**Co-Teaching is Extra Help and Fun: Perspectives on Co-Teaching from Middle School Students and Co-Teachers**

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Abstract

In this interview study, three middle school students with disabilities (SWD) and seven without disabilities (SWOD) were interviewed about their experiences in a co-taught classroom. Also, data from their co-teachers who taught mathematics, social studies, and science were gathered. Both students and teachers reported that co-teaching provides extra help for all students and that co-teachers’ positive interactions in the class benefit students’ learning and social participation. Although some results matched other researchers’ findings that special educators are less frequently the lead teacher, our results indicated that supportive co-teaching can be effective under certain conditions. We call for a deeper examination of the supportive co-teaching model because it can be effective when there is active support provided for all students. As reported by these co-teachers and their students, aspects of parity were evidenced in the relationships between and among the co-teachers and students, even when the general educator led most of the instruction.

Keywords: co-teaching, students with disabilities, inclusive education

**Introduction**

In the most recent report to Congress on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), more students with learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, and other health impairment were among the disability categories with increased graduation rates. One reason for the increased graduation rates may be that over 60% of students receive their education in general education classrooms for more than 80% of the school day, where they access the general education curriculum.

SWD in general education classrooms promote the development of new pedagogical approaches in response to their needs. Co-teaching is frequently referred as one of these approaches and as a pedagogical practice towards positive implications for students and teachers in the United States (U.S.) and internationally (King-Sears, et al., 2014; Keefe and Moore, 2004). Cook and Friend (1995) define co-teaching as two professionals delivering instruction to diverse groups of students in one physical space. Effective co-teachers combine general educators’ content expertise with special educators’ pedagogical expertise to enrich instruction for all students (Brusca-Vega, Brown and Yasutake, 2012; Hang and Rabren, 2009). Although co-teaching has been a service delivery model for SWD for over two decades, there is still much to be discerned about how to make the most of two fully-certified educators dedicated to teaching students with diverse learning needs. For example, Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger (2010) note that ‘far more literature exists describing co-teaching and offering advice about it than carefully studying it’ (p. 9).

Generally accepted components of effective co-teaching are that (a) parity exists between the two teachers, as derived from (b) equal distribution of responsibilities, for which teachers have (c) co-planned to determine how to meet students’ needs, and (d) shared delivery of instruction occurs, such that neither teacher is perceived the primary or subordinate teacher (Cook and Friend, 1995; Davis, Dieker, Pearl and Kirkpatrick, 2012). Varied co-teaching models depict ways co-teachers work (Friend et al., 2010), with effective teams sharing roles and responsibilities, including differentiated instructional methods responsive to diverse learners’ needs (King-Sears, et al., 2014). Cook and Friend (1995) describe six models of co-teaching.

* One Teach-One Observe: One co-teacher leads large group instruction while the other co- teacher observes students.
* One Teach- One Drift: One co-teacher leads the lesson while the other co-teacher circulates and supports students offering individual assistance.
* Station Teaching: Similar to a Learning Center approach with one group of students working independently at a station, while two other groups of students are with each co-teacher.
* Parallel Teaching: Each co-teacher with half the class group, instruct the same information simultaneously.
* Alternative Teaching: One co-teacher instructs a larger group while the other co-teacher instructs an alternative lesson or the same lesson taught at a different level with a smaller group.
* Team Teaching: Both co-teachers deliver instruction interactively.

Prior research has described ‘supportive teaching’ (i.e., one teach-one assist or observe) as most commonly used among the different models (Cook, McDuffie-Landrum, Oshita and Cotheren-Cook, 2011; Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie, 2007). However, some researchers raise concerns for the dominant use of ‘supportive teaching’ when special educators are in subordinate roles (Scruggs et al., 2007) and are not providing differentiated services to SWD (Magiera and Zigmond, 2005). Roles and responsibilities should be delineated and divided more evenly among the co-teachers.

