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Special Educators Speak Out on Co-Teaching Knowledge and Skills

Keywords

co-teaching, special education, teacher preparation, inclusive school practices



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Abstract

This study explored practices and attitudes of special educators from various states around the country regarding what they consider to be the most important elements for effective co-teaching. Results indicated that co-planning, communication skills, and shared instruction were the most critical factors in effective co-teaching. Professional development was found to be the most common way that participants gained co-teaching knowledge and skill. Future implications for research suggest that teacher preparation programs and districts use e-learning to support pre-service and in-service programs and initiatives related to co-teaching.

Introduction

Co-teaching is an instructional approach used to help ensure students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum. Some school professionals and researchers who are proponents of this instructional delivery model believe that, “at the core of co-teaching is determining what instructional techniques will be most efficient and effective in helping all students meet academic standards (Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

The Need for Research on Co-Teaching

Although research regarding co-teaching is still in need of further development in some areas such as student achievement, administrators often launch co-teaching initiatives in order to address the multiple needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities. Co-teaching has grown in popularity as a service delivery model with the potential to increase instructional equity for students with disabilities and other students who struggle while receiving their education in the general education classroom (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013). Proponents support schools and districts that initiate co-teaching in hopes that it may improve access to and progress in the general curriculum, for diverse learners, including students with disabilities (Bessette, 2008). Cook and Friend (2010) suggested that this surge in co-teaching implementation has occurred mostly as a result of the legislative mandates from the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001* (ESEA), formerly, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA). These laws make provision for students with disabilities and other learning needs to be educated in the general education classroom setting where they receive the same curriculum and instructional opportunities as their peers without disabilities (IDEA 2004). These specific legislative mandates have raised standards of academic accountability for students with disabilities which ensures that they a) have access to the general education curriculum, b) are educated in the least

restrictive school setting, and c) make progress in the general curriculum according to their potential (Cook & Friend, 2010).

Framework and Purpose

Historically, the topic of collaboration has eluded the efforts of researchers in being able to investigate and formulate it all into theory. Therefore, collaboration as a specific theory lacks a clear, widely accepted definition that spans across or within disciplines (Gajda, 2004). However, this study is based on a specific line of research (Cook & Friend, 1991; Friend & Cook, 2010; Friend & Cook, 2013) which focuses on collaboration and co-teaching. Thus, this study's purpose was to determine what special education teachers believe to be the most important factors in effective co-teaching.

Background of the Study

Kode (2002) chronicled the work of early pioneers in the field of special education which includes researchers, parents, leaders in education, and other supporters who paved the way for school doors to be opened for students with any sort of difference from mainstream society. When the nation's education system was in its fledgling stages, it was common practice for students with physical, academic, social, economic, racial and/or ethnic differences to receive inferior educational opportunities compared to the average student. Early studies indicate a period of time when over a million children with disabilities were denied access to public schools (Kode, 2002). During this time, some parents resorted to hiding their children for fear of being pressured into sending them away to institutions (Kode, 2002).

The policy of providing a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities has been foundational to special education since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, and remains as such through several reauthorizations including the latest iteration in 2004. Moreover, recent reports on classroom composition indicate that students with specific learning disabilities are increasingly joined by students with various health impairments as well as those with racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences that affect learning (Gardner & Whittaker, 2006). Thus, general and special educators often face many challenges related to providing instruction to diverse student groups in one classroom setting.

Research Question

In order to explore the beliefs of special educators regarding the most important elements to effective co-teaching, this investigation sought to answer one main research question. The work of Friend & Cook (2010, 2013) which focuses on collaboration and co-teaching was the theoretical basis for the study. The research question for this study was, "What elements or characteristics do special educators most often identify as critical to effective co-teaching?" In order to answer this question, special education teachers were solicited from different states to describe their current co-teaching status, education level and years of experience. They were also asked to list the top ten elements they believe are critical to effective co-teaching.

Demographic questions were included in the study to provide background data on each participant. These included, among others, years of co-teaching experience, area of certification, state, and gender. Additional supporting questions were related to participants' personal co-teaching experiences. These questions involved communication between co-teachers, mutual respect, and other co-teacher roles, responsibilities, and relationship matters.

Significance of the Study

Findings of this study may influence future decision-making regarding course and field experience improvement in teacher education programs and professional development related to continued school reform efforts. Preparing teachers who graduate with knowledge and skills in co-teaching would enable them to more effectively address the needs of students with disabilities and other diverse learners, in an effort to ensure that all students reach their academic achievement potential (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009).

