (Artiles, Kozleski et al., 2006; Gilmour, 2018; Gilmour et al., 2018). Therefore, a shift was made toward the idea of "meaningful inclusion" that adjusted the perceptions of inclusion from students merely gaining exposure to general education to making certain students had access to the instruction and opportunities provided within the general education classroom and curriculum, which led to social and academic benefits (Etscheidt, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2015; Gilmour, 2018; Stelitano et al., 2020).

In a recent qualitative study by Stelitano et al. (2020), researchers collected information from staff at two separate high schools who indicated they had strong inclusive programs. The schools were chosen because they were implementing different inclusive models and based on their student's data, demonstrated gaps between students with and without disabilities. Therefore, the team wanted to compare routines used to implement inclusion to better understand if special

education policies and teacher practices were meaningfully inclusive or merely exposure. What researchers found was that although buildings claimed inclusion, the models they implemented were not being carried out effectively. Although special education teachers indicated they were using models (co-teaching and consultation) that should place them in an indirect support position, special education teachers at both schools were providing direct and primary support for students with disabilities. Additionally, special education teacher support was focused on helping students with disabilities to pass their general education classes instead of working with general education teachers to provide instruction that was accessible for students participating. In short, the results of this study indicated that for inclusion to be meaningful, the framework for inclusion must focus on access. This pushed for a collaborative framework that provided general education teachers ownership of their students learning; special education teachers the ability to plan, adapt, and instruct to make material accessible; and for students with SSN to have access to and benefit from the general education classroom. The results of this research reinforced the need for schools to consistently question whether inclusion was truly meaningful even if an inclusive framework has been implemented.

<div align="center">**Learning Challenges for Students with
Significant Support Needs**</div>

Fluent and strong academic skills are frequently used as predictive qualities for success in school, employment, and overall quality of life. For this reason, it was concerning that individuals with significant support needs (SSN) regularly completed their educational programs with extremely restricted capabilities (e.g., Wei et al., 2011). According to Keefe and Copeland (2011), "People with extensive needs for support represent the last group of people routinely denied opportunities for literacy instruction" (p. 92). It was estimated that up to 90% of students with significant needs lacked basic literacy skills or had literacy skills that were extremely

deficient when compared to their same-age peers (Machalicek et al., 2010). Although it was understood that strong instruction is a vital responsibility of the American school systems, providing students with SSN access to effective strategies and research-based instruction was frequently overlooked on a national level (Allor et al., 2010). Therefore, students who demonstrated more intensive needs including cognitive disabilities, complex communication needs, orthopedic impairments and/or sensory disabilities were not only challenged with barriers to learning associated with their disability but also faced additional obstacles imposed upon them that directly impeded access to academic skill acquisition including perceptions and lowered expectations as well as a deficiency of research-based practices in instruction (Agran, 2011; Bailey et al., 2011).

Current Best Practices and Implementation—
Separate Is Not Equal

Although high-quality instruction for students with SSN follows similar guidelines in terms of instruction, it likely looks different than that of typical or students with mild to moderate disabilities (Ryndak et al., 2001). That is to say, instruction for students with SSN likely includes individualized programming and technology from service providers such as speech language pathologists, motor specialists, vision and hearing specialists, nurses, etc. (Jackson et al., 2000; Ruppar et al., 2015). Furthermore, teachers working with students with SSN must have a unique and extensive skill set to effectively access and assess learning as well as effectively implement instruction for students with SSN (Ruppar et al., 2015). Current best practices in instruction for individuals with SSN consist of programming which includes strategies that are both skills and meaning-based (Orlando & Ruppar, 2016; Pressley et al., 2002). Browder et al. (2014) extended these expectations to include and emphasize (a) both academic and functional skills; (b) both are planned and implemented collaboratively while

incorporating support from peers and low/medium/high assistive technology; and (c) both take place in an inclusive setting alongside both peers with and without disabilities. Ruppar et al. (2015) also emphasized the importance of systematic and systemic instruction in conjunction with high expectations, consistent and accessible assessment and progress monitoring (data collection), and expert teachers who consistently demonstrated effective communication and advocacy skills (Ryndak et al., 2001). This idea was echoed by Copeland and Keefe (2018) who encouraged inclusive instruction driven by standards and high expectations. In short, best instructional practices for students with SSN looked remarkably similar to those of typical students or students with milder to moderate disabilities so long as appropriate adaptations were made to facilitate access to the content and instruction was meaningful. Although it was clear students with SSN required flexible yet intensive instruction that should mirror that of their non-disabled peers (including content and expectations), this was rarely evident. This is problematic and continues to be an area of concern for individuals with SSN as the research in evidence-based practice was quite limited overall (Browder et al., 2012) and extremely limited in inclusive settings (Hudson & Browder, 2014).

Although researchers in the field of special education appeared to be working hard to develop a theoretical framework of what best practices for SSN should be, the transition from theory to practice continued to fall short. The idea of evidence-based practices or effective instruction for students with SSN was so vague within school settings that in a study conducted by Roberts et al. (2018), 12 school administrators who were charged with evaluating educators working with students with SSN across a variety of settings were given semi-structured interviews surrounding their perceptions of teachers' performance and expertise as well as what they perceived to be ideal in terms of instruction for students with SSN. This study reinforced the

confusion common among best practices and instruction for students with SSN. Administrators could not articulate specific instructional practices implemented by teachers of students with SSN even when prompted or probed by researchers. Additionally, administrators placed focus on skills such as caregiving and being positive as being increasingly important for expert teachers working with students with SSN. These findings directly contradicted current research identified by Ruppar et al. (2015) that identified effective SSN teachers as demonstrating strong and effective communication and collaboration, student advocacy, and commitment to improving their craft. Thus, the results of the Roberts et al. study reinforced the need for continued professional development around best practices for instruction for students with SSN as well as echoed previous studies that indicated the continuous confusion surrounding the roles and responsibilities of SSN teachers (Greenway et al., 2013; Timberlake, 2016).

The lack of specific instruction, which should be seen as effective instruction for all, was likely connected to the belief that individuals with SSN were perceived to be incapable of learning specific skills such as encoding and decoding systems (Erickson, 2006) due to the extent of their disabilities. This perception of incapability has left students with SSN subject to a number of unusual and/or non-evidence approaches to instruction if formal instruction took place at all. However, the most frequently used approach was that of sight word instruction. In 2006, Browder et al. conducted a comprehensive review of published literature surrounding best practices in literacy instruction for individuals with significant needs. This review indicated the majority of research conducted was centered on the learning of sight words through prompting and fading approaches as well as functional reading skills (i.e., identifying text in menus, signs, or words pertaining to one's routine). Unfortunately, upon deeper investigation, Browder et al. (2016) also discovered that sight word instruction, although often successful at encouraging the

identification and memorization of specific words, frequently neglected to accompany said words with vocabulary instruction or comprehension. This oversight was especially damaging when those participating frequently struggled with oracy, language, and vocabulary.

The belief that students with SSN are all cognitively incapable of developing decoding skills was proven to be unfounded by a number of researchers (e.g., Cupples & Iacono, 2002; Greer & Erickson, 2018; Hoogeveen et al., 1989; Joseph & McCachran, 2003) who determined that individuals with SSN and CCN were able to benefit from more analytic reading instruction. In fact, Browder et al. (2012) conducted a study using 93 participants in grades kindergarten through fourth with significant needs. Each was randomly assigned to receive either a multicomponent literacy program including phonemic awareness and phonics instruction or a curriculum that focused specifically on sight word comparison. Results indicated the participant group who received the multicomponent program demonstrated mean scores in literacy that were significantly higher than students who received sight word instruction. Despite the clear indicators of needs surrounding cognitive disabilities as well as research indicating individuals identified as having such extensive needs could acquire balanced and effective literacy skills, Greer and Erickson (2018) indicated that being certain effective and research-based literacy instruction was provided to students with cognitive needs remained a challenge. In addition, Banerjee et al. (2016) found programming for individuals with cognitive needs was typically focused on developing skills to assist them in daily living versus academic instruction, which frequently yielded less time with instruction on content and more time on nonacademic skills.

Frustration surrounding understanding and implementing best practices for instruction on a schoolwide level confounded by misunderstandings of what the role of special education and general education teachers tended to lead to unprecedented approaches and uncertainty in the

education of students with SSN. For example, in 2010, Fenlon et al. clarified that because teachers, parents, and additional providers were often uncertain of how to implement balanced instruction and incorporate assistive technology into literacy instruction and support, students with more complex communication needs were frequently subject to less instructional time and more task-oriented activities. The same observation was made in a study conducted by Jenks et al. (2009) when examining instructional practices for students with cerebral palsy. Throughout their year-long study, researchers found those who demonstrated an increased level of physical impairment received less instruction and practice time in class due to teacher uncertainty as well as non-academic interventions such as speech and motor therapies. Although this approach appeared to keep students occupied, it neglected the important element of effective literacy instruction and the implementation of evidence-based practices research indicated were a vital component of education. This concept was reinforced during a study of students with cognitive and physical disabilities, as well as significant and complex communication needs, where Hanser and Erickson (2007) found students showed improvement on individual literacy tasks such as word identification, spelling, and expressive language skills when they were given consistent and systematic phonics instruction combined with specific instruction surrounding incorporation of augmentative communication and assistive technology. It was clear that effective and evidence-based instruction from knowledgeable and confident special education teams was imperative for all students including those with more significant needs to access instruction and improve literacy skills (Brownell et al., 2004; Israel et al., 2013).

Learning Challenges for All

Given the history and current practice of exclusive education for individuals with SSN, literacy instruction has been an area of need for some time. The needs for students identified as SSN are intensive, requiring strong skills in each area of need on behalf of the educator, as well as strong and deep content knowledge of adaptation, motor skills, expressive and receptive communication, core content, and instruction. However, being placed in a separate learning environment could impact not only the student but also the teacher. The traditional model of instruction was not one of collaboration but instead was frequently competitive, unsupportive, and isolating (Baeten & Simons, 2014; Fraser & Watson, 2013; Friend et al., 2010). Much like the segregation of students with SSN limited access to incidental learning and exclusive practice restricts and deprived students with SSN opportunities to engage and interact in academic knowledge and understanding necessary to actively and autonomously participate in society (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007), placing special education teachers in segregated classrooms to work in isolation with students with the most complex learning needs and little to no opportunity to collaborate with other educators or gain access to effective feedback could also impact their performance and growth as educators. In a study conducted by Ainsworth (2014), teachers who worked with students with severe needs including CCN indicated feeling ill prepared to accurately assess and progress monitor as well as effectively teach literacy skills. To intensify this issue, the number of effective strategies for teaching literacy skills to this population of students was extremely limited (Bailey et al., 2011; Keefe & Copeland, 2011). Therein, it was safe to assume the crevasses in the research confounded by the lack of evidence-based strategies fed perceptions of low expectations of students with SSN by failing to provide professionals with

adequate means to effectively instruct and progress monitor students with SSN (Ainsworth, 2014; Browder et al., 2008).

Collaboration

"Collaboration in education is not a frill: it is an essential component of our practice" (Speer, 2012, p. ix). As previously mentioned, the U.S. Congress began the push for general education and special education teachers to work collaboratively to promote inclusion for special education students in the 1970s (Colandrea, 2015). Prior to this, the traditional format for education was for teachers to work in isolation (i.e., one educator to plan, prepare, and instruct all students within their classroom alone). However, with legislation that integrated both students with disabilities as well as special education teachers into public schools, the idea of one teacher planning, implementing instruction, and evaluating their own instruction should shift to a more collaborative framework.

Although several studies around collaboration exist and the practice is growing in popularity for the field of special education, it was difficult to clearly identify what made for successful collaboration. Brinkmann and Twiford (2012) and Solis et al. (2012) identified that for collaboration to be effective, teachers needed to have strong knowledge and skills as well as open dispositions, communication skills, and time to plan together. Granted, it was difficult to determine what successful collaboration looked like as there were no known lists or measures to assess it and there was a vague nature to best practices surrounding collaboration in education; however, the benefits of using collaborative frameworks are vast for both teachers and students. Quebec Fuentes and Spice (2015) indicated that collaboration is a way for teachers to begin to develop effective learning communities and function as "an alternative to a traditional, top-down approach to professional development" (p. 1). This reinforced the benefit educators gained by

working with a partner to receive consistent and daily reciprocated feedback and support in all aspects of their work instead of a single dose of information from an external source during a professional development session (Clausen et al., 2009; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Parks, 2009). Additionally, a recurring theme in the literature was student performance improved when two individuals brought their expertise together through collaboration including that of students with disabilities. In short, effective collaboration is a vital component to educator success. By working together, this process could "counter teacher isolation, improve teacher practice and student learning, build a common vision for schooling, and foster collective action around school reform" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 421). Co-teaching was found to be an effective and popular means of collaboration that increased student achievement and professional growth among teachers (Brown et al., 2013; Cook & Walsh, 2012; Eccleston, 2010; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Routman, 2012) and was the framework for this exploratory study.

Co-Teaching

When we think about collaborative practices that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities, co-teaching has evolved as a popular and critical practice for both meeting individual needs as well as reinforcing the LRE. This professional and collaborative partnership framework between both general and special education teachers was found throughout the literature (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). As Friend (2016) stated, in a classroom that is effectively and successfully co-taught, teachers not only provide "students with disabilities access to the general curriculum, but also provides the specialized instruction they need to succeed" (p. 17).

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), which identified requirements surrounding the inclusion of all students including those with mild, moderate, and significant disabilities, students with disabilities must have access to the general

education curriculum as well as instruction from highly qualified educators, followed by IDEA (2013) regulations that indicate teachers provide individualized and specialized instruction for students with disabilities that target "the unique needs of the child that result from the disability" and "ensure[s] access of the child to the general curriculum" (34 C.F.R §300.39 [b] [3] [i–ii]). That means that supporting students with disabilities including students with SSN to decrease the academic performance gap, teachers need to find a way to integrate both (a) strategies to support access to the general education curriculum, and (b) targeted intervention to target specific needs in a way that is accessible (Cook & McDuffie-Landrum, 2020). As a result of this transition, the interest surrounding alternative approaches of providing instruction for individuals with disabilities has intensified, more specifically—co-teaching.

Co-teaching is a service delivery model that most commonly involves strong collaboration between a general education and a special education teacher to deliberately plan, instruct, manage behaviors, and differentiate instruction (Cook & Friend, 2010; Friend et al., 2010; Murawski, 2009; Pugach & Winn, 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012). Therefore, for this study, co-teaching has been formally defined to clarify what was necessary for the model to be implemented. To reiterate, the fundamental components that must be present for the model being implemented to be considered co-teaching include two or more licensed professionals who have pledged to share planning, data collection, and instructional responsibility for students within one classroom or workspace for definite content and objectives with shared ownership, resources, and accountability (Friend & Cook, 2016).

Co-Teaching Models

One Teach, One Observe

Implementation of this model encouraged one teacher to take lead and deliver instruction while the other was able to observe and collect qualitative and/or quantitative data. Per the one teach, one observe approach, co-teachers develop goals together for students and then gather data while students continue to receive instruction using agreed upon systems and tools. Following sessions, co-teachers analyze information together and determine next steps as a team.

One Teach, One Assist

Within this model, one teacher takes lead in delivering instruction and the other supports this instruction based on the individual needs demonstrated with students (Cook & Friend, 1995).

Parallel Teaching

This model provides students with additional support by dividing a class into two groups and having each teacher provide instruction simultaneously. This model enables students to have additional opportunities to respond and participate.

Station Teaching

Within this approach, co-teachers divide both their students and the material they need to cover. In doing so, each teacher covers the content they prepared with one small group and then repeat this process with the other small group. Ideally, there should be an independent practice station designed within the rotation for students to practice the skills they gained within each teacher's session.

Alternative Teaching

The alternative teaching model provides an in-class opportunity for individualized support. This is a popular co-teaching choice for educators working with diverse needs within a

general education classroom. Alternative teaching involves one teacher working with a large group and the other teacher providing instruction for a smaller group. Please note, when working with learning needs (be it struggling learners, communication needs, etc.), it is not assumed that students would only work with a specific teacher (i.e., students identified as having special needs would work primarily with a special education teacher).

Team Teaching

Team teaching is frequently referred to as the one brain in two bodies approach. Within this model, co-teachers are providing the same instruction simultaneously. Although this is a more complex way to co-teach, it is often perceived to be a more satisfying experience and what most people think is co-teaching. Nevertheless, the success and satisfaction surrounding this approach is typically most contingent upon individual teachers' styles, relationships, beliefs, and trust.

Much of the earlier literature on co-teaching reflected the implementation of the collaborative frameworks used by teachers in the general education classroom that focused on providing access to and diversifying instruction for English language learners (e.g., Bahamonde & Friend, 1999; Pardini, 2006), students who demonstrated gifted and/or talented needs (e.g., Hughes & Murawski, 2001), and students who demonstrated mild to moderate disabilities (Cook & Friend, 2010). The co-teaching models just described have been identified as successful in meeting the individual needs of students. These models appeared to diversify to some extent based on researchers and student needs. For example, models identified for English Language Learners (ELL) varied from those models identified for individuals with disabilities. For this study, the six models identified were those highlighted by Friend and Cook (2016). This was

advantageous as we recognized that a single approach to learning was rarely effective given the diverse learning needs of students with SSN.

Student and Teacher Benefits of Co-Teaching

Educators can work collaboratively in a number of ways to increase support and inclusivity of diverse learners including students with SSN. However, co-teaching is a practice that has been frequently used as it is designed to target student needs as well as provide increased opportunities for both students with and without diverse learning needs by bringing together two teachers with diverse areas of expertise by combining their individual areas of mastery in a way that highlights their individual strengths to best meet the needs of all of the students whom they are instructing (Bauwens et al., 1989; Walsh, 2012). Additionally, because both educators are working with diverse learners in a shared space, they are able to boost the strength, rigor, and consistency of instruction and students are involved more systematically in their learning than would be possible in a classroom with only one teacher. However, to reiterate, collaborative practices and co-teaching are not an intervention or targeted instruction. Co-teaching is instead an opportunity to provide access to any student who might benefit from more targeted or diverse instruction within the general education classroom.

Additionally, the co-teaching model provides general and special education teachers an opportunity to learn strategies and skills from one another. In fact, according to a study conducted by Scruggs et al. (2007), educators who co-taught indicated they perceived it to be much like a long professional development opportunity. In a qualitative study conducted by Rytivaara et al. (2019), researchers documented teachers' stories surrounding their experiences as they worked to develop professional co-teaching relationships. Three team teaching dyads were provided with questions and researchers recorded their narratives. Findings across all three dyads

highlighted that the teachers indicated by co-teaching they were able to learn from each other through first-hand interactions with one another's areas of expertise as well as learn how to work together within the classroom with students who demonstrated dynamic needs. More importantly, co-teachers reported that successful co-teaching relationships did not simply happen. These professional relationships grew together as a team through commitment, negotiation, planning, time, and effort. In short, although co-teaching is a time intensive model of collaborative teaching, it is becoming increasingly popular because it not only increases the likelihood of meeting the individual and diverse needs of students by increasing the effectiveness of meaningful inclusion, reducing the student-teacher ratio, and improving student outcomes (Arguelles et al., 2000; Murawski & Lochner, 2011), it also provides teachers with an opportunity to stretch beyond their routines, observe instruction in action, and share constructive feedback.

Co-Teaching and Students with Learning Disabilities

As educators, our aim is strong student outcomes. Co-teaching is a method of educating that integrates additional support for both educators and learners. The benefits of merging both core instruction with intervention and utilizing two educators could yield both academic and social benefits for students as well as build a more accepting and compliant educational environment. Although the literature did not indicate or recommend a specified amount of time on any one co-teaching model, the assumption was students would benefit from models that capitalized on the expertise of both teachers (e.g., team teaching; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Academic Benefits

Friend (2016) stated that successful co-taught classrooms were those in which collaborative teachers provided "students with disabilities access to the general curriculum, but

also provide the specialized instruction they need to succeed" (p. 17). One of the goals of co-teaching is to optimize student access to effective and relevant instruction. Per each of the models listed above, educators are more available to provide clear content, reinforce positive behaviors, as well as to collect and analyze student data to move forward with informed and data driven goals. In a quantitative study conducted by Tremblay in 2013, co-teaching in an inclusive setting was compared with solo-taught special education instruction. The focus of the study was to focus on the academic progress of students based on the model of intervention received (inclusive co-taught or exclusive special educator solo). Participants within the study included 353 students (195 without disabilities, 58 with learning disabilities [LD] in inclusion and 100 with LD in special education classes), 12 classrooms with inclusive models, and 13 self-contained special education classes. Student achievement was measured through academic assessments and significant results were found in students' outcomes with reading, writing, and attendance. Overall, the inclusive co-taught model was globally more effective than that of the self-contained special education model for students identified with LD.

Unfortunately, the majority of the research surrounding co-teaching placed most of the focus on educators and the process instead of academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Provided the increased attention around improved academic outcomes for students with disabilities, the lack of student-centered research created an additional layer of complexity (Friend, 2008). However, the results of a study by Rea et al. (2002) that looked at data from both students with disabilities who were participating in a co-taught class or a self-contained environment indicated students who had been identified with learning disabilities and participated in co-taught classes demonstrated stronger performance on specific measures such as report card grades and attendance than students in self-contained classes. However,

performance on high-stakes tests were similar among students across both types of classes. Likewise, Idol (2006) echoed these findings and included that the impact on high stakes testing was minimal for both students with and without disabilities who participated in co-taught classes. However, in 2006, Murawski looked more closely at this phenomenon and although the achievement scores on tests did look comparable for students with disabilities in both self-contained and co-taught setting, she discovered significant differences in the way teachers were implementing the practice of co-teaching, which could possibly lead to the variability in the literature as well as lack of improved performance in student performance. In short, Murawski highlighted the importance of providing training in effective co-teaching practices for teachers.

Another reason that educators tended to opt for the co-teaching framework was to maintain a high standard of intensity and integrity of students' educational programs. Even if a student was working toward a modified standard, expectations should remain high. Within co-taught classes, students had access to increased instructional time with licensed educators who shared plans, expectations, and data. It was also important to note that having two teachers available to students would also create a smaller teacher to student ratio and offer students increased opportunities to participate, ask questions, and engage. In addition, the co-teaching model enabled students with more intensive needs, who would likely leave the classroom to receive services (special education or related service), to spend more time in a single instructional environment (the general education classroom), which in turn decreased the fragmentation of instruction, transition time, and interruptions to their school day and learning. To illustrate this point, let us break down what the transition process might look like for "pullout" interventions. To receive specialized instruction in an alternate space, students had to stop the instruction they were already engaged in, put away any materials they might be using and

hopefully have time to complete their current assignment/activity later, go to the space where the intervention or special service was taking place, and recall and acclimate to the alternative instruction/activity being offered in the alternative setting by a less familiar instructor and possibly less familiar group of students. Following the completion of the intervention session, the student would need to reverse all these steps to return to the general education classroom where learning and instruction had not stopped, which indicated the student would need to catch up on everything learned while they were away. In addition, the student who was pulled from class was one of a select few who were privy to the contents of the intervention instruction that was provided in a separate room, making generalization and reinforcement of the skill an exceptionally difficult task. Therefore, by co-teaching within the general education classroom, teachers could control for both the continuity of learning for students and the continuity of instruction as well as the instructional process and creating a more meaningful learning experience for students with disabilities.

Social Benefits, Self-Efficacy, and Belonging

In addition to academic benefits, co-teaching could also help to facilitate social benefits, self-efficacy, and belonging. This should ultimately lead to a more inclusive and positive school culture and climate. The benefits of co-teaching should extend to all students including those with and without disabilities. Such benefits include additional teacher support, smaller group sizes, attention, and individualized adaptations in instruction, assignments, and progress monitoring. However, this model could also help to facilitate social aspects of student development. By providing students with access to the general education classroom, co-teaching also decreased the stigma associated with students with disabilities being pulled from or completely removed for alternative and/or special education instruction (Cook & Friend, 1995).

Within the literature of inclusive education, a small area of focus emerged. A sense of belonging could be identified as "the extent to which individuals feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in their social environment" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Prince & Hadwin, 2013, p. 238). This idea was viewed as a vital component throughout life including time spent at school (Frederickson & Baxter, 2009; Maslow, 1943). In fact, some researchers suggested the interconnection between feeling a sense of belonging at school and overall school outcomes might be reciprocal (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Additional research including longitudinal research (Resnick et al., 1997) and intervention studies (Catalano et al., 2004) indicated a sense of belonging at school could function as a component of protection against potential negative outcomes for students (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). In general, research that targeted students' sense of belonging showed the positive impacts spanned psychological, social, and academic outcomes (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993; Ireson & Hallam, 2005; Osborne & Walker, 2006; Roeser et al., 1996).