**Co-Teachers’ roles and perspectives**

Most research studies on co-teaching focus on the roles and responsibilities of co-teachers as well as on their views and opinions about their relationship (Cook et al., 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007). However, both early and recent studies continue to raise concerns with regard to the confusion that exists in the perspectives of co-teachers about their roles (Stefanidis and Strogilos, 2015; Weiss and LIoyd, 2002). For example, Weiss and LIoyd (2002) identified a lack of understanding of special educator’s role with regard to the delivery of special education in co-taught classrooms and for this reason they concluded that ‘co-teaching…was implemented to get students with disabilities into the general education curriculum without much thought of how or how well’ (p. 68). More recently, Ashton (2016), in her analyses of discourse between two middle school co-teachers, found that the special educator was more frequently ‘saving’ SWD versus helping them attain the same standards that typical students were held to. Similarly, other researchers note that special educators’ role can be more that of a teacher’s helper instead of fully-certified and fully-functional professional when co-teaching (Keefe and Moore, 2004; Scruggs et al., 2007). Other studies have also identified limitations in special educators’ roles indicating that even though two teachers were in the co-taught class, students received instruction as if in a solo-taught class (McDuffie, Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2009; Moin, Magiera and Zigmond, 2009).

What is also unclear is why or how special educators assume subordinated roles and how students perceive special educators’ assistance (Harbort et al., 2007; Keefe and Moore, 2004; Strogilos and Tragoulia, 2013). Pratt (2014) used qualitative methods to examine how effective teams overcame challenges of co-teaching. Results indicated teams’ actions evidenced their mutual desire for receiving and giving respect, trust, and parity in establishing interdependent relationships. Her findings align with others’ recommendations for co-teachers to develop these qualities (e.g. Brusca-Vega et al., 2011), yet she notes the continued need for researchers to examine how effective co-teaching relates to students’ learning experiences.

**Students’ perspectives about co-teaching**

Research on students’ perspectives on co-teaching is limited. Even though the importance of students’ perspectives on co-teaching has not received substantial attention, from the studies that exist, students identify co-teaching as both a positive experience for their learning progress as well as areas that could be improved for their learning (Bessette, 2008; Embury and Kroeger, 2012; Leafstedt, Richards and LaMonte, 2007). In Hang and Rabren’s (2009) study, 58 SWD reported positive perspectives on co-teaching and agreed that they increased their self-confidence and learning, had sufficient support, and exhibited better behavior in co-taught classrooms. In an in-depth case study implemented by King-Sears et al. (2014) on secondary students’ perspectives on co-teaching in a science class, most students thought teaching was divided in half, and all students felt that their learning needs were being met. In Wilson and Michael’s (2006) survey on the perspectives of secondary SWD and SWOD on co-teaching, both groups talked favorably about co-teaching, indicating that it has increased their reading and writing skills. In addition, both groups agreed that they would choose a co-taught class next year. Similar results were reported by Shogren et al. (2015) in their study on the perspectives of SWD and SWOD in five elementary schools and one middle school. The majority of students in these inclusive schools indicated that co-teachers were available to help any students in the class, and, interestingly, students rarely linked co-teachers to SWD or used terminology like general and special educator.

 Embury and Kroeger (2012) interviewed middle school SWD and SWOD in co-taught classrooms about their teachers’ roles and their own learning progress. Even though their data varied in different classrooms (e.g. willingness to ask for assistance), the students were positive about having two adults in the room. Interestingly, they found that when the special educator was acting as an assistant or aide in the classroom, the students showed awareness of that difference in power and status. The authors argued that their data provide good evidence for the need to apply inclusion to all members of the classroom. A more complex picture with regard to students’ perceptions of co-teaching was identified by Leafstedt et al. (2007). In their focus groups interviews, a sample of 10 high school students with learning disabilities felt that it is more useful to receive instruction in resource rooms than in co-taught classrooms, highlighting a lack of access as to what they perceived as special education. The researchers concluded that co-teaching was ineffective or overwhelming for most of the students in their study and, thus, argued that ‘perceived instructional benefit is not merely a function of who delivered the teaching, but also where’ (p. 182).