Additionally, skills necessary for effective co-teaching have been identified as critical competencies needed by teachers in today's increasingly diverse classrooms (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Researchers highlight the role federal mandates have played in raising expectations for higher levels of collaboration among all stakeholders involved in delivering special education services to eligible students (Cook & Friend, 2010).

Definition of Key Terms

Important to this study is the vocabulary used in professional literature. The notion of collaboration in general – and in school settings in particular – is often misconstrued. Other terms are used synonymously, yet inappropriately, in relation to collaboration, such as collaborative teaching, co-teaching, inclusion, and inclusive practices (Paulsen, 2008). Major terms used in this study are defined as follows to enhance understanding:

Collaboration is a style of interpersonal relationship that exists when at least two parties have equal value and share in the decision-making process necessary for attaining a common goal (Friend & Cook, 2010).

Collaborative teaching, according to Austin, (2001) explains that in collaborative teaching, the special education teacher serves as a consultant to the general education teacher and teaches in conjunction with a general education teacher in the general classroom setting for part or all of the school day.

Co-Teaching according to Friend (2008), is an instructional service delivery approach provided by two educators. Typically, this includes a general educator, a special educator and/or another related service professional, who jointly deliver instruction in one heterogeneous classroom using their combined expertise. Students with disabilities or students who have other educational needs receive special education and related services for part or all of the school day in the general education setting alongside their peers without disabilities.

Inclusion is a belief system held by school professionals and other stakeholders who view students as most effectively educated in learning communities with high expectations for all students (Friend & Shamberger, 2008). In addition, students participate in the learning process within the least restrictive environment and with the appropriate supplementary aids and services, having full access to the general education curriculum (Friend & Shamberger, 2008).

Inclusive Practices is a term intended to convey the multidimensional nature of a school embracing a more collaborative school culture. This approach emphasizes collaboration among school-related professionals for the sake of providing a welcoming and appropriate learning community (including access to the general curriculum in the least restrictive environment) for all students (Friend & Shamberger, 2008).

Review of the Literature

Over the last several decades, public schools across the country have been experiencing significant growth (Gable & Manning, 1997; Little, 2000). At the same time, schools have seen rapidly increasing growth in diverse student populations and in the numbers of students with disabilities who receive the majority of their instruction in general education classrooms (Cook & Friend, 2010). Consequently, the call for more collaborative school settings by school reformers has continued into the present in order to address challenges associated with providing effective education for all students (Cook & Friend, 2010).

Emergence of Collaborative School Culture

Decades of federal mandates have prompted greater emphasis on developing a more collaborative climate in 21st century schools, especially between general and special education teachers regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Smith, 2005). Hence, the term inclusion, which has increasingly, become associated with school reform and collaboration. However, at no time, past or present, has the term “inclusion” ever appeared in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA), (Friend & Shamberger, 2008). Rather, inclusion is an interpretation of several components of IDEA (Hyatt, 2007). Together, these components require that the preferred setting for students with disabilities is the general curriculum setting with appropriate supplementary aids and related services (Friend & Shamberger, 2008). Thus, the heightened interest in collaboration becomes even more apparent. Districts that have initiated more collaborative school cultures often choose co-teaching as a service delivery model for providing services to students with disabilities and other special learning needs that have been included in the general curriculum classroom (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). Co-teaching also is considered a means of providing support to teachers as they address the complex academic and social needs of their students (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

Method

Research exists on the main aspects of co-teaching, however, few examine special educators' practices and attitudes about what they consider the most important co-teaching knowledge and skills. The work of Friend & Cook, (2013) which focuses on collaboration and co-teaching was the theoretical basis for the study. The study was conducted using a mixed methods survey design. An online format was used to recruit participants and collect data. Demographic information was collected and an open response question item asked respondents to list and rank up to ten of the most important elements of co-teaching knowledge and skills.

Participants and Setting

The study's participants were recruited by word-of-mouth, recommendation from a supervisor or colleague, and/or personal contact with special education teachers. Specifically, only special educators with co-teaching experience were recruited. The study was launched in a state located in the southeastern region of the United States. However, the researcher purposefully sought participants from outside the state where the study originated. Participants identified 6 different states and a foreign country as locations where they engaged in co-teaching.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted using a mixed methods design. An online format was used to invite participants to take part in the study and to collect data through completing a brief survey. Demographic information was collected as well as Likert-style items to get a snapshot of the participants' educational backgrounds and co-teaching experiences. Percentages of responses were recorded in relation to the quantitative data. The final item on the survey was an open response question which asked respondents to list up to ten factors which they considered the most important elements of co-teaching. This qualitative data was read multiple times by the researcher and several other professionals in order to identify codes and emergent themes.