This sense of belonging as well as academic expectations became evident in the work of Wilson and Michaels (2006) wherein students who participated in co-taught courses were asked about their perceptions of this specific method of receiving special education intervention. The team surveyed 346 students (127 students were identified with disabilities and 219 were not) and questioned them all about their individual perceptions of co-teaching. The students surveyed indicated they preferred co-taught classes and stated that if given the opportunity again, they would participate in another co-taught class. Students surveyed also indicated they were pleased with the diversity in instructional approaches and styles, teacher perspectives, and stated they felt more skill development was available for them. Students also mentioned they believed the standards were higher in co-taught classes and they noted they could not get away with anything

in these classes. Finally, students without disabilities indicated co-taught classes offered higher

levels of abstraction, concept development, and literacy skill development. This study

demonstrated that aside from the obvious benefits of co-teaching and inclusive education for

students with disabilities, the implementation of effective co-teaching could also benefit students

without disabilities. In turn, this would help to facilitate a more positive culture and climate for

everyone and provide opportunities for all students to increase their understanding and respect

for one another. In short, by integrating teachers, instruction, and students, opportunities are

facilitated to demystify differences, disabilities, and the inherent uncertainties and fears students

might feel about those differences. Our willingness to collaborate was the introduction for

students to learn about each other and develop their sense of belonging.

Interestingly, during this time of COVID-19, this was the first time all students were

experiencing struggles around exclusion and struggling with a sense of school belonging.

Although surviving a global pandemic is scary and would likely influence perceptions for all

students throughout their lifetime, it could be perceived as one of the first times all students

experienced some sort of exclusion and struggled with a sense of school belonging. It is my hope

that throughout this difficult time, we are able to walk away with a new understanding and

empathy for students with SSN who were frequently and comfortably subjected to isolative

practices that deliberately excluded them from a genuine sense of school belonging.

Summary/Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I clarified who students with SSN were and the struggles they

have faced. Within their movement toward access to skills, the importance of inclusion,

instruction, and presumed competence or high expectations are vital for students with SSN. In

addition to inclusive practices for students with SSN, I reinforced the value of collaboration and

co-teaching for both teachers and students with and without disabilities. This included how the implementation of a collaborative framework not only functioned as a long-term professional development for teachers but also how a variety of co-teaching styles and practices could optimize instructional time and increase opportunities for targeted and diversification of instruction. Finally, I presented both the academic and social benefits of including all students in a co-taught classroom including the importance of developing a sense of belonging. However, as we push for inclusion of students with disabilities, it is important to note that there was a single category of students who were not addressed in the literature when we investigated co-teaching. Inclusive co-teaching practices and students with SSN continue to be a gap in the research. Although research surrounding the effectiveness of co-teaching with students who have disabilities exists, few studies focused on more intensive disabilities (Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001) and none investigated SSN. Therefore, it was time to investigate this area of need and explore teachers' experiences and perceptions about co-teaching with students with SSN within the general education classroom. Within the following chapter, I provide the methodology for a case study using general education and special education teacher dyads, interviews, artifacts, and thick and rich description to shed light on the co-teaching experience with students with SSN.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Within this chapter, I restate the research questions and purpose of the study, explain the

theoretical framework driving the research approach, disclose my stance, and detail the

methodology to be implemented including trustworthiness and authenticity. I also include a

coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) statement as this research took place during a global

pandemic that entailed complexities and forced me to think about flexible access and alternative

data collection based on orders and safety. The purpose of this qualitative study was to

investigate perceptions of special education and general education teacher dyads who were co-

teaching with students who had significant support needs (SSN) in an inclusive environment.

Coronavirus Disease-19

Due to the current global pandemic, much of the data collection that had originally been

discussed as being face-to-face and or taking place in buildings was approached in a virtual or

more distant manner. Ideally, in depth interviews and conversation were originally intended to be

approached on-site and in person to gain both visual and experiential access to participants as

well as the phenomena they were creating. However, because of restrictions, health risks, and

exposure concerns surrounding physical access due to the COVID -19 virus, participants were

interviewed via virtual platforms and asked to go into greater detail surrounding their perceptions

and experiences, provide virtual visual access to space if possible, and sent photos and/or

scanned items via email or other comparable platforms. Also, because most educators were

required to comply with both federal and state mandates involving social distancing, limiting

contact with students and staff or working on virtual platforms that did not allow for teachers to

co-teach online, participant qualifications were expanded to general and special education

teacher dyads who had been co-teaching with students with SSN within the past two years.

Purpose of the Study Restated and Research Questions

Individuals with significant support needs (SSN) are frequently held to lowered

expectations and placed in segregated classrooms and programs, denying them access to

instruction and content. Additionally, students with SSN are completing high school programs

with some of the lowest academic skills of all learners (Dunlap, 2016). According to Dunlap

(2016), "I believe that a reason why, as a society, we have not embraced children with disabilities

as full participants in our schools and communities is the limitation of our own mental models

around disability" (lecture). Therefore, I investigated the inclusive practices of co-teaching

between special education teachers and general education teachers with students identified with

SSN in inclusive environments. This research allowed me to examine and hopefully influence

future studies that focus on improved practices for general and special education teachers

including systems in schoolwide approaches to working with students with SSN. Throughout this

initial investigation of the co-teaching with students with SSN, I was able to identify themes and

strategies that should ensure both teachers and students receive access to content, instruction, and

the most appropriate education.

Q1　　What are the experiences of educator dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?

　　Q1a　　What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant support needs?

　　Q1b　　What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Q1c   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Theoretical Frameworks

This research included an epistemological framework—both as disclosure of my individual thought process as well as the implementation of academic and philosophical guidelines for my research. Because the purpose of this research was to investigate the special education and general education dyads who co-teach with students with SSN, I approached this study from an epistemological perspective per the lenses of social justice theory as well as the social model of disability.

Social Justice Theory

Jost and Kay (2010) identified specific events that pointed to the alignment of principles leading to social justice: (a) that afflictions and struggles as well as benefits do not fall upon specific individuals as they might be socially identified as a priority or othered; (b) that human rights of all individuals and groups are preserved per political rules and procedures; (c) finally, that individuals within our society are valued and treated with dignity and respect by those in charge as well as peers and society. Fraser (2003) extended this definition of social justice theory to include the 'parity of participation' standard. This addition indicated that for justice to exist, all members of society, including individuals with disabilities, must be empowered to interact with others as peers (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The ideal of a just society by providing all citizens equal access was emphasized by Mladenov (2016) as he highlighted that individuals with disabilities were frequently overlooked or side-lined in social movements. This lack of acknowledgement in self-advocacy was reinforced by current practices that exist in schools as individuals with disabilities continue to be a population of learners that could be legally denied

access to language rich environments as well as balanced and complete instruction. These unjust

practices could be linked directly to both social justice theory as well as Fraser's (2003) parity of

participation standard.

Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability was founded by the Union of the Physically Impaired

Against Segregation (1976) in the United Kingdom in the 1970s and emphasized the

disadvantage and exclusion imposed upon individuals with disabilities from typical or

conventional activities (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Oliver, 1990). The social model of

disability is one of the more influential and prominent theoretical perspectives that exists in the

field of exceptionalities. Within this framework, disabilities are perceived to be socially

contrived constructs "deployed against minorities enforcing social marginalization" (Slee, 1988,

p. 128). In short, the foundation of social model of disability places heavy emphasis on access.

That is to say, by creating a world that is inaccessible to people who have individual needs via

barriers within systems, negative perceptions/attitudes toward individuals with disabilities,

and/or both purposeful or unintentional exclusion by the social majority (who do not demonstrate

said needs) have effectively disabled individuals who differ physically, cognitively, etc. from the

majority (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2020). Sutherland (1981) explained

the social model of disability in that it is common for society to recognize that disabilities hinder

access for many. However, these exclusive practices have additional consequences. For instance,

not allowing an individual to work could increase a sense of isolation and poses overall

limitations for those who must live with the individual who is no longer allowed access to an

increasingly independent lifestyle (Fujiura & Roccoforte, 1994). As these issues are brought to

light and investigated through the lens of the social model of disability, these restrictions and

limitations are imposed via the majority's intentional or unintentional willingness to provide access to individuals with disabilities.

Researcher Stance

According to Creswell (2013), we all bring individual beliefs and bias to our research whether intended or not. These views might influence our perceptions of important research and questions as well as how data are collected and interpreted (Creswell, 2013). In an effort to create a more complete context to this study, I am including some background surrounding myself, my experiences as an educator, and my individual beliefs. I grew up in a small and (at the time) rural city in northeast Colorado. As a child, one of my best friends had an orthopedic impairment as well as communication needs that were believed to have been a product of cerebral palsy (later to be corrected as a rare degenerative disorder). She was never placed in a separate school. She was never hidden in a separate program. Her parents would host regular sleepovers and all of her friends (myself included) would stay up late giggling with her. I recognized that her bicycle looked different than mine but we would still ride our bikes together. I loved her humor, her perspectives, and her friendship. I cannot imagine my childhood without her.

As an adult, I worked as a special education teacher for 13 years. Within my career as an educator, I worked with students with a variety or disabilities and needs. Additionally, I developed, ran, and provided services and opportunities for students with significant needs within an inclusive setting at the elementary level (kindergarten through sixth grade). With the support of a strong principal and exceptional staff, students were integrated into general education classrooms with support, and goals and objectives were met while providing all students with access to appropriate instruction and content. The extra hours spent co-planning,

adapting, and creating a climate of inclusive instruction and access for all students became my

passion. As I enter this new phase of my career, I am still driven to advocate for all students and

their access to strong instruction, friendships, and opportunities.

Methodology

The research conducted for this study was qualitative as the questions asked were

investigative in nature. The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore the experiences

and perceptions of three general and special education teacher dyads who co-taught students with

SSN within the general education classroom. Therefore, rich and descriptive data that aimed to

provide in-depth details to specific cases were appropriate for this research. This research was

implemented and completed following Institutional Review Board approval through the

University of Northern Colorado (see Appendix A). In the following section, I describe the case,

theoretical framework, research stance, and steps taken to establish trustworthiness and

authenticity.

Case Study Influenced
by Portraiture

Because this study was exploratory in nature, it followed an exploratory approach. While

the case of co-teaching with students with SSN was explored throughout this research, I was

open to any new discoveries and/or surprising data that might reside in the data collected

throughout the research process (Ely et al., 1997; Wagner & Alexander, 2013). Stake (1995)

identified case study as a bound system in which the researcher examines the complexity of an

entity (p. xi). Because of the highly individualized nature of the subject as well as the depth of

investigation involved in case study, it was brought to light that case study methodology could be

complex. Therefore, the approach to this investigation was guided by clear and concise research

questions, included binding to maintain focus on the case, and required a thick and rich

description to best communicate my findings with thorough and ample detail. Case study

methods are frequently used to gain a deeper insight into a development or experience that is

original, poorly understood, or unexamined (Yin, 2009b). It is also an effective method of

research to "illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were

implemented, and with what result" (Schramm, cited in Yin, 2009a, p. 13). Thus, case-based

research methods influenced by portraiture were selected and carried out for this research to

explore the "richness of actual cases, understanding a good story, staying close to naturalistic

events, exploring new areas and discovering new phenomena" (Carroll & Johnson, 1990, p. 44).

The case study methods completed for this study were also influenced by portraiture, i.e.,

each case was written using portraiture to better capture each teacher as well as their experiences

and perceptions. Portraiture is considered a more detailed method of inquiry developed to

capture the human experience by blending art and science (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Per portraiture, researchers attempt to capture, document, and interpret the individual

perspectives of their participants and communicate their experiences per thoughtful and deep

stories "where study participants are the subjects, not the objects, of the research" (Bell, 2009, p.

24). In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience, this study utilized the

five vital elements of portraiture identified by Lawrence Lightfoot and Davis (1997; context,

voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole) by incorporating virtual, verbal, or

onsite walks and observations, collecting artifacts electronically, and conducting individual

interviews. These strategies highlighted individual context and terrain that guided me to a

wholistic understanding of each participant's story (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The

idea of identifying and emphasizing areas of need that exist within a field through both case

study and portraiture takes an increasingly artistic path toward capturing 'the goodness' of

participants and research throughout data collection and analysis while placing an emphasis on

not just the needs identified through research but also the strengths (Lawrence Lightfoot &

Davis, 1997). By placing and emphasis on what works or is effective, I was able to approach the

experiences of co-teaching dyads through a more positive lens and sought not only to emphasize

the need for change surrounding exclusive practices but also to identify effective approaches to

meaningfully including students with SSN.

Binding the Case

Once effective research questions were established, it was imperative that these questions

were used to establish 'boundaries' for data collection. To establish these boundaries is referred

to as bracketing the case. Yin (2009a) and Stake (1995) identified that placing boundaries or

brackets on a case could help keep research focused. Parameters posed for binding a case

included (a) by time and place (Creswell, 2013), (b) time and activity (Stake, 1995), and (c) by

definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, the boundaries for these cases

were explicitly stated by all of these bindings as each dyad was investigated per their individual

location (the general education classroom), their approach to co-teaching with students with

SSN, specific criteria defining co-teaching, focusing upon a more specific point in time, and the

construct of each dyad (a general and special education teacher). However, given the need for

flexibility due to COVID-19, time was extended to include past perceptions and practices in

collaboration and instruction. This provided useful insight into experiences and strategies the

dyads used together but also provided participants to reflect on past approaches to co-teaching

that had shaped their approaches to collaborative education.

**Application of Case Study to Significant
Support Needs Research**

In the field of special education, case study is vital to gaining a stronger understanding of subjects who have unique and highly individualized needs. When examining individuals with SSN (a smaller and more diverse subgroup), developing effective and thorough case study methodology becomes increasingly important as researchers aspire to better understand this population. Therefore, constructing research with well worded research questions became a key component to determining the type of case study that would take place. Furthermore, to approach this work with focus and binding it based on strong research questions provided the opportunity for me to gain a more in-depth understanding of individuals with significant support needs. This perspective of holism, or the stance that by gaining a deeper understanding of an entity was most vital to an overall insight (Stake, 1995), provides the field of special education with a greater understanding of individuals with significant disabilities. It is important for all educators, including specialists who work with individuals with SSN, to understand the students they advocate for and work with as completely as they are able.

Participants

Because I was investigating special and general education teacher dyads' experiences and perceptions of co-teaching with students with significant support needs, a purposeful sample of general and special education dyads who had actively co-taught together in the general education settings with students who had SSN was selected. A purposeful sample has been described as deliberately selecting a participant, site, and case because they are able to effectively provide information pertaining to the research questions posed or the phenomenon taking place (Creswell, 2013). Through purposeful sampling, I was able to carefully examine co-teaching experiences and perspectives for teachers working with students with SSN through both general

and special education lenses, providing valuable insight from a variety of perspectives in an effort to thoroughly investigate this phenomenon. Because the Colorado Department of Education (2020) had programming in place that identified specific schools state-wide currently implementing inclusive co-teaching strategies for students with SSN, dyads were initially identified from this program. However, due to the extreme turnover prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, a snowball sampling was then implemented to gain access to the limited field of individuals who were co-teaching with students with SSN and willing to connect with me. Given the limited nature of this practice, additional locations and teams were contacted as only one of the three dyads who participated in this research was involved in the identified state model program. The reasoning behind this very specific sampling was to effectively explore each individual case and develop rich portraiture to better understand dyadic perceptions surrounding co-teaching with students with SSN.

I selected and recruited three special and general education teacher dyads within the state of Colorado for interviews, virtual or verbal observations, and artifacts. Participants were contacted by me via email or phone call and each dyad was notified that participation in the study was voluntary. Participants completed the written consent form and were provided a copy for their individual files (see Appendix B). I thoroughly explained the consent form to the participants and explain that they could select a pseudonym; otherwise, one would be provided. The age, sex, race, school demographics, number of years teaching, co-teaching, and co-teaching with students with SSN were noted within the paperwork and the interview but demographics did not impact selection for this study. Participants were also able to opt not to disclose this information if they are not comfortable sharing. Because the focus of this study was to understand experiences and perceptions of co-teaching with students who had been identified as

having SSN, interviews were conducted separately and focused on gaining a holistic and honest understanding from both special and general education teachers.

Data Collection

Yin (2009a) asserted that within case study, it was critical to use many sources of input as achievable; "a good case study will use as many sources as possible" (p. 101) and "any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information" (p. 116). This case included interviews, artifacts, virtual observations, and educator reflections. These sources provided me with the opportunity to look thoroughly at each dyad and compare data across dyads. This data collection process assisted with the development of a more accurate analysis of data and clearer understanding of co-teachers' perceptions and experiences. The case study combined with portraiture allowed me to use a variety of means to collect detailed information documenting the real-life phenomenon of the co-taught classroom (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2009b). I was able to observe virtually and verbally, interview, collect artifacts, and engage in dialogue with each of my participants. Data were kept under lock and key for a minimum of three years following now that this study was complete. A journal of observations, interpretations, etc. was also maintained throughout this study.

Interviews

Interviews consisted of both structured questions as well as dialogical (less structured) interactions with participants (see Appendix C). I met with each participant individually at an agreed upon quiet, secure, and private location (online) for interviews. All interviews were held virtually, recorded, pass coded, and were by invitation to ensure the conversations were secure. These interviews lasted approximately 60-120 minutes. The interviews consisted of open-ended

questions to gain thorough and honest insight about each of the participant's perceptions and experiences (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were recorded on an audio recorder as well as Zoom (the virtual platform), saved to the cloud with a secure passcode, and automatic transcriptions were generated by Zoom. I then downloaded and cleaned up each of the generated transcriptions to be certain they were accurate. Once transcripts accurately represented the content of our conversations, transcripts were emailed back to participants to be member checked. I then read the transcripts multiple times and by the platform and myself, and coded with colored pens for themes. Due to restrictions surrounding access to schools and classrooms for both myself and teachers, structured interviews and dialogical data were collected virtually and included virtual observations. As Merriam (2009) stated, "Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (p. 90). Information collected per more dialogical interactions was expanded upon along with observed data following each session and coded.

Artifacts

Participants were asked to produce artifacts related to co-teaching with students with SSN. This included, but was not limited to, lesson plans, schedules, tools they had developed, samples of effective co-taught lessons, and reflections (see Appendix D) surrounding the process of co-teaching with students with SSN. Artifacts were scanned, photographed, described or displayed during interviews, and saved to an external drive kept safely under lock and key. Additionally, teachers were be able to email or send digital copies of artifacts if they had access to their classrooms and the items were still being used. Student work could be scanned or photographed with the student's name covered if the teacher was able to access it so the student's identity was not revealed. The purpose of accessing student work was to see the adaptations among all students and how dyads were making curriculum accessible collaboratively.

Reflections were also be collected from both general and special education teachers. Participants were provided with a choice for reflection—be it audio recording, written, or email.

Observation/Virtual and
Verbal Walks

In addition to interviews and artifacts, participants were asked to take part in observations or virtual and verbal walks. Ideally, I wanted to observe instruction in the environment where co-taught instruction was taking place as well as the opportunity to watch teachers working collaboratively. However, due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 global pandemic, direct observation was not a possibility. Because I was looking at the practice of effectively co-teaching with students with SSN and not how teachers were coping with online platforms or attempting to create safe environments for students and staff, I asked teachers to take me on virtual tours of their spaces or provide stories, explanations of their classrooms, and a virtual classroom questionnaire (see Appendix E). If teachers had access to their classrooms, they were encouraged to use their phones or laptops to walk me through the environment while students were not present and explain what it would look like in a co-taught and inclusive situation.

Virtual Tour

A virtual tour was a method of data collection where teachers were asked to share and discuss the physical space they used to co-teach with students with SSN. Due to restrictions, this request was proposed to participants as either having them walk through their classrooms with a computer or telephone while describing the space and how they thoughtfully planned, implemented instruction, included, and progress monitored learning with their co-teachers, having them show photographs of their classroom and discuss the photos, or verbally describe their environment and setting. I developed a virtual walk guide (see Appendix E) to prepare educators for this exercise and in addition to working through the guide, we used the virtual and

verbal tour for dialogical questions, conversation, and opportunities for educators to communicate their approaches and beliefs as well as relevant stories and accomplishments. These tours were recorded using a secure virtual platform.

Student Free Observation

It was proposed to participants that if schools would permit visitors and they felt comfortable with my visiting with appropriate personal protective equipment, I would do the walk in-person while students were not present. The reason for observing the physical space without students in attendance (either before or after school) was to minimize contact or risk of spreading COVID-19 but still have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the general environment used by co-teachers working with students with SSN. The in-person walk would be recorded and follow the same guide as the virtual tour. These recordings would be kept pass coded and confidential. Additionally, much like the virtual walk, the in-person walk would be used as an opportunity for dialogical conversation, questions, and to gain access to a deeper understanding of educator's experiences and beliefs. However, due to restrictions and health risks, this observation method was only available to one participant as an option.

Data Analysis

Throughout this work, an emphasis was placed on developing each case using portraiture of each individual participant. Because this research was new and exploratory in nature, I placed a special emphasis on communicating each participant's story clearly and thoroughly. Therefore, each case was developed through thick description to identify themes per the portraiture method, which lends itself to developing in-depth and descriptive portraits of each participant and according to Clifford Geertz (1973), stimulates readers to "deepen the conversation" (p. 29). I used detailed description throughout data collection to include important details (Stake, 1995)

and then conducted a within case analysis for each case to identify key themes as well as gain a comprehensive understanding of functional variables presented by each participant (Merriam, 2009).

I then used across case analysis to identify more general themes that existed among all participants including any common experiences and/or perceptions (Merriam, 2009). Due to the nature of this case study, data analysis took place throughout the data collection process as well as following its completion (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Throughout the interviews, I took notes surrounding responses to questions, body language, and non-verbal communication demonstrated by each interviewee. Keeping data organized was critical throughout this process as it was important to begin "data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation, and continues to analyze the data as long as he or she is working on the research, stopping briefly to write reports and papers" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 104). These notes were examined and included following the transcription of each interview which I read and reread through to identify themes within the data using colored pens and sticky notes. Throughout this process, thematic analysis (more specifically, reflexive thematic analysis) was used to identify themes. This method was effective for "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). In addition to providing a more reflective theoretical framework, thematic analysis also provided an exceptionally flexible approach that facilitated the implementation of rich and detailed description as well as an intricate account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Thematic analysis was selected for this research as it offered a more accessible form of analysis, especially for individuals who were conducting research earlier in their career (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004) emphasized that thematic analysis is advantageous for

examining participants' perspectives as it highlights both similarities, differences, and unanticipated insights. Using thematic analysis involved following six phases: (a) becoming familiar with the data collected, (b) initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing each of the themes, (e) defining and naming each of these themes, and (f) developing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, thematic analysis is beneficial to identifying patterns of meaning across datasets that apply to research question being posed. It was also noted that according to Braun and Clarke, "There are no hard and fast rules in relation to this [thematic analysis], and different combinations are possible" (p. 86). These methods also generated deeper dialogue and understanding of the current perceptions of both special and general education teachers co-teaching with students identified as having SSN.

Rigor, Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

To establish rigor within this study, I looked carefully at virtual and verbal observations, responses to interview questions, participant reflections, and artifacts collected in an effort to capture the true perception of each individual and their unique circumstances. The participants' identities were protected and they were each interviewed in a quiet, familiar, and private area which I believed encouraged them to speak freely surrounding their experiences. Following each interview, I reflected on what went well and what could be improved upon making appropriate adjustments as I progressed. If I had significant questions and/or concerns, it was understood that these queries were to be brought to my committee and discussed in order to troubleshoot or make effective revisions to improve the overall study. With additional guidance and transparency as well as consistent reflection on each interview, observation, interaction, artifact, reflection, and interpretation, I established rigor within this study and addressed essential questions identified through the literature. Within each interview, participants were recorded with a small audio

recorder as well as the secure internet platform while I took brief notes. Following each meeting, I listened again to each interview and cleaned up the audio transcriptions generated per the virtual platform. I then sent transcribed interviews to each participant and provided them with the opportunity to review the thoughts they articulated throughout their individual interview as an initial member check. Participants were encouraged to offer feedback, elaborate on thoughts they did not feel were complete, as well as further clarify input they did not feel accurately reflected their thoughts or appeared entirely accurate. This increased the trustworthiness as well as the internal validity of each individual interview. I had some concerns with internal validity that stemmed from my knowing some of the participants I studied. In some regards, I felt having a relationship with some participants could be both advantageous as well as creating possible bias since they might have wanted to tell me what they believed I 'wanted to hear.' In dealing with this issue, I thought of Merriam (2009) where she clarified that within qualitative research, our participants are up close and ultimately become our data. To better understand the data collected, we must understand the individual participants. In addition to increasing the transparency and providing thick description of each interview and observation, I found that approaching the information gathered from multiple perspectives or dimensions assisted in creating a more complete understanding of both individual and overall findings.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Merriam (2009) stated that within qualitative research, trustworthiness is based upon the researcher's findings and ability to "carry out the study in as ethical manner as possible" (p. 234). To establish trustworthiness within this study, careful steps were taken throughout to effectively reduce bias as well as increase reliability and validity. Triangulation played a tremendous role in these efforts. This included looking closely at multiple points of data

including interview data, artifacts, and observations. Additionally, participants took part in

member checks of transcribed interviews to verify the conversations accurately captured and

reflected their thoughts and perceptions to provide them with a strong voice. Encouraging

participants to review their interviews also provided an opportunity for supplementary structure

and strength to the findings within this research. Member checks were sent electronically via

email. Interviews were also reviewed with a peer reviewer to check for shared themes. Finally, I

met regularly with my committee and advisor throughout this process with descriptive notes,

processes, questions, struggles, findings, and quotes that could be of benefit to the research itself

(Merriam, 2009).

In addition to triangulation, Creswell (2013) placed emphasis on attempting to be

reflective regarding any pre-existing assumptions throughout the process of data analysis that

could impact the interpretation of results. The need to acknowledge the impact of the researcher

was echoed by Merriam (2014) as she discussed the issues surrounding internal validity and that

"one cannot observe or measure a phenomenon/event without changing it" (p. 213). By simply

being present, to some extent, I influenced this study. To more formally address concerns with

internal validity, I elected to be transparent in my concern and document the impact of this

dynamic. I believed by stating my bias within this dissertation, I increased the trustworthiness of

my research by bringing specific concerns to the forefront as well as clarifying how each concern

was handled. To better understand the data collected, we must understand individual participants.

Thick Description

Johansson (2003) indicated that a unique feature of case study methodology is more than

one method can be combined with purpose to illuminate a case from a variety of angles.

Researchers should implement deliberate methods to gain a deeper understanding of a case and

place increased emphasis on effectively communicating the depth and detail of the entity being studied. Geertz (1973) created a distinction between thick and thin description, indicating 'thin description' implied data were left without interpretation and increased systematic documentation of individuals and situations. 'Thick description' was a deeper look into the data and brought additional elements from a variety of sources including the environment, implied non-verbal cues, and less obvious data. To provide rich and detailed accounts of cases, which were selected based on their highly individualized nature, was to provide powerful and multiple perspective insight of a subject. Through thick description, I captured and communicated stories and details that might have otherwise gone unknown.

Summary

The methodology described and implemented for this study was developed to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon taking place in each case as well as across all cases consisting of general education and special education teachers who were co-teaching with students who demonstrated SSN. The goal of this research was to better understand this practice which, up until now, had not been investigated. Per a case study and portraiture methodology that included virtual observations, interviews, and collecting artifacts, I believed the problem and research questions posed were addressed. I disclosed my stance as well as clarified that through trustworthiness and authenticity procedures, the results of this work were dependable and forthright, thereby bringing new and thoughtful information to light as we move forward in providing access to students with SSN within our educational systems.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of general education and special education teacher dyads while co-teaching with students who had significant support needs in the general education setting. Dialogue with educators also concentrated on their perceptions of both challenges and benefits surrounding the process. As established previously, students with SSN were frequently excluded from general school experiences. The analysis of information collected from participating dyads was interpreted per the lenses of established theoretical frameworks of social justice theory as well as the social model of disability.

Participants

Three general education and special education co-teaching dyads were interviewed individually via internet platforms (e.g., Zoom or Google) due to COVID-19 restrictions. All six participants identified were female and their ages ranged from 22 to 46 years old. Each participant was licensed and had co-taught with students with SSN within public schools in a western state in the United States. To participate in this research, participants must have co-taught as licensed general and special education dyads in the general education classroom with students identified as having significant support needs (SSN). Years of co-teaching across all participants was between 1 and 15 years with a total of 41 years combined and years co-teaching with students with SSN ranged from one to nine years with a total of 30 years combined. Participants identified worked in both rural as well as urban schools.

Coronavirus Disease-19

Although the current pandemic was not the focus of this research, it was unreasonable to assume it had not played a role in this research or in education. Due to the challenges posed to educators throughout this time, the attrition rate of my participants was significant as many were not only overwhelmed by the difficulties posed in reaching all students virtually but also losing staff support, supporting families, supporting their own families, and navigating efforts to maintain strong instruction and inclusion for their students on exclusive virtual platforms or in highly contagious face to face classrooms. The participants who agreed to take part in this research all indicated they elected to talk with me because they were extremely passionate about this inclusive framework as well as all of the students that it serves. In short, the teachers that I spoke with are amazing people who made time during a crisis to further the research on this topic that they all agree needs to be explored.

Setting

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews and data collection were completed virtually. Many teachers were not allowed into their brick-and-mortar classrooms during this time but had established in-home/remote classrooms. To gain a better understanding of their classrooms and circumstances, a virtual guide was provided to each teacher and information was compared between the two to gain a deeper understanding of the physical space, organization, access, instruction, and culture and climate of their classroom. The dyads represented three different public schools, two of which were higher risk with increased diversity of students and one of which was more affluent with less diversity, although both educators indicated this appeared to be changing based on data collected in the past.

Analysis

The data representation began with portraits of each dyad including interviews, information collected, and my observations based on our interactions. Following each dyad's portrait, a micro analysis was completed based on their input and then a cross case analysis was completed to gain a deeper understanding of vital themes that span all cases.

Dyad 1: Public Elementary School

Table 1 provides the demographics for Dyad One: a public elementary education (kindergarten through fifth grade) Title 1 School with high diversity and lower socioeconomic status.

Table 1

Demographics of Dyad 1: Public Elementary School

	Chosen Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Years teaching	Years Co-teaching	Years Co-teaching with SSN
General education teacher	Carrie	46	Hispanic/ Caucasian	15	4	4
Special education teacher	Sally	22	Caucasian	2	1	1

Sally and Carrie co-taught with students with SSN for one year at an elementary school (Grades K-5) in a smaller rural district in the western United States. Both participants indicated their school served a highly diverse community of students and families, many of whom were identified as higher risk with several students currently receiving Title 1, English language, and/or special education services. Both educators indicated the physical building was located in a

more rural area that was in a predominantly lower socioeconomic neighborhood. As Carrie stated

during her interview,

> The population is extremely diverse over here; a lot of refugees have moved here within
>
> the last few years. Thailand, Burma, Somali... all of those groups. So, we're really
>
> diverse. And I love working that way and I love the kids! A lot of them are in high school
>
> now and I still am in contact with a lot of them. And I'm just so proud of the young adults
>
> that they are becoming.

While providing me with a virtual and verbal tour of the general education classroom

(Carrie had access to the room using Zoom and a tablet), both educators explained that the room

was organized specifically to facilitate peer interaction as well as support them as they worked

together within the space. Sally and Carrie both indicated the desks were set up in three rows

where students were placed next to each other. Students with SSN were not grouped with each

other but deliberately placed with students who were known to be caring. A walkway divided the

rows down the center so people could move safely about the room and then kidney bean tables

were located to one side of the room in close proximity to one another where small group

instruction would take place. Both teachers clarified they had placed the tables close so they

could support each other during small groups and if something were to happen (i.e., Sally had to

tend to behavior in the building or Carrie needed to pull a student aside), they could either

combine groups or support the paraeducator who would step in. Interestingly, Sally immediately

brought attention to an interesting adaptation that would have likely been overlooked otherwise:

> Carrie like never really had the ceiling lights on. The room was mostly lit by lamps which
>
> made life so much easier on our more sensory sensitive kiddos. I never forgot that—it

was very nice. I really enjoyed going in there. It was not dark or anything, but no fluorescent lights, which is good for a number of sensory and behavioral reasons.

Special Education Teacher:
Sally's Portrait

Truthfully, I really like co-teaching. Yeah. Carrie is so good, and she clearly loved our kids. Like, because we had this time together and we were teaching together, it made a huge difference for both of us and all of the kids. I love Carrie so much. I don't know how I would have made it through that year without her. She's incredible.

I met with Sally on a snowy Friday evening via an internet chat. She indicated she had met face-to-face with students that day but had just received notice they were switching to on-line only teaching the following week as there had been a number of COVID exposures. I mentioned how much I appreciated her connecting and chatting with me during such a stressful time to which she responded with a smile, "Are you kidding? I live alone and I have someone to talk with on a Friday night." I elected to chat casually with Sally for a bit prior to beginning the interview. As we talked about the world and how things were going, I noticed she was no longer pulling anxiously on the drawstrings attached to the hood of the school sweatshirt she was wearing. Then we eased more comfortably into the interview questions.

Sally is young, quick witted, and has a wonderfully dry sense of humor. Although she had been placed in home quarantine that evening, Sally smiled and joked, and seemed genuinely happy to be connecting with me regardless of her circumstances. Sally indicated she graduated from a four-year bachelor's program at a local university and when she was initially introduced to the concept of co-teaching, she had been quite underwhelmed at the framework. It was not until her first year of teaching when she met Carrie whom she felt understood what the goal of

this framework was and how important it was for all kids, especially for those with more

significant support needs:

> So, I originally had a negative idea of co-teaching because I've seen it done before, like
>
> during practicums. And every time that I'd seen it done, the general education teacher
>
> would use the special education teacher as a para and not like another teacher. And so, I
>
> was like, nope, not interested. However, in the midst of the storm that I walked into, there
>
> was a second-grade teacher that I ended up co-teaching with. It was cool because she
>
> made a point of saying that she wanted the kids (with SSN) in her room. She wanted the
>
> kids there! If you want our kids in your room, I'm going to make a point of getting into
>
> your room.

Sally laughingly acknowledged that although she was still a relatively new teacher, she

believed that teaching SSN had forced her to become a stronger educator faster. She continued to

wrestle with the volume of meetings she must attend, schedule, and run as well as the amount of

scheduling she was responsible for school wide. But then she went on to indicate how co-

teaching with a strong and inclusive general education teacher who had a special education

background created a unique and positive first year teaching experience for her:

> I covered two programs, I was both the SSN and the resource teacher… Yeah, so it was
>
> good to co-teach with a teacher who knew her stuff and then to be able to walk her
>
> through what this process could look like with a special education teacher in your room.
>
> We would try a number of interventions together and collect data regularly. It was neat to
>
> be able to learn from each other that way.

When discussing co-teaching, Sally clarified that Carrie was the one who proposed they

co-teach with their more intensive students and that it was not only advantageous to students but

it also helped her with scheduling students, providing them access to peers, and providing them both with access to one another's strengths as both masters of content, instruction, behavior, and adaptations. They utilized a combination of all five models of co-teaching contingent on the needs of the students as well as the content but most often used a combination of one teach, one assist and station teaching:

> We needed to be flexible. I feel like a lot of things influenced which model we did—what we were teaching, behaviors, the schedule for that day…we had to stay pretty open. But we did station teaching more often than not - it was a really good way for us to teach both core and intervention at the same time with all kinds of kids.

Sally also indicated that the time spent co-teaching with Carrie not only helped her better meet student needs and assisted her in becoming a stronger teacher but it also created an opportunity for her to actively collaborate with another teacher in the building, which helped to decrease the sense of isolation she experienced when taking on the role of the SSN teacher:

> The neat thing about working with the staff and being in classrooms before the world ended is because the staff figured out who I was and that I was pretty good at stuff. So, because Carrie and I would write goals together, sometimes other teachers would come to me and be like, hey like can you write a work habits goal? And I was happy to help— give me the data. So, it was a really neat environment.

When discussing the impact co-teaching had on students, Sally was quick to respond that she felt the impact of co-teaching within the general classroom with students who had SSN was beneficial for both general education students as well as students with disabilities:

> I think that's something that I found really helpful was that the little girl who was in our co-taught class with SSN was the only second grader. Because she was the only one that

led her to having to make friends outside of the SSN self-contained group of kids. So,

like, had she not had a teacher who insisted she be in her classroom, or had she been in

the SSN room with other kids her age, she could have just latched on to somebody else

with SSN. I don't know that a lot of her skills would have developed as quickly had that

happened.

She went on to explain that the student she mentioned made tremendous growth over the course

of her school year in Carrie's class and grew to recognize both herself and Carrie as her teachers.

Sally saw a number of behaviors that had been evident at the beginning of the school year begin

to decrease:

Most of the feedback she got about behavior she would get from the kids in her class

whether it was watching what they were doing or having them tell her to let them learn,

and the kids she was next to were really sweet, that she needed to be more mindful. Her

peers provided authentic feedback both positive and constructive.

Sally believed her presence within the classroom made for increased opportunities for all

students to get a little more attention and instruction from another teacher. The classroom also

had a clear and simple positive behavior intervention support system (PBIS) that was accessible

for all students:

So, our co-teaching gave all of the kids a great chance to interact with each other on a

very genuine level. I mean, at that age, building appropriate social skills is something that

they all needed to work on. So, our team recognized that this wasn't a skill that only the

kids with SSN needed extra help with. It was a great opportunity to integrate skills for all

the kids.

Sally also emphasized how impressive it was to see students connect and to watch students with SSN begin to demonstrate increased self-advocacy skills as they became increasingly interdependent: "It's like they all started to make friends and connections and eventually we started to pull back the paraeducator support and had them float through the rest of the class."

Although Sally indicated the benefits of co-teaching with students with SSN far outweighed the challenges, she acknowledged there were struggles, nonetheless. These challenges included scheduling, making time to collaborate, and being certain your co-teacher is a good match. Neither teacher had a common planning time and had to set aside time one time per week to talk about data outside of their contracted hours. To simplify this process, they agreed to use a more scripted instructional program with which they were both familiar. This way they did not have to spend too much time co-planning but could instead focus on student performance, progress, and concerns. In addition, because Sally's caseload spanned the building, there was a degree of uncertainty surrounding her ability to get to and stay within the classroom if a student's behavior were to escalate within the building. For this reason, although there were already two adults in the classroom, Sally and Carrie would co-plan how they would include paraeducator support knowing that if Sally or Carrie were to be called out, the paraeducator would be able to step in and take over with one of them. This included the curriculum, plans, training, and how the classroom was set up. Finally, Sally acknowledged she and Carrie were an excellent match and held a similar expectation for students as well as an appreciation for providing adaptations for all students. She indicated she had attempted to co-teach with another teacher in the building and it did not go well:

> I tried co-teaching with another teacher, and it did not work. She was unwilling to budge. I had to have meetings with her like with moderators or whatever they're called because it

was hostile. She's like, I never had students with severe disabilities before and I don't

want them in my room.

Finding an educator who wanted to play an active role in a co-teaching relationship and preferred

to have students with SSN in their classroom was vital to a successful co-teaching experience.

When I asked Sally to describe the culture and climate of the co-taught classroom she and

Carrie shared, she stated:

It was chill. It was super chill, but at the same time it was very structured because Carrie

had a well-organized classroom. So, there's four stations and she taught at one station. I

taught in another. And then there were two stations where the kids were on their own.

This was cool because it was student-led, and we'd just monitor. But to see the kids work

together and they knew exactly what they're doing.

Sally indicated that students were responsible for their individual materials within the classroom

and any assistive technology students with SSN might need was available to them to access on

their own. Instruction between the two of them was typically simple, concise, and a subtle

redundancy was evident to support students who might struggle with instructions. She also

commented on how both she and Carrie loved watching the students guide one another through

independent stations and would get excited when they would ask questions and guide each other

through learning. When I probed further about how Carrie was so good at structuring and

implementing so many principles of Universal Design for Learning, Sally clarified that Carrie

was no stranger to special education and I was going to love chatting with her:

Yeah, I think she has an endorsement or something like that in special education. Like

she's never taught special education specifically, other than in ESY [Extended School

Year]. And so, in addition to loving our kids with SSN, the fact that, like I was co-

teaching with somebody who had a special education background. (kisses fingers and raises them upward) Lovely. She was able to give me the materials in a way that she knew were supposed to be in place. Like, she knew how to accommodate specifically for these kids and knew exactly what was on the IEP and how to interpret it correctly. I mean, she made it so easy and it was amazing to have a person to bounce ideas on how to meet the needs of some really intense kids in the general education classroom!

In addition to trusting Carrie and recognizing that with both educators working to meet all students' needs Sally felt a tremendous decrease in feeling isolated and alone, Sally placed a special emphasis on the collaborative nature of their partnership: "It wasn't just that we worked together and taught together. At some point, we would hit this cool kind of flow. We just sort of knew when to pick up where the other one left off." This intuitive rapport made for clear, quick, and great collaboration both in class with students as well when looking at data. Additionally, Sally discussed the degree of trust and comfort she felt while working with Carrie, indicating that at times in the beginning, it was intimidating to work with such a strong teacher and she struggled to disclose when she was uncertain about next steps: "She'd be like, we need to figure this out together, I'm not asking you about it because I know the answer, I'm asking you about it because we need to begin thinking about what we want to try." Through this collaboration, Sally felt everyone had benefitted.

General Education Teacher:
Carrie's Portrait

"Sally is a breath of fresh air; I absolutely love working with her." Meeting with Carrie was challenging. Again, due to COVID-19 restrictions, we scheduled a virtual meeting for a Thursday evening after work. That evening, Carrie did not show up. After 15 minutes and because this was out of character for Carrie, I reached out to see if she was safe. She responded

indicating she thought she had sent me a message earlier explaining that high winds had blown a tree over in her yard crushing both of her cars and part of her home. I was stunned. However, she wanted to reschedule for the following week because she was still determined to do the interview. Again, such resilience truly spoke to Carrie's character. When we did meet, she was in a long-term hotel room. Carrie appeared to be in good spirits and when I asked how she was doing, she responded she was incredibly grateful: "This all could have been so much worse! We are all safe, a wonderful friend is taking care of my dogs who are also safe, that's the most important thing, right?"

Carrie was a bright and positive presence. We quickly connected and began to talk to each other comfortably. Although this was my first time connecting with Carrie, she immediately made me feel as though we were old friends and I mentioned casually that I had a feeling this dialogue would be a bit less structured than those I'd previously engaged in. She, laughingly responded, "With me? Oh yeah! That's one thing you got to get used to—focus is overrated." I noticed she had a number of tattoos on her arms and asked if she was an art collector or if her tattoos had meaning and if she would feel comfortable telling me about them. She indicated each one represented a student who had a tremendous impact on her life:

> They just came so far. Like this guy right here (points to a child's name tattooed on her forearm). I'm not sure if you can see his name or not, one the puzzle pieces (tattooed on the other arm) is for him. And, you know, he's like in eighth or ninth grade now—I'm trying to remember because he's grown up so fast and like he'll email me randomly every once in a while.

Interestingly, each tattoo represented students who had challenged her as a teacher and left an impact on her as a human being:

That's why you're right here, buddy (points to the tattoo of the child's name and then to her heart). So, this, (points to her arms) obviously it's the puzzle pieces and it's hard to tell but they're the autism colors. And then this was like, the infinity plus one. And then one of my students, her dad was a tattoo artist and she picked out all the colors for the ABC and the 123 and added the purple apple. And I had one student, he was in kindergarten and then he came up to me for first grade and second grade. And at the beginning of kindergarten, he couldn't recognize his numbers or his letters. So, by the end of kindergarten and first grade, he would pull my wrist and he would identify them, he'd be just like (points to each letter and number). And I missed that little turkey. He was a handful. Oh, he was a handful! But they're the ones that I miss the most.

Carrie is a veteran general education teacher who had 15 years of experience teaching a variety of elementary level grades. In addition to her mastery of content across a variety of grade levels, in the past four years, Carrie elected to instruct Extended School Year during the summers for students with more significant needs. She clarified that she had completed a four-year bachelor's degree at a local university in elementary education quickly and once she entered the classroom, immediately fell in love with students who learned differently: "Since then, I have taken probably every single continuing education course I can get my hands on and afford for special education and English language development (ELD). Now, I am ELD qualified, and a special education generalist endorsed." Her passion for inclusive education and working with students who had diverse learning needs also stemmed from raising her own children. She clarified that one of her sons has an IEP for special education and one has an advanced learning plan for gifted and talented support.

Carrie has co-taught with a variety of different special education teachers for years and indicated that working with Sally was "a breath of fresh air." She recognized that Sally was a new teacher but also stated she clearly knew her stuff, had great rapport with all of the kids, and was both open and trusting within their partnership. Carrie had four years of experience co-teaching with special education teachers and insisted that students with SSN be included in her classroom prior to her experiences with co-teaching. She did indicate the process was made easier to implement when teachers had access to additional resources including paraeducators and additional time to plan and look through data but whether or not access to such resources existed, it should not impact a team's willingness to attempt co-teaching.

Carrie's passion for inclusion and co-teaching for all students was evident throughout the entire interview. When asked about what she perceived to be the critical elements to co-teaching with students with SSN, she did not hold back. In her experience, it was vital that co-teachers shared trust, respect, strong working relationships, and common views around expectations for students:

> If you don't have that, then it's like having, you know, a parent volunteer in your room because you don't know what you can trust them with and what you can't. And that's nothing against parent volunteers at all. But they're not trained educators, they're not there every day working with our kids. So that's what the biggest hurdle that I have found with co-teaching of any kind is - that trust in knowing that they have the same level of expectation as you do.

Carrie clarified that when this intensive partnership was in place and you began to work regularly and really well with your co-teacher,

it's basically like you share one brain. We could pick up exactly where the other left off and it was amazing, like we just work seamlessly together. I left off. She picked up. She supported, I supported, and we could just bounce back and forth, and we were great. For me, that's the ideal way to co-teach because it's like right there.

Carrie also made reference to the importance of investment from building leadership and their willingness to push students and staff forward to inclusive practices for all students, not just as a stance or creating mission statements but by getting involved in developing building wide systems and supports, listening and encouraging teachers, as well as advocating for practices through coaching and professional development. Carrie indicated she had discovered throughout her many years of experience that understanding the law as well as each other's jobs as you begin collaborating with a co-teacher made a tremendous difference as teachers begin working together developing lessons, looking at data, intervening with behavior, and facilitating an appropriate climate in addition to maintaining high expectations for all students. This included recognizing what each teacher brought to the table, and being vulnerable and confident enough within that relationship to admit you do not always know the answer, especially when you are working with intensive and complex needs and using strengths to create an outstanding learning climate for all students.

When I asked Carrie about what she perceived to be the benefits for educators who use co-teaching as a framework to include students with SSN in general education classrooms, she made reference to the importance of developing lasting collaborative relationships to best provide effective instruction and adaptations for not only the students you are currently working with but also students who have yet to arrive: "Honestly if every teacher could have a co-teacher they trusted and believed in and that mesh well together—amazing things can happen for not just

special ed, but for every kid!" In addition to this, she quickly connected the importance of lasting connections to help problem-solve beyond just your immediate teammates. She indicated that in addition to having a current co-teacher to think through challenging situations, she also used past student teachers and co-teachers who had moved on to other positions throughout the state:

> You know, I still talk with them, even to this day and we haven't worked together for years but being able to collaborate and work with strong educators is key. And the way I see things, we could adapt a lot easier to meet the needs of our kids with two or more brains versus one brain because we can all see student needs through a different lens. So, I look at kids from the general education experience and other teachers might see it from a special education experience.

Carrie also advocated that co-teaching was one of the best ways to develop future educators. In addition to exposing them to strong practices and instruction within their own area of study (whether general or special education), she claimed it facilitated a mindset of growth including working more collaboratively with other teachers and being honest and open about your uncertainties:

> It's great because you have another person who lets you know that it's okay not to know everything and that we'll do a better job figuring things out if we work on it together. So, the last couple of full student teachers I had, not practicum students, instead of having them take over the class I pushed for more of a co-teacher model with them. They can see what that was like and I think that was a huge benefit not just for them but for me to be able to see that cooperation and that understanding that we are in this together.