Results

The total number of participants who opened the survey was forty-eight and 100% of them consented to take the study survey electronically. Of that total, 89.5% of the participants (n=43) completed the study. These respondents indicated that they had co-taught in the states of Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Maryland, Oklahoma, Texas, and the country of Japan. The majority of the participants were female – only 2 identified as male. For the purpose of this paper, the remaining sections will focus on the last item of the survey, which asked participants to list the top 10 most critical factors of effective co-teaching.

The results of this part of the study were generally consistent with findings reported in the literature regarding special educators' perceptions of co-teaching (Bryant-Davis, Dieker, Pearl, & Kirkpatrick, 2012). For example, the top 3 elements that were identified in the survey as critical for implementing and sustaining effective co-teaching were collaborative co-planning, communication skills, and shared instruction/other teaching responsibilities.

Text from the last survey item of the study was read multiple times. Many codes were assigned during the reading phase. After coding was complete, the codes were ranked according to frequency of occurrence. The chart below lists the top 10 factors which respondents considered to be most critical for effective co-teaching.

Top Factors Most Important to Effective Co-teaching	Number Responding
Co-planning and preparation	27
Communication	21
Differentiated instruction/Student needs	13
Shared delivery of instruction	11
Content knowledge	10
Respect/willing to compromise	9
Assessment	8
Classroom management	7
Knowledge of Co-teaching	6
Complimentary teaching styles/personality	4

After close analysis of the codes, several major themes emerged. They are described in this section. First, shared, joint, or “co-planning” was considered to be the number one factor for effective co-teaching. This is consistent with findings in previous studies (Bryant-Davis, et. al 2012). When special education and general education teachers lack sufficient time to plan lessons together, instruction may not be special or differentiated enough to support the academic progress of students with disabilities who are to be educated in the general education classroom setting with their peers without disabilities (Wasta, 2006).

Still in line with the professional literature, communication emerged as the second most critical element of effective co-teaching (Winch-Dummett, 2006) Researchers emphasize that strong skills in communication are central, not only to instructional delivery, but also to interactions with other school personnel, related-service providers, families and community members (Voltz & Collins, 2010). Development of these key skills is vital to the educational process.

Third, “student learning needs,” according to respondents in this study, should be the foundation on which all other efforts in the school setting are based. As one participant commented

“...student success should be at the forefront of all teaching, differential teaching styles that fit the needs of all students, activities and materials that engage all students, co-teaching that best suits student needs, a good working environment that centers on students and not teachers’ pride and focus, classroom that is more student centered.”

Shared instruction was the fourth theme to emerge as a critical element of effective co-teaching. It is well documented that a special education teacher, whose certification is equivalent to his or his general education teacher counterpart, desires and is entitled to participate in the delivery of instruction according to their area of expertise.

“Elements of collaboration & content knowledge” were viewed as equally important and shared the fifth spot on the list of essentials for effective co-teaching. Researchers (Friend and Cook (2013) have devoted much work that supports the perceptions of this study’s participants concerning collaboration and related skills. Several viewpoints exist on the level of content knowledge special education teacher’s possess (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005). This researcher espouses the idea that recognizes both the special education and general education teacher as experts in their respective fields and their contributions are to be valued equally (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007). The entire list of the most critical elements for effective co-teaching (from most to least important) are displayed in the above table.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs of special education teachers regarding what they deem to be the most important factors in effective co-teaching. This study collected quantitative and qualitative data. However, the focus of this article is the qualitative part of the study in which participants described what they believe to be the most critical elements in effective co-teaching. Basic demographic data was collected in the first part of the study. In keeping with similar past studies and the field of education in general, most of the participants were female. All of the participants were current or past special educators with co-teaching experience. These respondents had a variety of licensure areas and roughly a fourth of them reported having 5 or more years of co-teaching experience. These special educators provided a snapshot of what they believe are the most important components of effective co-teaching. This section discusses the most salient findings.

The topic of co-planning received the highest ranking, indicating a need to make time for co-teachers to share instructional planning a high priority in order to facilitate effective co-teaching. Although researchers agree that co-planning needs to occur, no longer should it be limited to face-to-face meetings, email, texting, nor relegated to quick chats in the hallway (Friend, 2014). Many technology devices like smart phones, digital platforms, and online resources enable users to conduct conference calls, virtual meetings, share calendars and other documents. These technologies remove many of the old barriers to finding time for shared planning.