When I went on to invite Carrie to talk about the impact she felt co-teaching had on students with SSN in the general education classroom, she shifted my question to be all

inclusive. Carrie went into great detail surrounding the benefits of co-teaching and inclusive practices for not only students with SSN but all students. She mentioned the benefits of having additional adults who knew how to take over a classroom so she could deal directly with behavior if needed, the importance of providing diverse instruction for all students, and having more adults to listen to students who did not always have an opportunity to contribute in a larger group. Carrie also indicated the "mind meld" of co-teachers as well as common language was vital to the benefit of students:

> I think we were working on something in math. And it was like one of those tricky skills like arrays introduction to multiplication type things that kids in general, without significant needs have issues with. Between like the four of us myself, the interventionist, Sally, and the paraprofessional. It was so cool to watch all of the kids light up one by one as they got what we were all explaining just a little bit differently. With the support of all of these different people that were on the same page at the same time working on the same skill with the same language, the same vocabulary, and the same expectations, but in a way that individual learners were able to grasp it. And I'm like, "YEAH, it stuck!" But I know that it wouldn't have stuck if it had just been me. Because we would not have had so many brains figuring out the best way to do things, we wouldn't have been able to pinpoint it and really enforce it, and be on the same page. And I was like, that right there almost made me cry. Like, it's just like perfection.

Carrie also made mention of the importance of peer relationships and students learning from one another. Per the inclusive practices she advocated, she was thrilled students were provided with the opportunity to facilitate appropriate behaviors and gained exposure to diversity. As she lamented further on my question, she elected to provide me with an example:

I was working with a kiddo that got really mad at me when I told him he needed to put his book away. He kicked his shoe into the ceiling, that's right, his shoe was stuck in the ceiling. Admittedly, this kid has some pretty intensive behavioral needs. I was like, okay, everyone go to this page in your student activity book and do this work and whatever, and one of the other kids was like, "Well, why does he always get all of her attention" and one of my kids who is identified as gifted and who… well, he's got like the most pure heart, ever, and he sat there and he's like, "well, at one of my other schools" because he's bounced around a lot which is heartbreaking. He's like," well, I had a classmate that, you know, in order for them to be successful, they just needed a little extra attention and support that I didn't need. And that's what's happening right now with our classmates and with Ms. Carrie" and like for him to understand that AND help his classmate to also understand that! That kind of learning would never have happened if either of those kids had just be pulled out.

In addition to more specific learning moments, Carrie encouraged friendships by modeling good communication with her co-teacher as well as creating opportunities for all students to work together:

I think it benefits all of the kids, because then they could push each other within their groups, but they also have instruction at a variety of levels and by mixing them up when they are working at student led stations, they have to learn how to have conversations at different levels so that even kids who struggle with communication can go, "oh yeah!" - having that peer to peer is so important. It's so important.

Within the classroom, Carrie and Sally worked collaboratively with classroom management. Carrie indicated that throughout her years teaching, she had learned that keeping behavior management simple, clear, and concise was a game changer:

My expectations for Johnny are the same as the expectations I have for the kids that are in ILC or LLC or whatever. Are they modified a little bit? Probably. Like, if I expect like one kiddo to be at his seat. So, is his seat going to be on the floor, a wiggle seat, a ball, or just a typical chair? I don't care as long as he's in his spot. But it's like the basis of my classroom management is you respect yourself, you respect others, and you allow us to teach, and you allow others to learn. Yeah, I mean, I'm not gonna lie, I would like to say that I never have to call for support for any kid and more specifically, the one who threw his shoe through the ceiling yesterday because he couldn't have his computer and play prodigy when he wanted to [rolls eyes, stares unblinkingly, and then starts to laugh] ... But, you know, are you, while we were waiting for someone to help us crawl into the ceiling and retrieve his shoe, the follow up conversation is simple. Are you allowing me to teach and others to learn, buddy? Because right now I'm back here dealing with you and the rest of the classes waiting. So, it comes back to that - what would be a better choice to allow others to learn and allow me to teach? And that right there, I just found to work so much better. It worked for all of the kids and it simplified directions for adults too.

Although Carrie asserted that within the co-teaching model the benefits of a strong partnership outweighed the challenges, she agreed that challenges existed when attempting the framework. "If you don't have that communication and chemistry, co-teaching can be a bigger challenge than benefit. That'd be the case for any adult in your room. The kids figure out who is going to

let them do what they want." She stated that successful co-teaching teams had to be on the same page and hold high expectations for all students. Additionally, she admitted a lack of time to connect, communicate, and get on the same page could lead to challenges within the relationship:

> It can be complicated if you're not on the same page, for sure. Like, I've worked with co-teachers and paras that make excuses for kids and try to get them out of situations. No. The kids are here to learn. It's okay for them to learn from a mistake, but we need to be a united front. They are little humans and yes, they are going to mess-up. But they are smart enough to recognize when we are inconsistent or disagree.

Carrie's interview lasted two hours. By the time we were wrapping up the session, we were talking like old friends and not two strangers who had literally spoken directly for the first time. I asked her, what do you believe is the most important thing that I should know for this study and she responded,

> I wanted those kids in my classroom, I wanted Sally to be my co-teacher and I wanted her to teach alongside me. I felt like, when we had a strong co-teaching team in place, then you're not trying to like even out that load of IEPs or unique learning needs among other teachers. I was okay with having more kids with more needs because I knew that I had support - not just another adult in the room, I had that other teacher and I trusted them and knew that I could count on them. We could train paraeducators together to create a strong classroom where every kid was getting an amazing education and the same opportunities, the same inclusion, regardless of where they were because they were with us.

Dyad 1: Within Case Analysis

Reoccurring codes throughout the data were meaningful inclusion, leadership, schoolwide culture and climate, positive exposure to co-teaching, collaboration, communication, common goals, trust, self-awareness and confidence, recognizing attributes of co-teacher, understanding and vulnerability, flexibility, high expectations, gen ed first, time and scheduling challenges, individual profession challenges, learning in real time, peers, relationship and mind meld, universal design for learning/positive behavior intervention support system (UDL/PBIS), social and academic benefits for kids, and self-efficacy.

Per the data collected including interviews, artifacts, and reflections, a variety of themes were apparent and each teacher (although interviewed separately) echoed one another closely while still contributing their own experiences and stories as they applied to co-teaching within the general education classroom with students with SSN. Among those themes were meaningful inclusion for all students, flexibility, communication and collaboration, trust and vulnerability within their co-teaching relationship, and being certain that they were both "on the same page." Both remarked and showed evidence that UDL was implemented regularly within their co-taught classroom in an effort to best meet all student's needs. Carrie shared that the instruction and adaptations they made within the classroom were "good for all kids." She went on to explain,

> Any strategies that we put into place will benefit all of the kids. This is what I wish more
> gen ed teachers would understand - the strategy that we're putting in place for Susie over
> here because she's two grade levels behind in reading are going to benefit the kiddos over
> here too because these strategies are good for all learners, not just SSN, not just sped, and
> not just ELL. And it drives me crazy that it's like, oh, I have to do this and this and this
> and this for this one kid - let's be real, by providing like this, this, and this for this kid is

going to help these other kids even more because they're going to get to have more tools in their toolbox.

The physical classroom reflected the teachers' commitment to UDL as it was set up to provide students with access to each other as well as accommodate their individual needs. Furthermore, both teachers commented on the importance of encouraging peer interactions and providing opportunities for adults to "back off" to allow for more organic social interactions. They went on to assert their belief that peer interactions were beneficial to all students involved, not just the students with SSN, and by co-teaching with the entire class, students began to recognize Sally as a teacher in the room, which seemed to reduce the stigma surrounding both her position and the perceptions of students with SSN.

Although each teacher identified an overwhelming number of benefits to this practice, they were also honest about the challenges including finding time to collaborate and difficulties encountered with scheduling. Interestingly, Sally identified one of her major challenges throughout this process was to remain in the co-taught classroom as there was an expectation that she would deal with students needs building wide: "Because I had three kids in the building who were runners and it was always a question as to whether I would make it through the whole session." Whereas Carrie revealed that per her commitment to include and work hard to create an accepting atmosphere for all students, her classroom was typically overloaded with students with disabilities and diverse needs, which led to a lot of extra time and effort on her part.

In terms of behavior, a heavy emphasis was placed by both teachers to keep expectations simple, clear, and concise. Moreover, all students were included in the PBIS program although both Sally and Carrie clarified they paid extra attention to communication needs and recognized that students could demonstrate appropriate behaviors when there was flexibility. Furthermore,

both teachers highlighted the importance of leadership support for successful co-teaching as well as creating an inclusive and accepting culture.

When asked about what they perceived to be the essential elements within their partnership, Sally and Carrie both talked about the importance of having open and honest communication, trusting each other, and having time to effectively collaborate. They went on to communicate that they had a tremendous amount of respect for one another and considered the other to be a confident and competent colleague. Both also made mention that at some point within their partnership, they began teaching as a single unit where one teacher would pick up where the other left off. Carrie, who had been co-teaching for many years, referred to this phenomenon as a "mind meld" and explained that this was something she had experienced with co-teachers with whom she worked really well, but it did not always happen. Both teachers spoke to their intense commitment to their partnership and explained that much like their students, they believed co-teaching with students with SSN was a process and required both teachers to have a growth mindset. Sally commented that she enjoyed learning with Carrie especially as a new teacher:

> Yeah, so it was good to co-teach with a teacher who knew her stuff and that I could really trust. Then to be able to walk her through what this process could look like with a special education teacher in your room. We would try a number of interventions together and collect data regularly. It was neat to be able to learn from each other that way.

Finally, both educators indicated that school leadership involvement was vital to backing their efforts and pushing staff toward more inclusive practices building wide.

Dyad 2: Public Middle School

Table 2 provides the demographics for the participants for Dyad Two: the public middle school.

Table 2

Demographics of Dyad 2: Public Middle School

	Chosen Pseudonym	Age	Race	Years teaching	Years Co-teaching	Years Co-teaching with SSN
General education teacher	Amier	32	Caucasian	9	7	6
Special education teacher	Kristen	31	Caucasian	8	5	3

Kristen and Amier co-taught with students with SSN for two years at a middle school (Grades 6-8) in a large urban district in the western United States. Both participants indicated their school was unique as it hosted both a gifted and talented program as well as an SSN program where students were bused to their building to access these unique serves. Their middle school serves a diverse community of students and families, many of whom are identified as higher risk with several students flagged as requiring or currently receiving English language or special education services. In addition, the school works with a large percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Throughout conversations, both teachers indicated the culture and climate of the school was inclusive of all students and the school leadership, especially the vice principal, was highly invested in and supportive of inclusive practices—so much so that every year, an SSN professional development was held schoolwide by the vice principal and the SSN team to better prepare all staff members to better support students as well as facilitate an

accepting culture and climate. In addition, the school leaders had worked with both the general and special education teachers as they launched a peer mentorship program building-wide in order to add peer support for students with SSN. This program was piloted within Amier's classroom while she was co-teaching with Kristen and was eventually integrated into additional classrooms throughout the building.

The general education classroom was described by both teachers as being welcoming. Student desks were arranged in seven different groups or pods with four to five students per pod. Each pod was labeled numerically (Group 1, 2, 3… etc.) and Amier indicated her desk was located in the corner and decorated in sparkly blue and orange Denver Broncos material. She went on to explain she would use the desk to launch "getting to know you" activities. A Smartboard was located at the front of the classroom and in the opposite corner was a leveled book section that both teachers would change out for students contingent upon the content they were teaching. Learning targets, success criteria, homework assignments, and the agenda were posted on a whiteboard between the Smartboard and library. Finally, on the other wall, a vocabulary and word wall with pictures was available for all students and instructed regularly by both teachers. Amier expressed that she had been taking classes on autism and had since adjusted her classroom with Kristen's help to include one wall with a blank space: "I didn't realize that too much is just craziness. So, now I will make sure that I have a wall that is blank for resting for those kids who have autism."

Special Education Teacher: Kristen's Portrait

Kristen's interview took place on Zoom on a brilliantly sunny Friday afternoon. She was in the living room of her apartment nestled into a tan leather sofa. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this space in her home had become her new "office and classroom" because when she

and her fiancé moved into the apartment, they opted for a two bedroom as there was "no foreseeable reason that we would need a second office for just the two of us." With that, Kristen chuckled ironically and rolled her eyes, adding, "Well, at least we opted for a really comfortable couch, right?"

I had worked with Kristen as an SSN coach while she was working with her school to become a model program but we had not seen each other in some time due to COVID restrictions. As we sat and became reacquainted, it became apparent to me that our new normal or virtual platforms for meetings and dialogue left me feeling conflicted. In the past, we would likely have met face-to-face in a more neutral location (a classroom, office, etc.) and now, although socially distant, we were peering into one another's homes, recording facial expressions and dialogue instead of just words, and working to describe in-depth events and stories we recognized as important to both the field and ourselves whilst both wondering if we were making adequate eye contact or as if any of our background's clutter was visible to the other. Arguably, this led to a very honest and raw interview that we would frequently fill with both genuine and at times uncomfortable laughter.

I had the pleasure of observing Kristen work at a rather large middle school near the Denver Metro area. She was part of a program designed to establish model programs for education teams across the state to come and observe. Kristen's caseload was typically between 8 and 12 students with SSN and she managed and trained a paraeducator team as well. Within her program, the adult to student ratio (including paraeducators and instructor) was 1:3. Kristen reported the center-based SSN program had been established within the middle school prior to her being hired on and had been well received by teachers, administrators, and students for a

while. Administration was extremely supportive and encouraging of the program and worked hard to develop a strong culture and climate of meaningful inclusion:

> I feel like I had really strong administrator support and that made a huge difference. Most teachers were also pretty open to kids being in their classes, I typically didn't have to fight to have kids included in general education. For the most part, staff shared ownership of all students within the building and leadership would go above and beyond for both the SSN team as well as the special education team to hold training for teachers and staff annually to assure that staff felt empowered to work with students.

As a young but strong and experienced teacher, Kristen completed an alternative licensure program in special education after completing a bachelor's degree in International Studies and Spanish while she was living in Chicago. This prompted her to move forward with a master's degree in special education. Through her alternative licensure program, she was exposed to a lot of co-teaching: "I was first introduced to co-teaching in my training program and that included all of the different models of co-teaching." She reiterated this was a highly encouraged educational strategy in the area where she completed her program and so it was specifically taught, which helped her feel increasingly comfortable with the framework. Kristen also mentioned her first attempt at co-teaching with students with SSN was at the middle school as previous programs where she had worked tended to emphasize paraeducator support in the classroom instead of co-teaching.

When I asked Kristen what she perceived to be the essential elements of co-teaching, she indicated she believed flexibility was definitely one of the key elements. Within her experience co-teaching with Amier, they would use a variety of co-teaching models based on the content

being taught as well as what level of support and instruction students would likely need. She also

felt that while working with Amier they fell into their roles comfortably and quickly:

> She was definitely the content, instruction, and classroom organization expert within our
>
> partnership and then I would bring accommodations, modifications, and behavior
>
> management to the table. I think it was really good for both our paraeducators and peer
>
> mentors to watch us collaborate and co-teach the way we did. We definitely modeled the
>
> behavior we wanted to see from others.

In terms of their more typical day of co-teaching, according to Kristen, "We typically

didn't do a lot of parallel teaching and team teaching because that could be thrown out the door at

like any second depending on how students' days were going. So, we would do more station

teaching or like I'd have a small group." She also indicated that when content became

increasingly complex, they would begin with a one teach, one assist model so students all

received expert core instruction first with common language and would then break into groups.

Kristen would also attempt to bring paraeducators to co-taught classes with her both to model

instruction as well as to be prepared to step in if behavior or significant issues took place with

students elsewhere in the building:

> So, I mean, a lot of times, because I had to be available to take kids out of the classroom
>
> or sometimes, we didn't make it into the classroom, things could get pretty complicated.
>
> That's where our pre-planning would come into play. But my co-teacher loved our kids
>
> and was incredibly flexible. She understood that my job was building wide.

Kristen described the students she worked with as having a variety of individual needs

and each of them demonstrating a cognitive need as well as additional disabilities. Nevertheless,

she and Amier worked hard to increase self-advocacy skills as well as age-appropriate behaviors.

Therefore, prior to attempting to co-teach with general education teachers, Kristen and Amier collaborated to develop and implement a peer mentor program to facilitate autonomy with students as well as to illustrate for typical students in classrooms how social interactions and exchanges could appear. She and her co-teacher Amier, with the support of their vice principal, would screen appropriate mentors and train student mentors within the co-taught classroom and in other less structured environments. By using their co-taught classroom to work with peer mentors, students could facilitate additional contacts with peers in classrooms and better understand how to work with students with SSN. This interaction also functioned as a model for other typical peers who might be uncertain or uncomfortable.

Kristen indicated she had attempted to work with teachers in the past and was surprised at how open and excited Amier was to have students with SSN in her classroom:

Yeah, I think the first step is kids being in their general education classrooms and a lot of general education teachers tend to find that scary. Like, oh my gosh, this kid is, you know, yelling in my classroom, like what is that going to do for my evaluation or how is it going to disrupt other students' learning? But Amier was all about it. She wanted our kids with SSN in her classroom. She wanted me in her classroom. She clearly loved our kids with SSN and would go the extra mile to make sure that they knew that. This made it easy for us to get straight to work empowering them kids to do great things. But that relationship depends on the teachers - not all teachers want the extra work.

In addition to flexibility and trust, Kristen indicated co-teachers who worked well together and had students with SSN included in their classrooms had a relationship that was on a whole new level because the needs were intense and you had to be honest and understanding with one another as learning and social needs grew increasingly complex:

Like you just have to be flexible and it's really important to listen to each other when someone is upset about something. All anybody wants to hear when they're upset or frustrated is that you hear and understand them and that it's okay. It's important to know when people are looking for comfort or a solution, you don't have to offer a solution all the time. I think being open and honest about the fact that you don't have all the answers is good too. That opens up a door for the two of you to begin problem solving together instead of one person taking over the partnership.

In addition to a strong collaborative relationship, Kristen also identified the importance of being on the same page with your co-teacher and

making sure that you have goals. I mean, even outside of like what the curricular goals are for that classroom to make sure that it's meaningful for the whole 60 minutes or however long you're going to be in there and have a checklist of things that you need to take data on or like need to be addressed in that classroom. I think it's easy, especially in a general education classroom for some of our kids just to sit there—and although, sometimes, that is the goal (laughing) but it definitely shouldn't be the end goal, right, like we need to keep pushing them to be more involved and holding them to high expectations.

Kristen indicated she enjoyed working directly with general education teachers and not only empowering them with behavior interventions, adaptations, and strategies for all students including those with SSN but also using the time she spent co-teaching to increase her own skills surrounding content and instruction:

So definitely I would help a lot with classroom management, and I got to know a lot of the students, not necessarily those on my caseload as an SSN teacher, but who had an IEP

who might need some extra help, or just a student who needed support. I just kind of

plugged in where I was needed and helped like redirect.

Kristen went on to clarify that she had been co-teaching with two general education teachers

prior to COVID-19, which brought everything to a quick halt. But during her time in both

science and social studies, she felt like her skills and understanding of content improved

tremendously, which created an improved opportunity for her to make meaningful adaptations

for students with the general education teachers. She also identified Amier as an expert educator

whom she felt lucky to have had the opportunity to co-teach with as well as collaborate on

school wide projects. Kristen felt like the co-teaching framework was optimal for the two of

them because there was opportunity for them to learn from each other and empower one another

to become stronger educators especially when it came to creating a strong classroom for students

with SSN. She indicated that by having two strong educators in the room, it offered them

additional opportunities to provide on-the-job professional development in an inclusive

environment including working with one another, paraeducators, collecting data, and working on

decreasing prompting with students and facilitating independence. Kristen also indicated that

working in general education classes with a variety of students and teachers also helped to

decrease the isolation and monotony she tended to experience in more self-contained settings:

> Yeah, I mean I think having two teachers is obviously better than one in a classroom for
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> classroom management and to help with some of those kids that are struggling a little bit
>
> but might fall through the cracks. Having another set of eyes, I think, from my
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> perspective and maybe this is not the type of the answer you're looking for, but like going
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> into classrooms at the end of the day, like definitely helped like with the monotony of
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> being in one classroom all day with the same kids and just to mix things up a little bit for

me. And then for gen ed teachers, I think having another teacher in the classroom is helpful. And then they ultimately get to learn how to modify and not to be afraid of students with SSN, which is great.

Kristen's experiences with co-teaching and having two teachers and students with SSN within a classroom was clear. Having had the opportunity to provide services for students with SSN in both self-contained as well as co-taught inclusive environments, the co-taught framework, if done well, had a variety of academic and social advantages for both students with SSN as well as their typical peers:

I think naturally like kids seeing other kids interacting with students with SSN takes away a lot of the stigma that is frequently associated with more significant disabilities. Not to mention, I mean I think building confidence academically and socially were goals that I always thought would increase. Some kids who came from other schools that were completely separate all through elementary school like, all of a sudden, their parents would report that they loved to come to middle school. I think the change was good for them. I think staying in one classroom all day long would be extremely boring for anybody and I'm sure they would get tired of me or whichever teacher they would have all day.

Kristen went on to indicate that although co-teaching with SSN involved a lot of planning, creative scheduling, and commitment from both teachers, the long-term impact for students involved was a strong motivator to continue to invest the additional effort involved: "I think their self-confidence, their social skills, and how much they like school. They're feeling of being included in the school all seem to be impacted by our efforts to co-teach and get them involved in general education classes."

Having indicated there were clear benefits for both students and educators who engaged in a co-taught environment with students who have SSN did not minimize the challenges teachers faced surrounding the practice. Although Kristen had indicated she and Amier had been provided a semester with a common planning time to get their program started, once that period ended, the struggle of finding time resumed:

> Planning time, you know, we didn't have a lot of planning time like that, like our special education meetings at the same time as the general education teachers would meet to plan. So, I would just set up like 30-minute meetings with teachers weekly or bi-weekly depending on how good of a planner the teacher was, to just like get the objectives for the week and like if there were any projects or anything that needed to be modified, anything that the kids were reading, and try to find like reading levels that were appropriate for our students and you know, other activities that they could work on that would be more appropriate.

In addition to making time and schedule with other teachers, Kristen also had to come up with a plan to effectively schedule her day so she could fit alternative instruction for all three grades and still make it into her co-taught classrooms. Kristen indicated that to effectively co-teach, she adjusted her schedule to provide intervention courses for students in her SSN program in the morning so she could push into classrooms to co-teach in the afternoons: "This is tricky at the middle school level because you could have your classes and teachers all figured out and then everything will change at semester when the kids rotate courses and teachers."

Because Kristen had experiences with co-teaching with SSN, she felt like it was important to bring to light challenges she had experienced in the past (prior to working with Aimer). She indicated that finding the right colleague to approach this more intensive

collaboration was a critical aspect that was not always easy due to the fear and uncertainty that frequently surrounded students with SSN: "If somebody's not really open to having a student with SSN in their classroom even when you're telling them that you will come in and share the teaching responsibility with them, then the relationship is already off to a bad start."

Kristen went on to explain that teachers who enter a co-teaching relationship with the intent of including students with SSN in the general education classroom have to be willing participants who are ready to be honest and work hard with the mindset that "we are both learning." They also must have strong communication skills, demonstrate flexibility, and be ready to work collaboratively:

> I think that without good collaboration between teachers about what's going on during the week, then there's no way to modify and then you just have kids who are sitting in a classroom with nothing to do, which is going to be a behavior issue or the time they spend in class will simply not be meaningful.

As we gradually wrapped up our interview, I asked Kristen if there was anything else she felt would be important for me to know and she indicated that although she and Amier worked incredibly hard and well together to create a strong co-teaching framework with peer mentors and exceptional opportunities for paraeducator development, the success of this program had a tremendous amount to do with the climate and culture of the building:

> Our school has strong leadership and teachers who were used to and supported these types of partnerships. We invested a lot of time as a building doing things like training paraeducators and teachers on how to support kids with SSN and supporting good practices like co-teaching. It was important to us as a building and I would say it was pretty evident.

General Education Teacher:
Amier's Portrait

"Once Kristen joined our school it was awesome because she was like, hey, do you want

to plan with SSN and it was like, what? Yes! This is amazing!" (Amier). Amier and I met

virtually early in the morning on a weekday. She indicated she had already been meeting with

students and this was one of her planning periods. Amier had been identified by Kristen as both

an outstanding co-teacher and teacher. It took me little effort to convince her to talk with me and

when she connected for our meeting, I could see she had developed an organized but welcoming

virtual classroom in her home. She was centered on the screen with bright and welcoming visuals

behind her including a sign that read, "Welcome to Amier's class." She indicated she had taken

over a corner of the office in her home and tried as hard as she could to replicate what students

were used to both in the organization of her virtual platform as well as her on-line connections

with students. Amier was confident and engaging to speak with. She was one of the only teachers

to complete my request for artifacts prior to my meeting with her. As we talked, it became

evident she was very well organized, planned, and had a deep passion for teaching all children:

> Okay, so a little background on me as I've wanted to be a teacher since I was in like first
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> grade. I'd actually create lesson plans for my friends and have them do it and then grade
>
> them. I was that much of a nerd. When I got to college. I knew what I needed to do and
>
> what I wanted to do. So, when I was a practicum student, I wasn't just sitting in the back
>
> like holding my papers nervously. I was asking students their name; I was asking the
>
> teacher what I can teach and when I could teach it.

Amier completed a bachelor's degree at a local university and worked as a social studies

teacher. She explained she was a strong advocate of co-teaching for several reasons and her love

of the framework started with her student teaching placement during her undergraduate years;

I was introduced to the concept of co-teaching during my student teaching experience. I was fortunate to work with my collaborating teacher who was co-teaching with his wife, who was a special education teacher in the same school. Together, all three of us, we planned out the content, as well as the support systems in place for each student on her caseload. It was a wonderful experience, and I am lucky to have built my understanding so soon in my career. It has helped me be a better teacher and more responsive to students of all backgrounds.

In addition to being a veteran teacher, Amier had also earned a master's degree in English as a second language (ESL) and indicated the skills she acquired through this degree had shifted her approach to working with all students and attributed her determination to pursue that specific master's degree to her student teaching experience with co-teaching and an ongoing desire to polish her craft as an educator.

Amier indicated being well planned, goal oriented, and a strong communicator were important elements in the co-teaching process for her. She recognized these qualities in Kristen as well as her reputation as a strong SSN teacher with good instructional skills and a passion for partnering with general education teachers to promote a strong culture and climate within their school. In addition, she indicated she had a respect for Kristen as an expert and enjoyed working through challenging circumstances collaboratively. An example of such collaborative efforts included their work in launching a peer mentorship program for students with SSN that was piloted in her classroom using the co-teaching framework:

I was able to plan ahead of time with my co-teacher to support all learners in the SSN program. We would meet up during our planning and then share work through google docs to have a plan. I like to plan ahead as much as possible, so we would often plan out

a unit at a time (1-2 months of instruction). This allowed us to make changes as we

needed but not meet too often that we couldn't do our work for other classes.

She went on to say they had a vice principal who was incredibly supportive of the initiative they

were taking and made a point of providing them with time during the day to collaborate for the

first semester. Because both teachers were aware this would be a short-term common planning,

they made a point of using the time to establish on-line methods that would help them to

effectively collaborate in the future.

Amier identified teaching as her calling and made it clear that much of her success with

instruction, student engagement, and behavior management stemmed from her ability to connect

with students:

I think the reason I became a teacher is because...well, I've always wanted to, but also,

throughout the years I had teachers who just really connected with me and they

understood me. And when I would reach out to them and ask them for help with both

academic and non-academic things, they were there for me. So, I feel like I want to be

that for these kids too.

Prior to co-teaching with Kristen, Amier would still request that students with SSN be

placed in her room so she could work with them:

So, I generally start with, like, super-duper easy tasks at the beginning of the year for all

students, whether they're gen ed or special ed or whatever, just to kind of see like what

how they learn and how quickly they can pick up this stuff and then I gradually add in

some the intensity to it. So, for example, in the beginning, I would just have them color

pictures or something like that. You know, just things that help them to understand that

this is kind of a fun class and we can do some cool things. We had a topic where the

assignment was to write what it would be like to be gladiator for a day and you know our

kids with SSN couldn't quite write a story yet, but one kid was super excited about the

topic. So, he ended up creating a gladiator mask out of cardboard! I still have it in my

classroom because it was just like the coolest thing to show that there was still some way

that he could connect to the content without having to do all of the same things.

When I asked Amier what she felt she had gained through co-teaching with Kristen with

students with SSN, she told me about a student who still high-fives her in the hallway, even

though she is no longer in her class:

> Um, so we had a kid and if she didn't want to do something, she would just start crying so
>
> hard, she would make herself vomit. So, what I would do, and I mean, I feel like I'm a
>
> relationship teacher anyhow, but I would really dig in with those kids who had already
>
> been recognized as having those behavior issues ahead of time. She would come early to
>
> class and sit on the ground outside of my door and pout. So, I would sit on the ground
>
> with her and I'd pout with her and say, "I don't want to go in either" and, you know, just
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> kind of make it silly for a moment. So that she could have that moment of, "hey, I'm here,
>
> and I feel that". But then, "OK, now let's go to class and let's try this out". Because
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> Kristen and I were on this awesome wavelength, like we just knew where one left off and
>
> the other would pick up, I got to do that with kids and when we finally got to class, if we
>
> were late, Kristen would have already started the introduction".

Amier went on to explain that in addition to having the opportunity to make a meaningful

connection with a student that without a co-teacher she would likely not have been able to due to

the constraints of her position, the co-teaching partnership also allowed Kristen to relinquish

some of her responsibilities for behavior management to a teacher she trusted and knew cared about students with SSN.

In addition to the opportunities Amier felt were evident, she also talked about the growth she felt she had made as an educator since she and Kristen had begun working together. By sharing professional feedback and working together to make learning accessible for all students, Amier felt as though her perspectives and expectations of all special and general educators began to shift:

> You know, I honestly didn't know a lot about anything when we first started. I had worked a little bit with ESL students or students with IEPs. But I think having worked with SSN showed me how important opening this door of all the possibilities that these students should have access to and everything that I needed to do or what I could do. Whereas before it was kind of like I had one strategy that I would use. So, obviously, I didn't know what I was getting into when I agreed to co-teach with SSN. But I'm so glad I said yes! And every year since then, they keep bringing more kids back to my class because I'm willing to try new things and really see what's going on and how to support them and try new things. I'm not afraid to just, you know, experience. Especially since I have an expert in my room.

Amier indicated the hard work she and Kristen did to launch their co-teaching program definitely paid off with students with SSN as well as the rest of the students in their class:

> You know, so I've seen an improvement in the kids, all the kids, socially. They know who these kids are. They see them in the hallways and you can hear them like, "Oh, hey Chris, how are you?" and they include them. Where, back in my day, I didn't know their names. I didn't know what was going on in their lives. And I felt like it was so separate.

So, I think we need to include more kids all the time in every class. We need to make

sure they're in here so they don't miss anything.

Amier admitted it was not lost on her that this big push for inclusion of students with

SSN was taking place during a social studies class and she had expanded a lot of her lessons to

include thinking more deeply about individuals with disabilities:

I try to facilitate an inclusive and socially cohesive classroom environment and even

reinforce that appropriate behavior at a middle school level, it's not always perfect. I do. I

try really hard to build those relationships. But I think it's important that they all know

that I do expect people to be kind to each other. So, we need to make sure that we're

accepting of all other humans and it's okay to not like someone, you know, but that

doesn't mean have to go out and viciously attack them just because they're different.

Furthermore, Amier had seen strong academic growth with students who weare engaged in the

co-taught classroom. She explained that while working with Kristen, it brought a lot of the

content she had learned throughout her master's degree to the forefront and she found herself

restructuring classroom systems and resources to provide students who struggled with

communication or retention to feel more supported. Amier went on to say that by adding that

extra support or repetition in class, it benefited all students, not just students with SSN.

Although Amier was a firm advocate of co-teaching and had had healthy and beneficial

experiences co-teaching with students with SSN, she asserted there were challenges surrounding

the practice that should be acknowledged:

So, I think the biggest thing is time. We need to make sure to specifically build in time

with teachers to meet with their co-teachers to plan because we don't always have that

same planning period. And obviously, when you're teaching together. You can't use that

time to plan. So, I think time would probably be the biggest challenge.

She went on to explain that she believed it was also important that teachers be on the same page

if they elected to co-teach, especially if they were working with students with SSN. She also felt

having high expectations, common goals, and trust were critical in such a close relationship,

adding that if this kind of partnership was forced or misaligned, it was pretty miserable:

>I think I mentioned that I think it's important that people are open minded. Some people
>
>are very closed off and don't want to share - they think it's my stuff in my classroom and
>
>whatever. And that obviously doesn't produce a very happy environment for anyone.

Another challenge Amier identified as a byproduct of co-teaching and a breakdown in

building-wide inclusion was the overloading of her classroom sections:

>The other general education teacher I kind of co-planned with for Social Studies at our
>
>school - we did not always see eye to eye on a lot of things. She often would not work
>
>well with students in the SSN program or any student who needed more support. And so,
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>once the special education team and school psych kind of picked up on that, I got all of
>
>the kids with additional needs - not just SSN, ALL of the kids. And so, it was hard for me
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>because it was like, now I'm doing so much more work and getting paid, you know, not
>
>anymore for that. And so, as much as I love to do it, I really want everyone to have that
>
>experience. Everyone should be trained on how to support all learners.

As Amier and I began to wrap up our session, I felt excited to begin writing. I almost

forgot to ask her if there was anything she felt that I needed to know prior to ending the

interview. She paused, looked up for a moment, and then with a thoughtful look said,

I think I just want to reiterate the point that I feel like the sooner any educator can get

training, working with different learners, the better because I understand why that fear

exists around both opening your door and being vulnerable in front of a teacher as well as

bringing in students with SSN. They've never had to deal with it. And all of a sudden, it

gets put on their load and it's a legal thing they have to do and that's scary - but it's not

scary if you have the tools. It's not scary if you have the support and the people around

you that are saying, hey, let me help you. Hey, let's plan this together. And I think the

sooner we do that in your undergrad, as well as continued professional development on it,

the easier it is for everybody.

Dyad 2: Within Case Analysis

Reoccurring codes throughout the data were meaningful inclusion, leadership,

schoolwide culture and climate, positive exposure to co-teaching, collaboration, communication,

common goals, trust, self-awareness and confidence, recognizing attributes of co-teacher,

understanding and vulnerability, flexibility, high expectations, gen ed first, time and scheduling

challenges, individual profession challenges, learning in real time, peers, relationship and mind

meld, UDL/PBIS, social and academic benefits for kids, and self-efficacy.

Throughout data collection, more specifically interviews and reflections, a number of

themes emerged between Kristen and Amier. Both educators had positive exposure and

interactions with strong and healthy co-teaching practices early in their licensure programs. Both

educators held either an endorsement or degree in language intervention that focused heavily on

communication and creating access for students who needed adaptations. Additionally, both

educators indicated that inclusion was their passion and they believed all students were general

education first. The dyad expanded upon this by recognizing that Amier was one of those

teachers who wanted students with diverse needs in her classroom and both teachers worked incredibly hard to establish strong relationships with all students.

Themes that emerged from both teachers regarding what they perceived to make their partnership successful were effective collaboration and communication, trust and willingness to learn from one another, and the shared recognition that it was okay to not have all the answers paired with a commitment to ongoing learning. Moreover, both teachers communicated that they worked hard to remain on the same page with one another including shared goals, holding high expectations for all students, and creating a sense of normalcy for students. Both educators mentioned they provided instruction for students and used a variety of co-teaching models based on content, activity, and student need. Flexibility, meaningful inclusion, and access were emphasized, communicated, and demonstrated as lessons and the physical space showed evidence of effective implementation of UDL. Educators also worked hard to create an appropriate and organized physical space and worked collaboratively to provide meaningful adaptations that supported learning and self-efficacy.

Within their co-taught classroom and beyond, Kristen and Amier placed heavy emphasis on indirect learning that took place among peers. This was made evident by their collaborative efforts to launch and pilot a peer mentorship program for students with SSN. This program coupled with their co-teaching efforts assured that students with SSN were placed with peers within the general education program and pushed to encourage less adult support as a long-term goal. The push for increased peer interaction and support was also said to have had an impact on schoolwide perceptions of inclusion as students were now more inclined to greet and interact with students with SSN in additional settings. This push for increased peer interaction also

created natural reinforcement for appropriate behaviors and was believed to encourage self-efficacy for students.

Challenges both teachers expressed included finding time for planning and scheduling. Kristen placed heavy emphasis on scheduling and staying in class due to the expectation that she had to be free to assist with needs throughout the building (specifically significant behaviors of students on her caseload). Amier brought to light her main concern was the tendency for the special education team to overload her classroom with students with disabilities if there were inconsistencies in general education teachers' willingness to be inclusive, which would lead to a significant increase in workload for her. Both teachers also spoke to how difficult it could be to find a person that you fit with, who understood what their role in the classroom was, and how engaging in co-teaching could backfire if you were not a good match.

Kristen and Amier acknowledged that although coordinating a strong co-taught classroom involved extra work and thinking ahead, the benefits of having two brains working together was amazing. They also indicated that with two teachers in a classroom working with all students, they were able to connect and support more students as well as help to facilitate peer relationships and provide more consistent modeling and feedback for paraeducators in the room. The co-teaching team went on to explain that having access to one another's experience, expertise, and knowledge pushed them to learn more about educating all students and they believed this led to them becoming stronger educators.

Finally, both teachers made a special effort to acknowledge the importance of leadership support. They explained that with the encouragement and involvement of their vice principal, a movement toward schoolwide inclusion and acceptance was taking place. In turn, the climate

and culture of their building was moving toward being more welcoming and understanding of diversity and willingness to include students with SSN.

Dyad 3: High School

Table 3 provides the demographics for participants of the third dyad: high school.

Table 3

Demographics for Dyad 3: High School

	Chosen Pseudonym	Age	Self-Identified Gender	Race	Years Teaching	Years Co-teaching	Years Co-teaching with SSN
General education teacher	Jenny	38	Female	Caucasian	17 years	15 years	7 years
Special education teacher	Megan	45	Female	Caucasian	18 years	9 years	9 years

Jenny and Megan work at a high school in an affluent district in the western United States that services students and their families in grades 9 through 12. They both indicated their school is located in a well-to-do neighborhood and the school population is mostly White. They also identified a rather strong rural presence as the school rests on the far south border of this larger urban district. Their high school houses specialized programming for students with SSN (a center-based program) who live throughout the district and are bused to daily as well as special education and English language services. Both acknowledged they were fortunate as they had access to resources not always typically found in all schools such as additional paraeducator support and extra special education teachers for the center program.

The co-teaching pair described Jenny's classroom 'in a normal year'—not this year where desks were all facing forward and six feet apart—as well organized and easy to navigate. Each student had an individual desk but desks are arranged in groups of four. Students were

generally sitting with other students for a few weeks at a time and then groups were rotated so students had an opportunity to sit with new students and in a new space. "So, they'll sit with the same students for maybe, you know, three weeks or so and then we'll get new seats because I want them to interact with different students and we'll be really purposeful of placement," said Jenny. The team took the group shifts as a chance for students to provide a variety of support for one another contingent on the unit the teachers were teaching:

> So, like, this time, or for this activity, we want to group kids that are all very similar ability so we can focus on specific small groups and then for this a different activity maybe we want kids grouped so that there's, you know, a high and medium, and a student who might still be struggling with the content so that they can work on supporting each other. (Megan)

The duo mentioned they worked hard to make the classroom simple to navigate so all kids knew where to get what they needed independently as well as turn in assignments, etc. They also had in-depth conversations about the potential "curve balls" individual students might pose and work hard to remain focused on the goals they had set. Teachers used examples of how the physical layout of the classroom was, in fact, an issue they would address together as they looked at students and keeping goals in mind was a critical piece to the process. Megan explained,

> If the goal is for a kid to tolerate sitting with their back to the door then we work towards that goal with the understanding that we need to introduce it slowly. If we're focused more so on content and social interaction, then we might not rotate a seat for a student but instead rotate some of the students around them.

Special Education Teacher:
Megan's Portrait

Megan agreed to meet with me on a snowy afternoon on-line from her home. I noticed she was pacing around with her computer in her hands at first and she mentioned she had been meeting with kids all morning and could not handle being in her guestroom classroom any longer: "Sorry, we're going to talk by the window so that I can watch the snow fall and warm up next to my fireplace." She let me know that dealing with behaviors on-line during the pandemic had not been ideal but (at times) pretty funny:

> I had to talk with a student this morning about his behavior. He saw me log on and took a piece of paper and immediately covered the camera [starts laughing]! Seriously, this guy did THIS to me [puts paper in front of the camera] which was kind of good because he couldn't see me do this [pulls paper away to show her laughing hysterically].

> I asked her how things were going and she let me know that she had just received an exposure notice: "Yup, I'm home for a while, but I don't feel sick right now so I guess we'll see." Again, we chatted casually for a while until I noticed her settle on her sofa and appear a bit more relaxed.

Megan is a veteran special education teacher who has been working as a special education teacher with SSN for eight years. She has worked as an educator for 18 years total and has been co-teaching off-and-on for approximately 10 years. Megan earned a bachelor's degree in elementary general education at a local university and was co-teaching with special education teachers in her room prior to returning to her local university to complete a master's degree in special education kindergarten-12. She indicated her passion had always been working with students with more intensive disabilities and "seeing them thrive in a general education setting is like Christmas." Megan indicated that when her school began working toward more inclusive

models, even though math was not what she would call an area of strength, she went out of her way to connect with Jenny.

Because Megan had been in the field in a variety of positions and had access to a number of opportunities to co-teach, I was curious which model she tended to use most or preferred.

So, we've done a little bit of everything. Let me think of all of the models we've tried… Definitely one teach, one assist, parallel teaching, station teaching, we did that a lot when we had groups that needed extra help, alternative teaching but we tried not to do that too much because the grouping started to look a little exclusive, and team teaching. We would use the one teach, one observe a lot with our paraeducators, but not so much between the two of us. (Megan)

She indicated that oftentimes she would work to tailor the co-teaching approach to align to the students' needs but co-teaching in high school math had pushed her to rely on Jenny's expertise:

I think it's because you are working with students with SSN and all of the other needs in that room - you have to be flexible and comfortable using each strategy based on what all of those kids need at that time. I mean, I would use a combination of all of these approaches even if I'm not working with kids who have SSN. So, I think it has more to do with what kids need, the topic we're going over - my co-teacher is a star with content! She helps me feel more comfortable with it too.

Megan explained that she started co-teaching when she was working as a fourth-grade teacher and made a deliberate effort to include students with SSN in her classroom right away:

I remember we had like four students with Down syndrome all in the same grade. I know! One of the kids had such unique needs where we felt like, how can we help her and still keep her in the general education classroom because she absolutely can be

successful there. And even at that time, a lot of teachers are still grappling with the idea of, you know, letting kids with disabilities spend less time in a separate room and more time in a general education classroom. That was a pretty intensive year, but I learned quickly that you have to be honest and trust your co-teacher. When we're honest and confess that we might not really know what to do, we can start figuring things out together.

In addition to honesty and trust, Megan explained that other essential elements important to co-teaching with students with SSN were strong collaborative skills, an investment to include students with SSN meaningfully in the general education classroom, and having goals that aligned including high expectations for students with SSN and sharing the understanding that they were general education first:

I mean, we're all really there for every one of our kids, you know. So, I'll do whatever it takes, I will work late, I will collaborate with you, I'll plan with you, I'll take over your class if you need more one-on-one time with that students with SSN, so long as we both understand that you're their teacher first. Jenny is an amazing teacher and she already felt this way which made my job easy. She embraced all of the opportunities that we generated through co-teaching to really help them make adaptations meaningful not just for kids with SSN, but for all kids. And we're not always perfect, we can say that to each other and know that it's okay, and if we get stuck somewhere, we go back together and figure it out.

Megan also identified that having additional support available made co-teaching more accessible even though it would often require a bit more work initially. She clarified they made a point of using paraeducators regularly to also support students and would use their co-taught

class to provide training but also to be able to give in the moment feedback surrounding prompting and providing support:

>We agree that we want kids to be able to not only function but thrive in any environment so one of our main goals is to encourage students to be more independent or as independent as possible with scaffolds in place. This includes trying to pull back when we know we can. One of our students who had full one-on-one support and came from a self-contained program at another school, once we got him into our co-taught class and started supporting behavior and learning as a team within the classroom, we were able to start floating the paraeducator because he didn't really need her in there.

Having had experiences co-teaching with students with SSN both as a general and special education teacher, Megan offered a unique perspective as it applied to educators involved in this practice. Overall, she advocated that co-teaching with students with SSN was advantageous for teachers as well as students:

>So, I would stay in the classroom and co-teach a lesson with Jenny and the whole group - she would typically take lead. Following that, we'd typically pull small groups or begin cruising the room to see if anyone needs additional help. So, it was neat because we both had a lot of freedom to work with kids or collect data because we were both considered another teacher in the classroom.

Megan also spoke to the value of keeping co-teachers together as years progressed, which was not always a guarantee given the nature of high school and the clientele she targeted. Nevertheless, she spoke to the importance and advantage of growing together as co-teachers and how it would lead to seamless transitions within their co-taught environment:

When we did this together, things got a lot easier in the following years because we both

knew what we were doing. It was kind of neat to learn from each other like that. But,

yeah, we'd figure out those areas and then decide, you know, who's going to do what. Or

we'll give the whole class instruction, and then she would help kiddos not just our

students with significant support needs. And then she would take over, or vice versa, but

we would just kind of jump in and out of our roles a lot of times.

Finally, Megan referenced the importance of using both teachers' areas of expertise to

meet the needs of all students. She asked that I emphasize this statement because she genuinely

believed the isolation teachers, especially SSN teachers experienced, was destroying the

profession and working against the best interest of students: "We're finding that if we have really

good practices and collaborate, we can meet all kinds of needs. Even if they seem small,

connections help us to make sure we're hitting on all of their needs".

In addition to placing heavy emphasis on teachers learning from teachers and decreasing

the isolation that frequently takes place between educators, Megan also made a special note to

emphasize that kids also needed to learn from other kids: "Having kids support each other and

model appropriate behaviors for each other is so powerful. That's one of the most important

goals of co-teaching with students with SSN, I think." Megan also felt co-teaching helped to

alleviate a great deal of the stigma that often surrounds SSN by flipping the script on dated

practices and roles:

I mean, that kind of does cover the teacher aspect, but we try to stop the labeling for

everyone. So, really all of us are teachers and all of us are students. So, by doing that, it's

setting up the environment appropriately and letting kids know that any adult in the

classroom can help them and any student in the classroom can help each other. And I

think that is REALLY important and I think what it does is actually helps students see that we're all people first and that they are valued without a label.

Both Megan and Jenny committed to modeling the behavior they hoped to see in their students. Within the classroom, they agreed that teachers and paraeducators were resources for students and claimed as well as demonstrated ownership for all of their students. Additionally, they advocated that students work together in pods and made sure students with SSN were spread throughout the classroom with a long-term goal that they would connect with their peers for questions before seeking out an adult. In turn, peers would grow more at ease and recognize students with SSN as both active participants in classes as well as friends.

> That's really what I feel like helps kids socially to thrive. Because when I started seeing kids with SSN initiate interactions with other kids in a co-teaching model. I mean, they're looking at you as a person who will work with anyone and that's the same model that you provide for kids. So, kids will want to hang out, support, and interact with anybody. I mean, if we are really committed to having kids appreciate and accept each other, we also have to walk the walk and talk the talk, right? You can't say one thing and then show them something entirely different. (Megan)

Although Megan held co-teaching in inclusive environments with students with SSN as an amazing practice, she recognized that challenges could arise. Initially, she made reference to her first experiences co-teaching as a special education teacher and how awkward the process could seem. This included approaching a teacher you recognized as someone who clearly wanted to work with kids who have SSN but also walking into the room and learning your role within the first few days. She indicated this was a skill you build as you co-teach and although the

occasional breakdown in communication could happen, there were certain areas where you and your co-teacher needed to be on the same page:

> So, it's hard sometimes, not wanting to step on toes or step in when you see a kid taking advantage. Especially if you're working with a newer teacher. One thing I learned though, and I learned it pretty quickly, is that you really need to start your partnership by learning the teacher's expectations of his or her classroom. I think I had to learn that when I overstepped. As educators, this is tough, I think we all want to take control of situations. But now, I make a plan of checking first, like what are your views? Your hard rules? What are things that you would prefer me to do? Because I want them to feel like they're still in charge of the classroom.

Megan and Jenny both understood that if they did not present themselves as being in sync or on the same page with one another with each other, students picked up on their misalignments quickly. This was made more challenging when time to co-plan and collaborate on student's data was scarce as they did not have a common planning time.