Communication was ranked as the second most important element for effective co-teaching. Skilled communication consists of more than being able to send appropriate verbal messages. Non-verbal communication and listening skills are key factors in keeping lines of communication open. Additionally, knowing how to maintain professional, culturally relevant interactions with other school personnel, students and their families and the community is vital. Thus, communication is foundational to the delivery of instruction and the entire educational process.

In this study, student learning needs were highlighted as the focal point of all education-related activity. Classroom environment, lesson planning, assessment, stakeholder relations and delivery of instruction, along with many other things, all need to be student-centered. Although adults are responsible for planning and delivering instruction, managing classroom activities and routines, communicating and interacting with various groups and individuals, student academic progress and overall well-being must be kept in the forefront. One of the major thrusts of recent legislative mandates has been to allow all students, especially students with disabilities to have greater access to and be able to make better progress in the general curriculum classroom. Providing required accommodations, necessary supplemental aids and services, and specially designed differentiated instruction are to be put in place according to student need and eligibility. It's all about the students.

One way to help students get their needs met in co-taught classrooms is to ensure that both teachers share in the joint delivery of instruction. When only one teacher leads the instruction, co-teaching is not occurring. There are several co-teaching models presented in the literature (Friend & Cook, 2013; Murawski & Dieker, 2004) which can be used based on student needs and the lesson being covered. It is neither best nor effective practice to have the special education teacher serve as an assistant, when he or she is fully certified in their own area of expertise. A special educator is able to compliment the expertise of the general education teacher by providing insight into specific strategies to help a student grasp a concept or manage behavior.

Elements of collaboration and content knowledge were both ranked fifth. The topic of content knowledge is related to the previous topic addressed above, thus, additional comments here will be brief. In general, most respondents indicated that special education teachers need content knowledge. The literature supports the fact that knowledge of general curriculum content is needed. However, it does not support the notion that special education teachers need extra courses or licensure to co-teach in a general curriculum classroom setting. Neither is there evidence suggesting the opposite for general education teachers. What researchers do advocate is that both teachers in a co-teaching arrangement employ both areas of expertise to meet the needs of all the students they teach.

The final point in this discussion is that respondents viewed collaboration as a key element in effective co-teaching. When the style of professional interactions is one of collaboration, then such activities as planning lessons, delivering instruction, and maintaining classroom structures are accomplished by valuing the work that two can do together rather than

alone – for the sake of the students. Collaboration flourishes in an atmosphere of trust, mutual goals, parity, shared decisions and outcomes. Several other factors received lower rankings in this study but still play major roles in co-teaching effectiveness. They include but are not limited to administrative support, mutual respect, working with all students, and assessment. Together, all of the aforementioned topics provide insight into what special educators value most for effective co-teaching.

Recommendations/Implications

Several limitations are associated with this study. First, only special education teachers were invited to participate in the study. Including general education teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders would have provided a broader range of perspectives and perceptions. Additionally, participants were not picked from a random sample. Doing so may have resulted in different responses. Finally, although several geographic locations were represented, only forty-three participants responded to the survey. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to other settings.

Despite these common limitations, and since the findings were similar to those in previous studies, several recommendations are offered to help increase co-teaching effectiveness. Of first importance is the utilization of 21st century technologies to plan, share, document, communicate, and support teacher work as well as enhance student learning. Teacher education programs, districts, and communities, could work together to ensure candidates and teachers have the competencies to support 21st century learners. Providing more opportunities for students to develop and practice communication and collaboration skills throughout their programs might help them be more effective when placed in co-teaching positions. A final recommendation is related to developing professional dispositions. The ability to choose a collaborative attitude, even when co-teaching is not a voluntary placement is very important. So is the ability to communicate and interact professionally with persons from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Further, it is imperative that special education co-teachers be able to work with all students and prepare ahead (especially in the content area) to participate in the delivery of instruction for the common goal of seeing all students make progress.

Conclusion

Future research regarding co-teaching and what makes it effective will include a focus on academic achievement of student in co-taught classrooms and similar students in similar classrooms that are not co-taught. Investigating if and how different forms of technology facilitate co-teaching and student learning is another area of research interest. Special education teachers are educational experts in their own right. They are skilled in providing insight into student learning and behavior needs, and possessing knowledge of strategies that support greater access to the general curriculum, especially for students with disabilities. As special educators continue to hone their co-teaching skills, their voices must be kept in the forefront of 21st century education.

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