> Most of the time, I'd make regular times with each of the teachers I co-teach with to collaborate. This was never easy because we all had too many things to deal with but I'd try to either pop into their rooms during the day or we'd have a system online that we could use. (Megan)

Megan did indicate that with Jenny, they would typically use a combination of both in-person chats as well as online adaptations and lesson co-planning.

Finally, Megan discussed the culture and climate of not only the co-taught classroom she and Jenny had built but also the movement taking place within their building to promote a more inclusive culture and climate:

Um… A lot of the change that is taking place has to do with our principal and leadership being so pro special education. So, when I say that, I just mean like the reason Jenny and I are able to do what we do and the reason we are where we are, what we've done is because - the philosophy of our building leadership is that all kids are general education students first.

When I asked her if there was anything else she felt I needed to know, Megan paused and responded,

You know, if you're really trying to universally teach on levels that you don't always think about with students that may not have such intensive needs. So, I think in general, it kind of makes teachers become better teachers even though initially it can feel messy and put you in kind of a vulnerable situation. And I'm totally including special education teachers, because you're having to walk the other way and make sure that the other students' needs are being met and that even with peer modeling that they're not doing too much peer modeling or too much peer attention or just engaging too much because their needs still need to be met. Yet at the same time, they're not using baby talk or trying to prove that the other kid is looked upon and when that's not their main focus or job. So, it's really a kind of a symphony in a way. There are all these parts that you have to make sure work, and it's not always easy. And there are days you leave thinking; this wasn't a good day. And other days you leave going, that was PERFECT!

General Education Teacher:
Jenny's Portrait

Jenny agreed to meet with me via a virtual platform on a calm Friday afternoon. Following my meeting with Megan, she had mentioned that Jenny was an amazing resource and one of her favorite teachers to co-teach with. Once again, I was not familiar with Jenny until we

met and when we logged in, we quickly found our conversation transition from a stiff first-time encounter to a more casual and friendly meeting. Jenny explained that she had just finished meeting with students and was still in her at home classroom. She apologized for not having had time to switch out her holiday decorations yet and laughed while pointing to the holiday stocking hanging behind her on a whiteboard with her name written on it in silver glitter. She reached behind her, pulled the sock off of the board, and casually tossed it out of view of the camera while laughing. "There we go, that's better."

Jenny identified as a female in her late 30s who is White and has been teaching math at the high school level for the past 17 years. She explains that of those 17 years, she had been co-teaching with special education teachers for about 15 of them. However, she had only begun co-teaching with students with SSN in the last seven years. She clarified that this was not because she had not wanted to include students with SSN in her classroom but it was more so due to her being a high school math teacher and so a lot of the students who participated in their center-based program were not encouraged to leave their SSN room for a core subject. It was not until Megan was hired on and began pushing students into general education classes that she was approached with a co-teaching proposal.

Jenny completed a bachelor's degree in math with a minor in secondary education at a local university. She then went on to complete a master's degree two years later while working full time: "That was combined with the National Board Certification process. So, it's kind of just a general best practice of teaching combined with programming that at the end of your master's program you're ready to submit to your national boards." Interestingly, when asked to describe one of the co-taught classes she has shared with Megan, Jenny smiled and said,

Um, well, I've taught many different co-taught classes with many different teachers. The last class that I co-taught with Megan (we have not been allowed to co-teach during COVID-19) is an algebra class and we have, I would say a lot of special education students in there. But there are also a couple of ESL students and one student from our SSN program that has autism in addition to a few other things, but he's in there as well and then we also have a couple of students from our affective needs program and a smattering of general education students who are either struggling at math or are at risk of not graduating on time. So, our class is just a big smorgasbord of students. It's a good time [laughing].

Jenny went on to reveal her motivation to pursue a teaching career in math was not typical. She explained her experience learning math was not a good one and although she enjoyed math now, she had disliked it so much throughout her schooling that she felt as though she was not good at math even though she did well in her classes. Because of the disconnect, she went to university with a desire to genuinely understand math so she could create positive learning opportunities and encourage students to enjoy it as much as she did now.

When I asked Jenny what she felt was important that I know about her as a teacher, she quickly responded:

I think, with me teaching math, it puts me in kind of a little weird niche, because a lot of students that are in the SSN program do have really excellent math and reasoning skills. So even though their reading or their writing or their communication or any other things they might not be in general ed classes for other subjects, but their math skills, really, we want to challenge them and put them in appropriate math class based on their strengths. I believe that they can do algebra. I have an opportunity to introduce them to a logical and

visual language. Just because someone can't walk or talk doesn't mean that they can't do math. I feel like I have an opportunity to help these kids shine with math. I don't believe that we should lower the standards because of a label because there's just such a wide range of ability.

According to Jenny, she had not really been introduced to co-teaching during her education and was instead approached by school leadership to see if she might be interested in giving it a try as part of an initiative to become more inclusive schoolwide. She agreed and was not disappointed. Because Jenny had many years of experience co-teaching with students with SSN, she indicated she would use a variety of models in her classroom. When I asked more specifically which she and Megan typically implemented, she responded,

> We usually do a combination of a number of them, sometimes we use a few different models in the same class period…if the math gets hard, then we'll do one teach one assist and I'll take lead. Um, although oftentimes, Megan and I will break-out into stations or we'll do the thing where I take part of the class, and she takes part of the class and we do different things.

Jenny indicated the benefits of being part of a collaborative team that combined their knowledge and resources to identify better ways to reach students spanned the majority of her day as strategies she and her partner could use with all students:

> I use a lot of the same strategies that we come up with in our co-teaching with other students who are struggling in my other sections. So, the benefits of co-teaching for me actually stretch beyond just the time that I'm working with my co-teacher and students that are identified with additional or significant support needs.

She also went on to discuss how participating in a co-taught classroom with SSN changed many of her misperceptions and had not only influenced her feelings about inclusion, high expectations, and perceptions of capability, but also brought to her attention just how excluded students with SSN were:

Before I had students with SSN in my general education classroom I kind of just assumed that they were their own program in the school. You know, they had their own hallway in the school and sometimes they would interact with the rest of the building by doing a unified basketball game or something like that. But, um, yeah, I just really kind of thought of them as their own separate little entity and I had never really thought about it before, I kind of just assumed that maybe what I saw on the outside, you know, maybe their communication skills or their limited mobility or whatever it was, like a lot of people do, I think I made the assumption about their intelligence and their academic capabilities based on just what I saw from their placement. But the reality is that so many of these kids do have an affinity for math and logic and reasoning and their brains really work that way.

She went on to explain that co-teaching was a nice way to show her she should not be afraid to have students with SSN in her classroom and that students she had once been concerned about because they were kept separate were really becoming some of her favorite kids. She went on to say she now believed that students should be in the most inclusive environment.

In addition to the benefits that she had experienced as an educator co-teaching with students with SSN, Jenny felt all students benefited from the diversity that had now become the norm in her classroom. In addition to learning from each other, Jenny admitted that co-teaching with Megan had prompted her to change a lot of her practices to be more accessible for all of her

students: "I learned a lot about how to structure my day to make learning optimal for not only students with SSN, but really for all students." Jenny explained that she would begin each class with some review of what they had gone over previously prior to working her way into the content for that day. She also started instructing with more simple, clear, and succinct lessons so she could minimize confusion as well as provide students with ample time to practice while she and Megan were in the room:

> So much of getting math is repetition. Repetition, repetition, repetition. And so, we do a lot of reviews. Here's what we were doing last time, let's practice this before we move on. It's also important for our students that we're always trying to connect it to something that they already know about and find meaningful. You know, making clear connections to things that they already know. Again, it seems so simple, but it's so easy to overlook. Working with Megan and students with SSN has brought my teaching to a whole new level.

Jenny also indicated she had implemented a very simple structure to her system in terms of behavior expectations, how to organize homework and manage time, as well as handing in material. She indicated that when she did this, not only did she have success with her students with SSN but she also saw a change in her other students as well.

Although Jenny admitted that co-teaching had been a life changing experience for her, she also indicates it could also pose challenges. She explained that although she and Megan were in a place where they were able to work off of each other easily and Megan had been with her long enough so she was comfortable with the content, high school schedules could make it difficult to maintain that collaborative relationship. Each semester, a new group of students rotated into her math class and sometimes there was a new teacher with them.

Most of my co-teachers have been, you know, special education teachers that I think drew the short straw and had to go co-teach with the math department (laughing). And so, when it's not a good pairing, most of my experience has been me doing most of the planning and the direct instruction and my co-teachers just, you know, waiting for me to finish so that they can either pull their students or assemble them to run a special education group in the back of the room. Um… so, throughout the years, you know, I've co-taught with probably dozens of different special ed teachers. Some I mesh with some more than others. The tough part is, if it's not a good match, it creates more work for me and a weird dynamic in my classroom. But, my current co-teacher, Megan, that I co-teach with, we really just have a good flow and we can, you know, play off of each other and leave where the other one left off. (Jenny)

In addition to odd scheduling and not feeling the co-teaching chemistry, Jenny also indicated that making time to communicate regularly and finding time to plan with her co-teacher was difficult:

Um, yeah, I mean I guess just the main challenge with any adults that are trying to work together is just communication and making sure that we're on the same page. I mean the communication in general, especially when we have limited time to plan together or grade together or to discuss what happened on this assessment or you know anything like that. Luckily, they have been flexible and in addition to "on-the-fly" connections they also use on-line collaborative tools, she states that if she could design the perfect co-teaching system, she would include time during the day to meet with her co-teacher.

As we drew our conversation to a close, I asked Jenny to disclose if there was anything she felt was important for me to know for this research. She responded by saying,

I alluded to this earlier, but by the time we get to high school, just flat out most kids either don't like math or they don't feel like they're good at math. One of those two. And somewhere along the way they've developed those beliefs. So my co-teacher and I, we intentionally set up an environment from day one where kids feel successful where they start to feel like, "hey, I can do math" or "well, that wasn't so bad - I did that problem really well" and so little things or every little way, we can help them feel success from the very first day of school to where now you know four months into school, I would say that in our co-taught class, most of the kids, even though some of them will never enjoy math, they at least feel capable of doing math, which is, I think, almost more important. Together, we create success for all students.

Dyad 3: Within Case Analysis

Reoccurring codes throughout the data were meaningful inclusion, leadership, schoolwide culture and climate, positive exposure to co-teaching, collaboration, communication, common goals, trust, understanding and vulnerability, self-awareness and confidence, recognizing attributes of co-teacher, flexibility, high expectations, gen ed first, time and scheduling challenges, individual profession challenges, learning in real time, peers, relationship and mind meld, UDL/PBIS, social and academic benefits for kids, and self-efficacy.

Throughout the data collection process, especially interviews, Jenny and Megan reported and demonstrated a number of common themes as they pertained to strengths, challenges, and essential elements surrounding co-teaching with students with SSN in the general education classroom. Much like the other dyads interviewed, Jenna and Megan placed a great deal of emphasis on their commitment to providing meaningful inclusion for all students including students with SSN. They attributed a great deal of their motivation to co-teach with students with

SSN to the support and encouragement of their administrators and school leadership who pushed to initiate more inclusive practices for students within their building and encouraged students and staff to embrace the ideas that students are "people first."

Jenny and Megan's like-mindedness around creating meaningful inclusion for students with SSN was reflected in their practice as they each indicated all students were held to high expectations and worked toward clearly identified standards. However, both teachers also explained that having high expectations for all students including students with more significant disabilities needed to be both facilitated and supported, and they agreed that co-teaching was the most effective way to do this. The dyad implemented a variety of co-teaching models based on content and students' needs but indicated they used the one teaches one support and station teaching as these were typically most supportive and showcased their areas of strength including Jenny's content expertise in mathematics and Megan's expertise in adaptation.

Both teachers remarked that for co-teaching with students with SSN to work, teachers needed to be flexible, demonstrate strong communication skills, collaborate and work together well, and continue to "push each other to be great." They also spoke to the importance of being on the same page and making a point of learning each other's roles as well as negotiable and non-negotiables. The co-teaching team shared that they believed co-teaching with one another with students with SSN had made them stronger teachers and pushed them to develop a growth mindset. They believed that collecting and reviewing student data together helped them to implement more thoughtful and meaningful next steps when approaching instruction and behavior.

Classroom management and expectations were clear, concise, and followed the schools PBIS system. Students were held to high expectations but also received additional support and

instruction as there were two teachers available to them. Although students were provided with ample adult support, they were encouraged to work collaboratively with each other. Both teachers believed students tended to benefit both academically and socially by working together and increased interactions with students reduced the unfortunate stigma many of the more diverse students in the classroom experienced and promoted a sense of self-efficacy for students with SSN.

Challenges for educators included finding time to collaborate and plan as well as scheduling. Much like the middle school team, Megan and Jenny highlighted the frustrations of high school scheduling would change at the semester. Both teachers explained they recognized how good their partnership was when they would suddenly be placed with a new co-teacher who might not understand their role or be as committed to building an inclusive classroom. Megan spoke to her frustrations with having to leave the classroom to deal with behaviors throughout the building but indicated she and Jenny would use their co-taught time to train paraeducators to step in when issues arose. Jenny indicated she would grow frustrated with co-teachers who did not understand the content she was teaching and would take on a paraeducator role instead of that of a co-teacher. She followed this by explaining that although she understood she was the content expert, Megan had put forth the additional time and effort to learn her curriculum and was able to support students using common language and instruction. She also spoke to similar concerns voiced by her general education colleagues that although she wanted all students in her classroom, often times she would be overloaded with students who demonstrated more intensive and diverse needs.

In terms of what they believed was essential to their partnership, both teachers explained that they valued one another's expertise in content and adaptations and believed co-teaching and

learning from one another made them better teachers. Additionally, they agreed they shared the same goals and expectations for their partnership as well as for students and recognized that they needed to trust and work together to meet their students' needs. Jenny and Megan spoke of being at ease with their co-teaching and that they "mesh." As Jenny put it, "There's flow to our teaching, we just kind of know what to do. One can easily pick up where the other left off."

Across Case Analysis

Within each of the portraits and cases presented, themes emerged and were acknowledged. While each within case analysis served to emphasize both the unique and rich detail each individual dyad provided, the across case analysis served to highlight the common themes that spanned throughout participants (Ayres et al., 2003). The following themes were organized via each the research question and sub questions that drove this research.

> Q1   What are the experiences of educator dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?

In addition to themes identified under each sub question, some overarching themes were identified by co-teachers that reached beyond the classroom. Each teacher spoke to their own experiences and how their commitment to co-teaching with students with SSN within the general education classroom prompted change in themselves, their practices, all students involved, and helped to facilitate a shift in the overall culture and climate of their school.

Meaningful Inclusion for Students

A clear theme that was communicated directly and made evident throughout stories was both the general and special education teachers' commitment to providing meaningful inclusion for students with SSN through the physical layout of classrooms, implementation of support systems, instruction, and adaptations. Not only did educators demonstrate passion for all students

to experience an inclusive education but educator dyads recognized that the time and energy they invested in co-teaching assured their programs were student centered. All teachers (especially general education teachers) emphasized that they believed effectively and meaningfully including and reaching all students was a vital component to their becoming stronger educators overall. As Carrie mentioned,

> So that they're still hearing all of that grade level content on grade level and that feedback - especially like, I'm thinking number talks. When the kids are talking out there math thinking with the math vocabulary. Having a co- teacher in there instead of having a pullout model, having that inclusion model so they are hearing that grade level vocabulary and content and thought process. And then having that co-teacher there that is on that same page and knows exactly what to look for - is such a huge benefit for those students because then they're, they're not only getting the support they need per their IEP and their needs, but they're also getting exposure to what the rest of their peers are doing as well. And that's such a huge, huge benefit

Additionally, as both general and special education teachers within each dyad shared a commitment to meaningful inclusion, their goals and expectations for students with SSN were developed and carried out cohesively. These goals and expectations drove much of their dialogue around what their roles within a co-teaching dyad should be and created a strong foundation for determining their approaches to learning. Furthermore, by establishing both short-term and long-term goals for all students together, co-teaching dyads not only created clear guidelines for students but also for developing inclusive expectations for all students. As indicated by Megan within her interview, for co-teaching to work, inclusion has to be your passion:

Inclusion has to be your love language. But it really comes down to every child and sometimes we're so quick to give labels or like we want to strip the disabilities in these scenarios. Instead, I believe that it's important to strip the labels and focus more on the whole child instead. And I think it's just so important for us to invest our time and expertise collaboratively to make this practice a reality

Culture, Climate, and Leadership Support

All participants in this study were quick to acknowledge that without the encouragement and support of school leadership, their efforts to implement a successful co-teaching framework that promoted meaningful inclusion would likely have failed or remained stagnant. Each teacher explained that within their efforts to promote acceptance and inclusion, principals, vice principals, and/or administrators played a vital role in their efforts to shift the overall culture and climate of their schools to one of inclusion and acceptance. Kristen recalled that the standard in their building was inclusion:

I mean it just as a whole, like, I mean the classes were very inclusive and the school was very inclusive. So, I wouldn't even say that it was like our co-taught classroom had a certain culture or whatever, it was the whole school. The entire school was very inclusive.

They also commented on the importance of school leadership in this movement as they worked to encourage other educators and students to participate in inclusive efforts via professional development, expectations of inclusion, increased collaboration and providing additional support to teachers who were taking on additional work to co-teach or implement other inclusive frameworks. Jenny indicated leadership initiated inclusive practices within their school and this prompted her to begin co-teaching:

My assistant principal or my principal had initiated inclusion in our building and they said, hey, we need you to co-teach this class. I'm not sure that it's something that I initially had sought it out. It was just something that was needed of me at the time. And then I just fell in love with it.

Positive Experiences and Deep Understanding of Co-Teaching

Participants all spoke to having positive experiences with co-teaching as well as some type of exposure to co-teaching during their licensure programs. They also clarified that they used a variety of models to meet the needs of students and therefore had to have a good understanding of co-teaching to effectively meet the needs of their students. Sally was the only participant who had indicated her early exposure to the co-teaching framework was underwhelming and would not have attempted to implement this inclusive practice had it not been for Carrie's insistence on having students with SSN included in her room. However, following her experiences co-teaching with Carrie, she had sought out additional opportunities to further implement the practice. Amier attributed her desire to co-teach, include all students, and added a master's degree to the positive experience she had during her program. In turn, it was safe to conclude that teachers should have access to co-teaching instruction and would be beneficial for all educators (whether practicing or preparing to become educators) to have exposure to complete and constructive co-teaching pairs.

Understanding of Diverse Communication Needs

Participants within this study shared a number of qualities and attributes. One quality that became apparent as I reviewed all of the data was each participant demonstrated an increased understanding of diverse communication needs and felt uniquely qualified to accommodate those

needs. While each special education teacher indicated their program had informed them of the importance of communication and how to accommodate and facilitate growth with this need, each general education teacher participant also demonstrated a deep understanding of the impact of limited communication on learning and accessing school. Carrie shared she held additional degrees in special education and felt comfortable meeting the communication needs of students with SSN, especially students with autism. Amier completed a master's degree in ESL and quickly discovered that many of the strategies she implemented with students who were English language learners were also beneficial for all students including students with SSN. Finally, Jenny indicated she believed including students with SSN in her classroom was beneficial as she believed math was a logical, concrete, and accessible language and as the content expert with advanced degrees in mathematics instruction, she felt confident instructing and communicating: "I mean, it's [math] just Universal. In this same class I have kids that speak very little English, but we can all do the same math. You know, it really is the universal language which kind of helps connect lots of different groups of people together."

> Q1a What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant needs?

Shared Goals, Beliefs, and High Expectations for Students

All participants expressed a critical need for co-teachers "to be on the same page." This expression was used when participants discussed adjusting instruction and the classroom to be certain it was accessible for all students, making certain expectations were held high and clearly scaffolded, and sharing ownership while recognizing that all students were general education first. Participants indicated they had either witnessed or had experience with co-teaching where educators came together and struggled to work effectively and cohesively. Carrie was quick to

point out that if teachers were not on the same page, students recognized the inconsistencies and frequently took advantage of a co-teacher's lack of alignment. "I have high expectations for you. I have high expectations for ALL of you. And I expect you to adhere to those high expectations" (Carrie).

Throughout each interview, co-teaching partners expressed their shared commitment to holding all students, including students with SSN, to high expectations academically, behaviorally, and socially. However, each co-teaching pair also spoke to committing their time and energy to adapting and modifying content; implementing appropriate intervention and co-teaching models; developing, training, and integrating additional supports such as peer mentors and paraeducators; and making both the physical layout of the classroom as well as PBIS expectations accessible. Additionally, participants clarified that they felt it was important both co-teachers shared goals and beliefs that centered on holding students to high expectations when appropriate scaffolding was in place but extended the vital nature of this belief to any other adult or mentor in the room.

All Students are General Education and We Want Them in the General Education Classroom

Per their commitment to meaningful inclusion, co-teaching dyads communicated that they not only believed students with SSN were general education first but also demonstrated their shared beliefs by committing to keep students in their general education classes with accessible general education instruction and assignments, with preferential seating with general education peers, and regular reviews of student performance to see what their next steps should be. General education teachers indicated taking a more direct role with students and indicated that within their teams, they recognized ownership was theirs; whereas special education

teachers would often take a more supportive role but work hard to facilitate this ownership by training and utilizing paraeducators in addition to themselves so if they were called out of the room to deal with behavior elsewhere in the building, the general education teacher had access to an additional resource.

Throughout the conversations, special education teachers were clear that within their careers, they had actively sought out ways to encourage general education teachers to willingly allow students with SSN to be physically present within the general education classroom. They offered regular meetings, co-teaching opportunities, or (the ultimate bargaining chip) paraeducator support. However, within these dyads, who were exceptional, a subtheme emerged among the general education teachers that could not be ignored. It clearly tied with both meaningful inclusion and the shared understanding that students with SSN were general education students first but went another step further. All the general education teachers interviewed for this study made a specific and deliberate effort to communicate with special education teachers that they wanted students with SSN in their classrooms. All students were general education first. Sally explained,

> Oh yeah! But her teacher clearly knew the law. She knew that she was her teacher. A lot
> of teachers are like, well, that's your kid or if you send a para in with a kid they're going
> to sit with a para um but that teacher stepped up and was like, that's my student and
> they're going to sit at the table with the other kids.

**Trust and Vulnerability in an
Intense Partnership**

All teachers indicated co-teaching partnerships encouraged you to work very closely with a teammate. They went on to explain that co-teaching with students with SSN amplified this experience. Teaching dyads highlighted that when agreeing to co-teach with another educator,

you are not only "opening your door" or "moving interventions to someone else's classroom," which could be intimidating. There was also an understanding that you were also teaching alongside another licensed professional and sharing your ideas, strategies, and plans, which could leave educators feeling vulnerable, defensive, and/or self-conscious about their craft. All of the teachers I spoke with mentioned there being an element of fear surrounding both the inclusion of a student with SSN as well as disclosing what teachers frequently considered their ultimate weakness or kryptonite: not knowing what to do or not having an answer. When you added the complexities involved with meeting the needs of students with SSN to an already vulnerable situation, every teacher emphasized the importance of trust within their relationship with their co-teacher. This was particularly important due to the trial-and-error nature of working together as well as adjusting the environment, instruction, access to technology, and behavior management. Additionally, when teachers discussed trust, they indicated it was not only vital to their relationship as co-teachers and being honest about uncertainties, the sense of trust extended also to classroom instruction and implementation. The co-teaching dyads explained that to be successful, they not only had to trust one another as confidants and colleagues but also to carry out instruction and follow-through with students.

> You know, we talk about students having a growth mindset. And that's like the big
> buzzword right now—students need to have a growth mindset and be open and willing to
> make mistakes and fail and start again. I feel like teachers have to be that vulnerable as
> well. And I think staff in general and special education need to have that vulnerability.
> Special education teachers need to be okay with sharing students with significant needs
> with other teachers and trusting them to do good things and general education teachers
> need to be open to having more significant needs in their classrooms and having special

education teachers in their classrooms to support them and giving up some of that

control. (Carrie)

These intensive partnerships were made up of additional components including strong

communication and collaboration skills. Participants agreed that to effectively co-teach with

students with SSN in the general education classroom, co-teachers must have strong and honest

communication and be able to effectively collaborate. Each teacher acknowledged that nearly

every part of their relationship including understanding their roles, developing common goals for

students, implementing effective instruction with students, and nurturing the trust and

vulnerability was recognized to be the backbone of their partnership. Megan explained this

phenomenon well:

Sometimes teachers do things a little bit different especially when it comes to

expectations and you have to make sure you both know that big picture. You need to trust

each other enough to have those conversations and then work together to be sure that

students recognize you as a team. So that's both a challenge and a pro because once you

understand how to reach kids differently and work together to diversify instruction, it's

kind of empowering and you can begin teaching kids in ways that you would never have

known about had you not had an inclusive co-teaching opportunity.

Megan commented further:

What are critical elements to a co-teaching partnership with students with SSN? A lot of

communication. A lot of flexibility. A lot of willingness to genuinely collaborate and

push each other to be great. We constantly bounce ideas back and forth and give each

other feedback. We are nurturing both to kids and each other. And hopefully

empowering for each other. I mean, that's what we always strive for, and I hope that's what we gain from each other through the years as a co-teaching system.

The Mind Meld

Every participant made mention of a phenomenon that seemed to take place over time within their successful co-teaching partnerships. Each participant explained this experience differently but indicated that at some point they would begin working fluidly or effortlessly. Many explained they would just know what to do without and some explained it felt as though they were sharing a brain. Carrie and Sally referred to this event as the "mind meld." Upon looking this term up online, I discovered it was a term used in old Star Trek episodes that described a psychic fusion that would take place between brains which would allow individuals to share non-verbal communication and a deeper understanding of one another. Participants who had experienced co-teaching indicated the mind meld did not always happen but it made co-teaching seamless.

Flexibility

Throughout each of the teaching dyads, the theme of flexibility was apparent. It was identified as a vital component within the co-teaching partnership, the co-teaching framework, and the approach to meeting the unique needs of students with SSN. This theme extended throughout the day and was identified repeatedly by each teacher as a vital component to meeting the needs of students with SSN in a general education co-teaching dyad. However, upon further questioning, flexibility within the partnership could be reactive or "on the fly" such as a teacher having to deal with an unforeseen behavior or providing an adaptation quickly that the team had not accounted for. Most of the teachers emphasized a more proactive flexibility or "going with the flow" where they had become more attuned to the variability that could take

place within a school day and had become flexible with whatever replacement, backup system, or instruction they had already agreed upon would be implemented. According to Sally,

Flexibility. Yeah, just like flexibility with understanding. And like I feel like this is especially true, like in the beginning of the year for somebody who is new to a school. More specifically because you don't know the schedule, you don't know the kids, and you don't know how anything's going to look ever. And like with all the meetings that you have! So like, there'd be some times where I'm like, I couldn't get into the classroom because there was a behavior somewhere in the building or I'd have an IEP meeting at that time. So just like being flexible and understanding that my job was building wide.

This flexibility extended from a short-term or long-term scenario. For instance, all of the teachers cited examples where paraeducators were trained within co-taught classrooms to take over a group while one of the licensed teachers would step into a lead role while the other handled whatever was taking place. However, co-teaching dyads also made mention of a more long-term understanding of flexibility when discussing co-planning lessons, discussing behaviors, and looking at data—all required time to meet and connect regularly, which was difficult to establish and uncertain due to the unpredictable nature of a school day. The middle school dyad highlighted their commitment to long-term flexibility when they discussed launching both their peer mentorship program as well as their co-teaching efforts within the same semester. Because they knew this was going to be a big job, their assistant principal provided them with common time to work together during the day with the understanding that this was temporary. As a result, they used this time to create a spreadsheet and multiple online collaborative models that could support them meeting fewer times face-to-face in the future but still enable them to effectively meet student needs in an asynchronous format. Both teachers

recognized this method would not be perfect but it provided them with a flexible method to collaborate.

A great deal of the flexibility and more understanding approach to a school day stemmed from co-teachers working intimately with one another and gaining a deeper understanding of one another's jobs. All co-teaching dyads indicated that as they worked more intimately with one another, they gained a deeper understanding of one another's positions and responsibilities, they were more understanding, and they recognized the importance of being more flexible with one another. Interestingly, this theme worked on two levels. First, co-teachers had to determine and recognize what their roles were within their partnership and classroom and second, teachers gained a deeper understanding of one another's jobs with students and per their improved understanding participants recognized the responsibilities or stresses that accompanied each position. When co-teachers had productive dialogue around roles and responsibilities both within their partnership as well as within the school, they indicated they were more flexible and more willing to accommodate one another. Special education teachers also indicated this move toward being recognized as a co-teacher for all students within a classroom helped to decrease the sense of monotony and isolation they tended to feel within a self-contained SSN environment.

Q1b   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Time and Scheduling

All co-teachers indicated the primary challenge they faced was finding time to plan, look at student data, and collaborate. Many of the teachers indicated they would meet outside of school hours, stay late, or come in early to connect with each other or had developed on-line tools to plan and collaborate asynchronously. The lack of common planning times and additional

obligations before and after school made communication and collaboration challenging.

Teachers indicated that if they had the opportunity to co-teach together for years, their

interactions became less lengthy and they were able to work effectively with short meetings, text

messages, online formats, and email. But when teachers were just beginning to co-teach or were

working to include more challenging needs, a lack of sufficient time was extremely problematic.

Megan stated,

> As a special education teacher, I think sometimes when you co-teach, you might feel like
>
> you don't get that intensive one-on-one time with students who have SSN. That's when
>
> that whole trusting your co-teacher and planning with them comes into play and we just
>
> don't get a lot of time to connect because our planning times are different, and we have
>
> so many other committees we have to be a part of. Yeah, you and your co-teacher really
>
> have to be on the same page especially when you are teaching independence and how to
>
> advocate for you know what you need and I think that can be a challenge if kids are
>
> getting different messages from teachers.

> Scheduling between general education and special education presented itself as a

challenge for several reasons. All participants stated that scheduling time to connect with one

another was difficult but junior high and high school teachers also brought to light challenges

they faced with co-teaching and including students with SSN in general education classes due to

master schedules for special education teachers attempting to meet the needs of multiple grades

as well as having to shift courses and teachers each semester.

Profession Specific Struggles

Stacking the Classroom

Each general education teacher participant shed light on the tendency for their classrooms to get stacked with students with disabilities once they were identified as inclusive educators. Although they all mentioned they did not mind having additional students if they were participating in a co-teaching partnership and had access to support, they acknowledged this was not always the case and would often be pushed to work harder on their own than their general education colleagues because of their inclusive beliefs. Carrie noted her class was typically stacked even when other teachers had low numbers of students:

> So, they placed a kiddo with me and I went to talk to the office because like I had the highest numbers so you know I wasn't clear why they didn't want to even things out and they're like, no, we think that he will do really well in your structure. And I said, so what you're telling me is that he needs the teacher that's going to be a bitch and not stick him in a corner by himself.

Being Needed Building Wide

Each special education teacher participant spoke to their frustrations with having responsibilities schoolwide and the challenges co-teaching posed when they would often have to respond to needs and behaviors in other areas but simultaneously wanted to honor the commitment they had made to co-teach. Kristen expressed that she felt as though she would let her co-teacher down when she was called to deal with students throughout the building,

> You know, any given day or time somebody else in a different class could be having a meltdown and I'd get pulled out for that. Sometimes things would happen all over the building at once and I couldn't make it to class. My co-teacher was really understanding,

and I made sure a strong para was in the room to support her when this happened, but it

made me feel unreliable even though it was beyond my control, unfortunately.

Sally echoed this struggle and talked about how discouraging it could be:

And like, typically it would be me going in to co-teach and sometimes I'd bring a para,

depending on what my other students were doing or how they were behaving. Because I

had three kids in the building who were runners and it was always a question as to

whether I would make it through the whole section. If I had to run out of the room to deal

with behavior, then the para could jump in and take over. That was a challenge.

Q1c   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Teacher Benefits of Co-Teaching

Participants in this study stated that although co-teaching was a lot of work, the benefits

of the practice outweighed the additional time, commitment, and effort. Teachers commented on

the co-teaching experience feeling like an on-the-job professional development and believed co-

teaching with students with SSN was pushing them to improve their craft. Each teacher

interviewed spoke to feeling more confident including students with SSN in general education

classrooms with two teachers available to provide support and general education teachers

indicated that participating in this practice with a special education teacher relieved fears or

concerns they initially experienced when including students with SSN.

Valuing Both Co-Teacher's and One's
Own Contributions and Expertise

The general education and special education teacher co-teaching dyads I interviewed for

this study demonstrated high levels of credibility and expertise. Even Sally, a second-year

special education teacher, was recognized as exceptional by her co-teacher. Interestingly, each

individual member clearly identified the expertise and contributions of their colleagues overtly, indicating they were wonderful to work with and remarking on how working with two minds and two perspectives made instruction and adaptations for all students within their co-taught classes more meaningful. However, each teacher also recognized their own contributions and worth within this relationship. These specific co-teaching dyads who had found success working together to meet the needs of students with SSN in a general education setting demonstrated strong levels of confidence, both within their partners as well as themselves. Whether this recognition of both a co-teacher's strengths as well as self-awareness surrounding individual attributes was a characteristic of confident and capable professional co-teaching, a culmination of being a part of a positive co-teaching experience, or a combination of both was uncertain.

> Yeah, so it was good to co-teach with a teacher who knew her stuff and then to be able to walk her through what this process could look like with a special education teacher in your room. We would try a number of interventions together and collect data regularly. It was neat to be able to learn from each other that way. (Sally)

Two Brains and Two Bodies

Co-teachers participating in this study placed emphasis on the benefits of being able to provide more direct intervention in the classroom, work together to problem solve challenging needs and behaviors, and appreciated sharing responsibilities such as data collection. Each asserted it was better to have two brains working together to figure things out and were excited to have the opportunity to hear what their partner's perceptions of a situation might be given their general education of special education lens. Additionally, participants added that with a healthy co-teaching relationship, classroom management became more manageable and they were able to better meet the needs of their students as well use the opportunity better model and

train paraeducators to intervene appropriately with students. Kristen indicated, "Yeah, I mean I think having two teachers is obviously better than one in a classroom for classroom management and to help with some of those kids that are struggling a little bit but might fall through the cracks."

Academic and Social Benefits
for Students

Participants in this study indicated and demonstrated that because they were participating in co-teaching with students with SSN in the general education classroom, they were actively working together to create accessible curriculum for all students, which aligned to the standards. This focused a great deal on implementing the principles of the universal design for learning (UDL). By co-planning lessons and looking at data together, participants recognized that by planning with more diverse learning needs in mind, they were better able to meet the needs of all students. This was also reflected in their willingness to diversify which model of co-teaching they used based on the amount of support or attention students would likely need and knowing when to encourage peer support.

Social benefits were identified by co-teacher participants for both general and special education students. Carrie stated, "I firmly believe I would rather have a push in than a pull-out model because there is such a huge benefit for everyone involved with the push in model. And I think it does a lot for gen ed students' empathy and understanding." Participants spoke to the improved behaviors of students with SSN as well as an increased awareness and acceptance for typical students. They also noticed these skills carry over to other parts of students' school days. Sally mentioned,

> They knew that like that kid in their classroom that was in it, they would, they would
>
> hang out with them at lunch and on the playground, they, you know, they included them

in groups. They would work on projects together. It was actually really cool to watch the dynamic of the room. It wasn't just the kid that was there that had this label, but it was the entire classroom kind of learned how to handle being with the student that was exceptional and building friendships that were pretty neat.

Amier and Kristen took these social lessons further and created lessons of acceptance and why it was important to recognize that although classmates might appear different, they were not to be targeted. Amier explained,

> One of the lessons I've taught the last few years, which is my favorite one is talking about stereotypes and assumptions and the kids have a chance to be 100% honest and sometimes it's a lot… no, too much to hear about how they feel about certain types of people in the school and then I bring it back around—and it's kind of like the Mean Girls scene like how many of you have been victimized by Regina George—I'm like, so now, having heard someone talk crap about you, do you like when that happens? And they say, no. You know, so we talk it through and say, like we ALL feel those same things regardless of race, gender, disability, etc.

The opportunities for students to learn and practice appropriate social skills, make friends outside of a self-contained room, and gain access to increased self-efficacy were tremendous. Sally clarified,

> Our student had a lot of social stuff and speech goals as well. And so, by having her work in the classroom, with other kids and a teaching team that knew how to target those skills, her progress was pretty impressive. So, she still got one on one with me for some skills and work, because she's seven and needed that. But when it was group time and I would push-in, she had an opportunity to practice those skills.

Sally summarized the social (and academic) benefits of an inclusive co-taught classroom when she stated, "If you just looked in the room and didn't know she was in there, you wouldn't know that there was a kid with SSN in there."

Summary

Six participants were interviewed and provided artifacts as well as virtual and verbal tours of their co-taught classrooms to explore their experiences with co-teaching with students with SSN within the general education classroom. Following both within case and across case analysis of each teacher portrait, both specific and general themes emerged that addressed both the overarching research question as well as each sub question. These themes included meaningful inclusion for students, the importance of school leadership support in developing an inclusive culture and climate, and the importance of having deep understanding of both co-teaching and communication needs. Additionally, participants demonstrated that shared goals and beliefs including having and scaffolding high expectations for all students and believing that students with SSN were general education students first and wanting them in the general education classroom were apparent. Themes surrounding participants' perceptions of essential qualities within their intense co-teaching partnerships included flexibility, knowing and understanding each other's roles, communication and collaboration, trust and vulnerability, and achieving what was eventually coined 'the mind meld.' Themes around challenges included shared struggles around time, scheduling, as well as individual challenges with stacking classrooms and building wide responsibilities. Finally, perceptions of teacher benefits such as having access to one another's professional insight and real time professional development as well as both academic and social benefits for students ultimately led to an increased sense of school belonging.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION/INTERPRETATION

Interpretation, as described by Wolcott (1994), is aimed at extracting meaning and identifying context. Rather than providing a theory of a specific phenomenon by relating themes, interpretation addresses more global issues. Walcott noted that "at the interpretive extreme, a researcher-as-writer may seem merely to swoop down into the field for a descriptive morsel or two and then retreat once again to the lofty heights of theory and speculation" (p. 11).

Summary of Research

Throughout the previous chapter, portraits of six participants—each of whom was a part of a dyad consisting of one general education teacher and one special education teacher who had co-taught together in the general education classroom with students with SSN—were developed using responses to interview questions, artifacts, and virtual/verbal tours. In addition, both within case and across case themes were represented. In this chapter, I summarize and discuss interpretations of this investigation as they pertained to the research questions as well as implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of general and special education teacher dyads who co-taught in general education classrooms with students who had SSN. Further, through this study, I aimed to inform and contribute additional knowledge to the current literature to describe the perceived benefits, challenges, and essential elements

identified by practitioners in the field who were actively co-teaching with students with SSN in the general classroom.

Participants within this study were identified initially through a model placement program where educators were identified as having outstanding programming for students with SSN through an external agency evaluation utilizing evidence and research-based tools. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the educators identified had either left the field or were unable to connect with me. However, they did provide me with names of other strong special education teachers who were participating in this practice with students with SSN. From these contacts, a snowball sample of general education teachers who SSN teachers were working with was established and contacted via email. Qualitative data were collected from a total of six teachers (three special education and three general education) via on-line interviews that included questions as well as virtual classroom walks and artifacts the teachers were able to access. Therefore, semi-structured and dialogic interviews lasting from between one to two hours were the foundational sources of information and a qualitative analysis was implemented to address the following research question and three sub-questions:

Q1   What are the experiences of educator dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?

Q1a   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant support needs?

Q1b   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Q1c   What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Themes, data, and findings discussed in the following paragraphs are a reflection of the general themes identified per the across case analysis. Many of the results identified within this qualitative research reflected those identified within the literature review in Chapter II including (a) meaningful inclusion, (b) supportive leadership, (c) collaboration and trust, (d) planning time, (e) scheduling, (f) teacher benefits of co-teaching, (g) academic benefits for students, and (h) social benefits for students. The following sections provide interpretation for these themes while drawing attention to themes not initially evident and could serve to further understand co-teaching in the general education classroom with students with SSN.

Research Question 1

> What are the experiences of educator dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?

Within this study, every participant spoke to their experiences co-teaching within the general education classroom with students with SSN. The bulk of the data collected reflected that perceptions and experiences from both general and special education teachers were positive and themes that emerged grew more detailed and specific as participants went into greater depth with content covered within each sub-question. However, an overarching concept expressed throughout this research was each participant's commitment to the practice of co-teaching was motivated by a desire to create an overall culture and climate of meaningful inclusion. Based upon responses provided during interviews, participants worked collaboratively as well as individually to develop strong and accessible instruction with an emphasis on repetition and clear communication (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020) as well physical space to encourage students with SSN to have the opportunity to participate. However, participants went on to explain that although they believed their efforts and collaboration had an impact on their classrooms and the

students, the challenges surrounding the sustainability of meaningful inclusion were difficult to overcome without leadership supporting and promoting a schoolwide culture and climate of acceptance.

Meaningful Inclusion

It is vital educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs of all students. The Center for Studies on Inclusion Education (2004) stated all students within an adaptable school system share equal value and status. Additionally, deliberate exclusion of students from mainstream settings and activities due to disabilities or diverse learning needs was "a devaluation of their self-worth as individuals" (p. 6). Throughout this research, per participants' insight, it became increasingly apparent that providing students with meaningful inclusion was a foundational element to their work, i.e., participants were striving to create meaningful inclusion for students that did not involve simply encouraging students to exist in general education settings but instead worked to create inclusive environments where all students were provided access to instruction, their peers, and to have opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. However, participants made it evident that creating meaningful inclusion for all students, especially students with SSN, was not achievable or sustainable in isolation. The complexities and challenges of implementing effective instruction for students with SSN in the general education classrooms alongside peers could be an overwhelming prospect for educators. Each participant emphasized that for students with SSN who frequently demonstrate intense and complex physical, social, cognitive, and communication needs to be genuinely included required skilled and confident educators to work together with school leadership to push for change thoughtfully and deliberately. The idea of moving toward collaborative frameworks like co-teaching to create meaningful inclusion was emphasized by Cook and Friend (2010) who reinforced that sharing knowledge and expertise

was essential to school teams meeting the diverse needs of students in schools. Implementation of inclusive practices that are meaningful typically translates into increasingly equitable practices and provides all children with access to the general education curriculum and experience, which is a moral and ethical responsibility for educators (Rea et al., 2002).Furthermore, it was clear that students who had been identified with disabilities or additional needs demonstrated improved academic skills and performance when they were actively educated with peers in an inclusive environment versus students who were segregated to an alternative setting (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). For this reason, it was time to update exclusive practices that continue to be prevalent in creating separate school experiences for students with SSN (Bock, 2013).

Supportive Leadership

According to Van Horn (2011), school leadership (more specifically, principals) not only constructs what a school's vision will be but also leads students and staff to embrace how each student should be treated. Administrative support and drive function as a catalyst for an inclusive movement and work directly to facilitate change. Within each interview, participants mentioned that although principals and administrators were not actively co-teaching with them in the classroom, they played a vital role in setting thee overall tone for inclusive practices throughout their school buildings. Participants explained that their school leaders were deeply invested in developing inclusive school communities. Participants spoke to school leaders advocating for them to have time to meet, working collaboratively with them to provide professional development that would promote inclusive practices, advocating for co-teaching between general and special educators, and promoting schoolwide organizational philosophy that all students are people first. In short, the role of school leadership in facilitating meaningful inclusion and co-teaching partnerships is vital. This statement was reinforced by Hahn (1995) who stated that in

each school's movement toward equality for all students in education, to simply provide children access to the identical proverbial starting line was not enough. Leadership needs to encourage strong building-wide practices that effectively level the playing field.

Positive Exposure to Co-Teaching

Kohler-Evans et al. (2013) identified eight objectives that teachers and administrators must engage in to implement strong co-teaching practices. The first of these objectives was to place value on co-teaching. Murawski and Bernhardt (2016) expanded on this statement and advocated that all teachers should be familiar with all of the models identified within the co-teaching framework. The participants in this study all shared that they entered their professions with knowledge of co-teaching practices and frameworks. Each participant explained that to best meet the needs of all their students, they would use a variety of co-teaching models to provide instruction. Furthermore, all participants discussed having positive exposures and interactions with effective co-teaching teams during their licensure programs except for Sally. Sally clarified that her positive experience with co-teaching took place with Carrie and explained that she believed this opportunity to be transformative. Whether positive interactions took place prior to or during their teaching career, each participant indicated that having a strong understanding of what co-teaching entailed, how successful co-teaching worked, as well as the potential benefits of this practice played a part in their motivation to implement the framework with students with SSN in the general education classroom.

Although this research resulted in a focus on strong and successful co-teaching dyads, participants both spoke to and demonstrated the importance of exposure to strong and positive co-teaching instruction for current teachers as well as pre-service teachers. Additionally, participants indicated that positive interactions with this framework early in their careers helped

them to recognize the benefits of planning, instructing, and looking at data collaboratively as well as recognizing and better understanding roles within the classroom and building wide. Scruggs and colleagues (2007) solidified the importance of seeing this dynamic in action as they warned co-teachers of the tendency of perceiving the special education teacher's role as that of an assistant. By providing a strong and positive foundation with co-teaching for both current and pre-service educators.

Research Question 1a

> What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant needs?

Themes that emerged within the across case analysis showed participants believed the critical elements in supporting students with SSN in the general education classroom were reflective of their compatibility, partnership, and common goals. Participants repeatedly voiced the importance of having shared goals and beliefs with their co-teacher or "being on the same page." Themes within their shared goals and beliefs included a shared understanding that students with SSN were general education first and expectations for all students were high. Participants went on to explain that due to complexity and intensity of both their students' needs as well as their circumstances, co-teaching with students with SSN in an inclusive classroom forged an intensive bond that encouraged them to be more honest and vulnerable with each other as well as share a growth mindset that acknowledged not always knowing the answer was not a sign of weakness but instead an opportunity to collaborate. Each dyad reiterated the importance communication, collaboration, flexibility, and respecting the expertise of their colleague and believed their partnership was an opportunity to further develop their teaching skills to better meet the needs of all students including students with SSN.

Trusting Collaborative Partnerships

According to Walther-Thomas et al. (1999), the goal for teachers who work

collaboratively is to vary and individualize instruction to best meet the needs of students. Per

these collaborative relationships, teachers work through learning challenges and provide

effective adaptations for students. However, the participants within this study identified effective

collaboration as a vital element when co-teaching with students with SSN in the general

education classroom due to the broad range of the diversity. Megan explained,

> I do think I've learned more working with SSN students than I have from working with
>
> just typical resource, behavior, or general ed students. And I think that it's because you
>
> have so many varied needs all at once. Those challenges force you to be a better
>
> communicator, a better collaborator, and a better teacher.

For this reason, participants clarified that the degree to which they worked together

intensified and their partnership became a necessity, not a luxury. Because the participants in this

study placed additional emphasis on the depth of which this collaboration looked with increased

emphasis on trust and vulnerability as they would frequently have to confide in one another if

they did not have all of the answers. All of the participants indicated they adopted these moments

as an invitation to work together and not as a sign of weakness. Participants explained that

through honest and difficult conversations, they were better able to initiate and participate in

constructive dialogue, goal development, and eventually grow to experience what they explained

to be a seamless relationship where one was able pick up where the other left off when teaching a

lesson (the mind meld). Participants went on to explain that per their intense partnerships, they

gained firsthand access to skills and information that would otherwise take place in consultative

interactions, separate rooms, or not at all. They appreciated having opportunities to plan and see

skills carried out as well as attempt them with a supportive partner and believed the co-teaching framework created an optimal learning environment for both students and educators. Megan articulated,

> So I feel like we're always trying to make it better and striving for growth, and we don't take for granted what we have and what we've done. So, we recognize that we have something special here, but as a team we know that there's always more room for improvement and that's what we want to do.

In building a strong bond, demonstrating that learning is fluid and healthy when people feel safe, and modeling a trusting partnership with good communication, teachers provide a positive model and environment for students to learn and grow. These perceptions and experiences of participants were echoed by Kohler-Evans (2006) who drew parallels to effective co-teaching partnership and marriage. Both involved individuals engaging in dialogue surrounding their roles and responsibilities, honoring each other's contributions, and recognizing that they cared for each other. By facilitating healthy relationships and trust among all teachers, the likelihood of teachers taking part in co-teaching opportunities should increase, in turn creating a stronger staff and more inclusive environment.

Shared Goals and Beliefs

Nickelson (2010) conducted a study that examined perceptions of what determined successful co-teaching relationship between general education and special education teachers. Results indicated that participants believed shared beliefs coupled with common experiences rested at the core of their co-teaching relationship (Nickelson, 2010). All participants in this research shared that a critical component to their successful partnership rested within their shared goals and beliefs. This was frequently communicated using the phrase "on the same page." All

participants indicated that sharing beliefs and goals made the co-teaching partnership work more smoothly and contributed to their wanting to continue working together. Additionally, participants communicated that if goals and beliefs were aligned, it made developing collaborative goals for students easier.

**Scaffolding High Expectations
for All Students**

Within this study, all six participants mentioned repeatedly that they had high expectations for all their students including students with SSN. Each participant advocated that this was what they considered a non-negotiable or a belief on which they would not compromise. When high expectations were met with deliberate and effective support to help push students with high expectations, this relationship was even more evident. Throughout each of the co-teaching dyads, the common goal of high expectations was evident and a shared non-negotiable cornerstone of their relationship. However, the co-teaching dyads developed additional programs and supports to encourage not only strong academic achievement but also increased self-efficacy. By implementing peer mentorship programs, grouping students with supportive students, providing small group instruction, effectively training paraeducators on prompt fading strategies, and working together to ensure that students had access to effective instruction and looking at data together to determine next steps, co-teachers created learning environments that pushed students academically and socially without overlooking their individual needs. The co-teaching dyads discussed their expectations that all students in their classrooms were general education first but also recognized the importance of reinforcing "splinter skills" and merely having an expectation would not only be insufficient for students with SSN but insufficient for most students. Additionally, participants believed by providing students with opportunities to practice these skills in a safe place with peers, they reinforced their commitment to holding students to

high expectations and promoted and self-efficacy. In doing so, participants witnessed students reach their short-term expectations and long-term goals as well as fostered a belief in their students that they too could be successful.

Research Question 1b

> What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Overarching themes identified under this sub-question were more confirmatory with the literature than they were revelatory. Although participants within this study expressed high levels of satisfaction, they identified challenges as well. Among identified themes were concerns surrounding time to collaborate and issues surrounding scheduling. On a more individualized scale, general education teacher participants identified challenges with having their classrooms "stacked" with diverse needs once special education staff learned they worked more inclusively, and special education participants remarked on feeling conflicted with committing to participate in co-teaching when they could have to leave due to their responsibilities to students building wide.

Time and Scheduling

Within this study, the primary challenge participants identified was a lack of common planning time as well as not having a designated time to connect and collaborate with their co-teacher. Although each of the participants had developed compensatory strategies to work around their lack of time including, but not limited to, meeting outside of their school day and developing online tools to work asynchronously, participants communicated frustrations around knowing they needed to connect more frequently. As previously identified, to meet the more intensive and diverse needs of student with SSN as well as other students within the general

education setting, participants often found themselves struggling. This need to allocate time for co-teachers to collaborate was reflected by Cook and Friend (2010) who indicated that co-teachers experienced immense pressure to ensure students had access to and met academic standards. To meet these needs became increasingly complicated with progressively diverse students. For co-teachers working with students with SSN, time to collaborate was vital. Scruggs et al. (2007) also emphasized the importance of providing co-teachers satisfactory time to collaborate and plan so co-teaching teams could effectively implement the framework as two educators in lieu of working reactively and using the special educator as an assistant. Frustrations surrounding time and scheduling appeared to intensify for co-teachers at the middle and high school levels as participants remarked that the master calendar would change for both students and teachers each semester. Broderick et al. (2005) and Vakil et al. (2009) reinforced this need for systematic change to provide educators time to work collaboratively so meaningful inclusion could take place. "Policymakers have called for the creation of school based professional learning communities, including organizational structures that promote regular opportunities for teachers to collaborate with teams of colleagues" (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, para. 2).

Profession-Specific Struggles

Although I had not initially proposed to look at cases based on whether participants were either general or special education teachers, themes were evident upon cross analysis that I felt were important to mention. A strong theme that surfaced among classroom teachers was advocating for ownership of students with SSN. Each general education teacher who participated in this research asserted they wanted students with SSN in their classroom. They also spoke to fears and uncertainties that existed when they initially brought students with SSN into their classrooms and how, for many of them, co-teaching in a healthy and strong partnership helped to

ease many of the fears they initially experienced. Finally, general education teachers indicated there was a tendency for disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities, including students with SSN, being placed in their classrooms once it was known they were open to providing inclusive instruction and effective adaptations. Many general education teachers indicated they were more inclined to take on additional students if they had access to a co-teacher but schoolwide inclusion was important to keeping students with diverse needs more equally distributed throughout general education classrooms. Special education teachers spoke to difficulties with co-teaching and attempting to manage behaviors and needs for students with SSN building-wide. They also acknowledged the isolation they experienced prior to co-teaching within the general education classroom. Additionally, special education teachers indicated they liked using successful co-taught classes to train and support paraeducators.

Research Question 1c

What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Throughout this research, participants spoke to the benefits of co-teaching with students with SSN, both for educators (both general and special) as well as students (both academic and social). Per the themes identified in Chapter IV, participants indicated the benefits they recognized for themselves included being able to both contribute and share expertise as well as have two likeminded teachers in the same educational setting at the same time. According to participants, they perceived the benefits for students (with SSN or otherwise) to be both academic and social. Academically, participants indicated and demonstrated that classrooms were more thoughtfully organized,and students had direct access to more individualized instruction. Socially, student benefits included recognizing diversity, learning from one another,

practicing appropriate social behaviors with peers, and developing friendships to increase for students' sense of belonging.

Benefits for Co-Teachers

Participants in this study all expressed the belief that although co-teaching with students with SSN involved a lot of extra work, the benefits being able to have two professionals approaching instruction with different areas of expertise and the ability to bring varied perspectives to challenging circumstances were valuable. Again, although the goal of this research was to shed light on themes that were consistent among all participants, I believe it would be irresponsible to overlook themes that emerged by profession. Interestingly, general education teachers expressed the idea of having a co-teacher to plan and look at data with them alleviated the fear they experienced about including students with SSN in their classrooms. Interestingly, the fear the teachers identified was reflected in the literature by Robinson and Goodey (2018) as 'inclusion phobia' and reflected fears individuals experienced per their individual conceptualizations of disability. By working collaboratively with special education teachers and having 'an expert' available to facilitate meaningful inclusion prompted an initial willingness to be more inclusive, which then led to general education teachers requesting for students with SSN be placed in their classrooms. Although special education teachers did recognize that part of their role within their co-teaching partnership was to address stigma that frequently surrounded students with SSN and facilitate a healthy inclusion process, they identified the benefits they found with co-teaching centered more around decreasing the sense of isolation that occurred with their position. All special education teacher participants indicated they were often the only special education teachers within their building and the tendency for them to be 'self-contained' along with students with SSN was a common practice. Each of the

special education teacher participants spoke to the frustration they experienced planning, problem-solving, and instructing with students who demonstrated the most complex learning needs alone. By pairing general and special education teachers together, the co-teaching framework functioned to promote meaningful inclusion and decrease isolation. According to Langher et al. (2017), by bringing special educators into a

> co-teaching partnership, support from the general education teachers in a school was conceived as a key factor which allows special education teachers to feel as though they are part of the school environment and to experience greater personal accomplishment (Billingsley et al., 2004; Gersten et al., 2001), acceptance, and participation (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008). (p. 123)

In combination, all participants indicated the pairing provided them with growth opportunities that Megan referred to as "real time professional development." The participants all indicated that learning from an expert in another field made them a better teacher and having an opportunity to watch one another work with students in real time provided them with strategies and resources they would otherwise never have known. In short, the desegregation of students within a school could also promote a desegregation of skills among general and special educators.

By decompartmentalizing general and special education teachers through a successful co-teaching framework, all participants reported they felt like they were becoming better teachers. Additionally, although I probed to learn more about experiences surrounding students with SSN, the participants inevitably shifted conversations back to "all students." They spoke to feeling tremendous respect for their co-teacher as well as feeling more confident working with and providing appropriate adaptations for "all students," and the practices, goals, and expectations

they adopted were best for "all students." Interestingly, as participants gained access to more transdisciplinary strategies, they collaboratively shifted their approaches to both instruction as well as the physical organization of their classrooms to be more accessible and meaningful for all students. Whether intentional or not, participants within this study were implementing the principals of the UDL, which is an important component to creating meaningful inclusion for all learners. The UDL is a framework for structuring lessons and environments to be accessible based on three principles: (a) multiple means of representation that allow for students with a variety of strengths and needs to have access to the format in which learning is represented or the way in which knowledge is taught, (b) multiple means of expression that provide a variety of options to express or demonstrate learning while maintaining high expectations; and (c) multiple means of engagement that provide students with opportunities to integrate individual interests and preferred modes of interaction in learning activities and assessments (Universal Design for Learning, 2021). By combining each co-teacher's expertise in content, instruction, adaptation, and diversity with common goals of meaningful inclusion as well as the principles of UDL, the possibilities of creating effective instruction and access for all students as well as advancing teaching skills were themes expressed by all participants.

Benefits for Students

When asked about the impact they believed co-teaching had on their students with SSN, both general and special education teacher dyads spoke to what they had witnessed or experienced with all students participating in inclusive co-taught classes. This experience echoed the findings of Kramer and Murawski's (2017) research on co-teachers' beliefs that both the social and academic needs of all students (with or without disabilities) were better met in a co-taught classroom. The dyads spoke to social gains for all students but placed exceptional

emphasis on the progress students with SSN made when placed with typical peers. All educators reiterated the importance peer feedback, peer modeling, peer support, and friendships played in the overall educational experience for all students in their co-taught classrooms.

Participants described academic advantages within their co-taught classrooms as being applicable to "all students." They indicated that by having two teachers working with students at the same time, students were able to access more complete instruction and did not need to transition to a separate space to gain access to interventions. Co-teachers in this study also indicated they were more inclined to encourage students to collaborate and support one another as there were additional adults in the room who could monitor or facilitate dialogue when appropriate. They also expressed that with two teachers, students were able to participate and share more directly with teachers and because their instruction was aligned, students who struggled with concepts or communication had additional access to the same terminology and strategies that mirrored one another instead of having general and special education teachers presenting disjointed instruction in separate rooms using varied terminology.

In addition to providing their students with increased academic opportunities, participants spoke a great deal to the social benefits they witnessed and experienced while co-teaching with students with SSN in the general education classroom. Participants spoke to students with SSN having an opportunity to integrate social learning with peers and receiving meaningful feedback as well as demonstrating increased motivation to communicate with peers. Additionally, participants communicated a shift in students not identified with SSN within their co-taught classrooms. All participants indicated that most students developed an increased sense of empathy and were happy to include students with SSN. Kristen and Amier supported this practice by including a peer mentorship program into their co-taught classroom and witnessed

the advantages of peers modeling appropriate social interactions for students with and without

SSN. Finally, all participants expressed that they had witnessed this behavior extending beyond

their co-taught classroom and into less structured parts of students' days. Friendly behaviors

demonstrated by peers included playing together during recess at the elementary school level and

greeting each other with high fives and chatting at the middle and high school levels. Based on

the research identified in Chapter II, the combination of both academic and social benefits

identified by participants led to an increase in sense of school belonging for students with SSN.

Lessons for Practice

The data collected throughout this research were extensive but provided a foundation by

which possible strategies or practices might be implemented to further co-teaching efforts so

students with SSN are successfully placed into school settings or teacher preparation programs.

The following paragraphs integrate the information gathered and funnel it into professional

suggestions identified as "lessons" that could assist in successful approaches for co-teaching

students with SSN.

Lessons for Policy

It is time to move policy toward meaningful inclusion for all students. The Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act (as cited in Owens et al., 2016) stated that all children with

disabilities should "have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes

special education and related services designed to meet their particular needs" (p. 196). However,

it is time to begin thinking critically if placing students with SSN in a separate room, away from

peer modeling, with a single teacher who is also isolated is a placement that benefits the student

or a placement that simplifies work for schools and does not impose upon dated practices that

continue to take place. While moving forward to promote more inclusive practices, policy should

promote collaborative models for teachers, school leadership, and stakeholders so co-teaching can guide a transitional framework and provide both special and general education teachers resources needed to meaningfully include students with SSN.

Lessons for Leadership

It has been determined that school leadership plays a pivotal role in promoting an inclusive culture within schools and among staff. Ways that leadership could increase the likelihood of general and special education teachers participating and benefiting from co-teaching with students with SSN are by providing time during the day to provide co-teachers with sufficient time to plan together. Additionally, in their efforts to promote collaborative practices that promote meaningful inclusion, school and district-wide leaders would benefit from providing professional development and coaching opportunities for general and special education teachers to participate in this practice. Finally, school buildings should have alternatives to schoolwide behaviors that both allow special education teachers to remain in general education settings while co-teaching as well as demystifying student behaviors that perpetuate the stigma that only one teacher is equipped to work with specific students.

Lessons for Licensure Programs

Both general and special pre-service educators should have access to strong and effective co-teaching instruction, experiences, and models to better understand and implement meaningful inclusion. In addition, collaborative practices should be practiced and reinforced within licensure programs to prepare teachers to work with all students as well as each other. Pre-service teachers need to recognize their programs as not two separate entities who are educated apart from one another and work only with specific students in isolation but instead as two content experts who

can grow each other as professionals and work collaboratively to best meet the needs of all students.

Areas for Consideration

Completing a dissertation in the field of education during a global pandemic was not ideal. However, this was (hopefully) a once in a lifetime opportunity to understand how teachers worked throughout this time. Due to mandates surrounding health and exposure risks and brick-and-mortar schools closing down, alternatives to in-person observations had to be made. In addition, the stress placed on teachers while attempting to launch virtual education from their homes, losing resources, and coping with a global pandemic led to difficulties accessing artifacts as well as high attrition rates and setbacks. Furthermore, of the teachers interviewed, the majority clarified they were not able to actively co-teach with students with SSN due to restrictions that year. Therefore, much of the data collected was based on past experiences.

Although this exploratory research was in depth and I was able to reach a point of saturation, it was evident that limited access to participants also limited diversity within this study. Each of the dyads spanned grade levels kindergarten through 12th grade, extended from both rural to urban settings, and spanned low to higher economic status with a variety of students; participants were all female, mostly White, and they were all identified by individuals in the field as being strong educators and working in outstanding programs. Speaking with individuals who worked within successful partnerships offered strong insight as to what benefits and essential elements to co-teaching with students who had SSN were important for practitioners and researchers when initiating, implementing, or polishing an inclusive co-teaching model with SSN. However, it might undermine the challenges new programs and co-teaching collaborations could encounter as many of the struggles that participants recalled had

been in the past. These ideal or less stressful partnerships within well supported schools that included effective and invested leadership could also limit access opportunities or strategies for teachers who do not have access to such opportunities but are still motivated to attempt this approach to supporting students with SSN within the general education classroom.

All three co-teaching dyads (elementary, middle school, and high school) were represented as well as educators who spanned from very early in their careers to those who had been in the field for many years. However, all participants were located within a single state and worked in public schools within said state. Because this research was both exploratory and qualitative, it was understood that the information revealed could not be generalized to all general and special education teachers co-teaching with students with SSN in the field. However, per each portrait and case, teachers are encouraged to consider the data collected that might echo their own circumstances as well as consider the strategies and implications for practice as possible strategies for current or future implementation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of general and special education teacher dyads who co-taught students with SSN within the general education setting. Because co-teaching with students with SSN within an inclusive environment was an area of research that does not currently exist, it was my hope this study would serve as a foundation for future research. The following section identifies possible future studies to expand upon in this field of research. Potential areas for future research include but are not limited to studies involving a greater number of participants who are more diverse; studies that include site observations and include input from additional providers including school leadership and paraeducators; research that includes student, parent and family perceptions and experiences as they pertain to their

children who are included in co-taught classes; and research focused on student teachers who actively participate in co-teaching placements with students with SSN as part of their teacher preparation programs.

Future research should include more participants with increased diversity including race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Although this research was not intended to be exclusive, difficulty recruiting and retaining participants created a rather homogenous group of teachers. Because participants were limited to teachers who were all female, primarily White, worked in a single state, and only in public school systems, it was uncertain if perceptions and experiences could vary. Nevertheless, all data collected would provide additional insight to this educational practice.

Because the theme of isolation emerged among special education teachers working with students with SSN, it would seem advantageous to look into this more deeply, especially with new teachers who were still developing skills, strategies, and interventions whilst working with students who demonstrate the most intensive needs. Exploring and investigating more deeply the idea of professional isolation, the tendency for individuals working directly with students with SSN to experience this phenomenon, and their perceptions surrounding a siloed approach to education has had on their overall professional development.

Next, to expand upon best practices and strategies, research should include additional time observing on-site and co-taught instruction, teams working together collecting and interpreting data, and co-teachers working together to plan lessons. Ideally, future studies should include access to peripheral resources including feedback from service providers such as motor specialists, speech language pathologists, vision and hearing specialists, social and mental health providers, etc. Data collection should also include building-wide staff who support inclusive

practices as well as assist and encourage an inclusive culture and climate such as school leadership and paraeducators.

Finally, gaining first-hand accounts of benefits and struggles surrounding experiences and perceptions from students with SSN, parents, and families who are actively involved and/or included in co-taught classes would be another area of research that could offer tremendous insight to this field of study. This information could offer valuable insight surrounding both short- and long-term consequences for students and families involved in this process. Finally, further research on educators who actively participate in co-teaching placements with students with SSN as part of their teacher preparation programs would be beneficial. It would be important to investigate experiences as they pertain to preservice educators both general and special and their experiences providing instruction with co-teachers in an inclusive classroom with students with SSN.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Within this study, most elements felt very intertwined. The findings from this study make evident that co-teaching within the general education classroom with students with SSN should be a practice that is implemented more frequently in schools. The participants in this study indicated the benefits they experienced both while co-teaching for students, themselves, and on a building-level appeared to outweigh the challenges that were discussed. Although this practice requires commitment of time, energy, and resources, the overall outcomes could change the lives and experience of educators, school communities, and most importantly, students. As Megan said, "It's really a kind of a symphony in a way. There are all these parts that you have to make sure work, and it's not always easy. And there are days you leave thinking; this wasn't a good day. And other days you leave going, that was PERFECT!"

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 11/20/2020

Principal Investigator: Katrine Gosselin

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
Action Date: 11/20/2020

Protocol Number: 2011015055
Protocol Title: All Means All: Exploring Co-teaching Dyads Working with Students with Significant Support Needs

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).

- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).

- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.

- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - http://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX B

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION
IN RESEARCH**

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: All Means All: Exploring Co-teaching Dyads Working with Students with Significant Support Needs

Researcher: Katrine Gosselin, University of Northern Colorado,
email: brei4818@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Corey D. Pierce, University of Northern Colorado
Phone Number: (970) 351-1662   email: corey.pierce@unco.edu

Procedures: We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. If you elect to participate you will be asked to take part in a recorded 1:1 virtual interview which will consist of both structured as well as dialogical (less structured) interactions. This interview will take place via a private pass coded Zoom platform to ensure that the conversation is secure. Interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Participants will also be asked to provide artifacts including schedules, effective co-taught lesson plans, and student work (no names) as well as complete either a Zoom virtual walk of their class space without students present or in person observation of classroom space (Covid-19 contingent) without students present. Finally, participants will be asked to complete an educator reflection electronically to triangulate findings. Member checks will be performed with all the data collected to ensure that participants feel that their input is accurately captured. All information provided will exist under a chosen pseudonym and kept in a secure location with a passcode. After 3 years, recorded information will be deleted or destroyed.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Katrine Gosselin at brei4818@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE AND
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Thank you so very much for participating in this study about co-teaching with students with significant support needs. Prior to our interview, it is important that you complete the following questionnaire. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability and if there is an item you would like to speak more about during our interview, please let me know. This item includes both a questionnaire and a demographic inventory. Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out brei4818@bears.unco.edu

Again, thank you so much for participating in this very important work.

Katrine Gosselin

Your name: _____

Your preferred pseudonym: _____

Your school: _____

How do you identify?
· American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native
· Asian, Asian American
· Black, African, Caribbean, African American
· Latina/o, Chicana/o, Hispanic
· Pacific Islander
· White, European-American
· Other: _____
· I'd rather not disclose this information.

How do you identify in terms of gender?
· Female
· Male
· Genderqueer
· Transgender
· Other: _____
· I'd rather not disclose this information.

What is your age? _____

How long have you been teaching (general/special education)? _____

How long have you been co-teaching? _____

How long have you been co-teaching with students with SSN? _____

Which type(s) of co-teaching models do you and your co-teachers implement (please check any that apply)?
☐ One teach, one observe
☐ One teach, one assist
☐ Parallel teaching
☐ Station teaching
☐ Alternative teaching
☐ Team teaching

What type of teacher training program did you complete? _____

My school works with grade(s): _____

What are the demographics of the student population at your school?
_____
_____
_____
_____

Please share any additional information about your school and/or your program
that you think is important for me to have.
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Please share any additional information that you think may be useful to this research with regard to your approach to co-teaching with students with SSN?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Formal Guided Interview

Name: _____ Date: _____
Time: _____ Setting: _____
Thank you for participating in this work. This interview should take between 45minutes to 1 hour to complete. This interview will be used to develop a clear and complete picture of your experiences and thoughts surrounding co-teaching with students with SSN along with the articles that you have provided as well as my subsequent observations or classroom walks. Naturally, there are no correct or incorrect answers to the questions that I have developed to guide us through this process. I hope to make the interview as comfortable as possible in order for you to express your ideas fully and completely.
With your permission, I would like to record this conversation. Is this acceptable to you? Y/N
At any point during this interview, if you are uncomfortable with what is being recorded, please just let me know, and I will stop.

RQ1: What are the experiences of co-teacher dyads (general education teachers and special education teachers) who co-teach with students who have significant support needs (SSN)?
When were you first introduced to the concept of co-teaching? Can you describe in detail how you began participating in co-teaching with students with SSN?

Tell me about a typical day of co-teaching with students with SSN.

Tell me about your experiences co-teaching.
Follow up: with planning,
        With data collection and review with a co-teacher,
        With classroom management
        Do you co-teach in tandem (directly or indirectly) with additional service providers (OT, PT, Speech, etc)?

SubQ1: What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of elements they believe to be critical in supporting inclusive education for students with significant needs?
What do you believe to be the most critical elements of co-teaching with students with SSN within an inclusive setting?
        Instructionally:
        Socially:

Please describe the culture and climate of your co-taught classroom?
        Follow up: Do you believe that co-teaching in the general education classroom has had a social impact on your students including students with SSN? What are some examples?

SubQ2: What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the challenges to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Please describe what challenges you think collaboration and co-teaching have for students with SSN, classrooms, and educators (general and special). Do you have any specific examples?

SubQ3: What are co-teachers' (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of the benefits to the co-teaching process with students who have significant support needs?

Please describe what benefits do you think collaboration and co-teaching have for students with SSN, classrooms, and educators (general and special). Do you have any specific examples?

Is there anything else that you believe is important for me to know or that you would like to add?

APPENDIX D

CO-TEACHER REFLECTIONS

Teacher Reflection:

1. Please state your "name", position, school, and district.
2. Please describe your responsibilities in your role as a general/special education teacher.
3. How many years have you been teaching? How long have you been co-teaching?
4. Is there a specific event that has most impacted your beliefs about working with other teachers and students with SSN?
5. What prompted you to begin co-teaching with students with SSN?
6. What were your expectations or perceptions of student capability for students with SSN prior to co-teaching in a general education classroom with them?
7. How do you feel like your perceptions of inclusion compare to that of the overall school culture and climate regarding including students with SSN in general education classrooms and school experiences (i.e., specials, field day, school dances, field trips, clubs, etc.)?
8. As you reflect on the overall process of coteaching with students with SSN, what do you believe is most important for me to understand about this process including the impact that it has on all student, you and your co-teacher, and the overall culture and climate of your school.

APPENDIX E

OBSERVATION GUIDE

OBSERVATION GUIDE

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Individual: _____

If permitted to go into schools to observe, this will assist in observation. If unable to observe, this will serve as a questionnaire or guide for virtual observation:

What is the layout of the physical space?

Where does the student with SSN sit within the space? Are they close to peers (which peers)? Is there an adult nearby?

Do they require any physical or educational adaptations and can they access these materials independently?

Who interacts with the student during lessons/class (gen ed teacher/spec ed teacher/para/students)?

Is instruction accessible and aligned to that of other students?

Does the student have a locker/desk/tote/etc. near typical peers?

Does the student have lunch/recess during the same time and in the lunchroom with typical peers?