**The current study**

There is still inconsistency with regard to the parity that should exist for co-teachers’ roles and responsibilities. Most research studies on co-teaching have focused either on teachers’ perspectives and interactions (e.g. Ashton, 2016; Stefanidis and Strogilos, 2015) or on the organizational aspects (i.e. models of co-teaching, roles and responsibilities of co-teachers) (e.g. King-Sears, et al., 2014; Keefe and Moore, 2004) within a co-taught classroom. However, the literature on students’ perspectives is limited, mainly focused on secondary students, and rarely includes the perspectives of SWOD. In addition, there are very few studies which have combined both teachers’ and students’ perspectives (e.g. Hang and Rabren, 2009) in an attempt to provide an understanding of how teachers’ feelings about their roles influence students’ learning and social participation. Thus, the aim of this study is to describe and evaluate the perspectives of middle school SWD and SWOD and their co-teachers. The perspectives of students and teachers are described with regard to the roles and responsibilities of co-teachers and the impact of co-teaching on students’ learning and social progress. There were three research questions:

1. How do students and co-teachers describe the roles of co-teachers?
2. What are students’ and co-teachers’ perceptions about the academic impact of co-teaching on students’ learning?
3. How do students and co-teachers explain the social outcomes of students in the co-taught class?

**Method**

Permission to conduct this research was acquired from the university and school system. Subsequently, consents were obtained from co-teachers, parents, and students. The current study was part of a larger study on co-teaching (King-Sears and Strogilos, 2018), with this study focused on qualitative findings.

**Research design and methodological approach**

Co-teaching is considered a complex social action and, as such, needs to be described and interpreted based on the different meanings that people attribute to it within particular contexts (Schwandt, 2005). Thus, in order to describe and evaluate the experiences of co-teachers and their students, through the meanings that these participants give to this action/phenomenon, we conducted semi-structured interviews. This means that we used the participants’ opinions, experiences, and representations to empirically interpret the academic and social impact of co-teaching (Patton, 1997) by giving the participants themselves the opportunity to describe and explain specific processes (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Our aim was to get as close as possible to the research participants’ experiences in co-taught classrooms in order to raise their voices (Trainor and Graue, 2014) within their social and cultural context. As such, elements of analytic induction (Hammersley, 2010) in order to systematically examine similarities between the interviewees’ accounts to develop concepts or ideas and procedures specified in grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2008) were used to guide the conceptualization of and analysis in this study. Both approaches aim at generating theory to explain the central concepts in the data.

**Participants**

We purposefully selected two specific teams of sixth-grade co-teachers, which had the same special educator on both teams. Our goal was to study effective teams, based on administrator’s nominations. The co-teachers had taught previously with other co-teachers, but they had been together as teams for over four years. Even though they did not have previous preparation on co-teaching, their administrator considered them one of the best exemplars of co-teaching in this rural middle school because of their student’s learning and relationship with students and parents. All co-teachers taught the same group of students. From the 27 total students in the class, 10 SWD and SWOD volunteered to participate in this research. One team of co-teachers taught sixth-grade mathematics five days per week, and the same special education co-teacher and a different general educator taught social studies and science two-to-three days per week.

All students were in sixth grade. From the three SWD, one had learning disability and two speech and language impairments. Two of them were males and one female. One student was 11-years-old, and two students were 12-years-old. Seven SWOD participated in this research; two were male and five were female. The mean age for students was 12.1 and 12.0 for SWD and SWOD respectively. Seven students were Caucasian, one Hispanic, and one African-American. One SWD and two SWOD were entitled to free or reduced meals.

**Interviews**

The research occurred at the end of the school year to ensure that both students and teachers had sufficient experience in receiving and delivering co-taught instruction. All students were interviewed individually, whereas the three participating co-teachers were interviewed both individually and in their co-teaching teams. In total, we conducted 10 interviews with the students and 5 interviews (i.e. 3 individual and 2 in pairs) with the co-teachers. All interviews were conducted by the second author, lasting approximately 30 to 45 min.

We asked students to describe their experiences and feelings about (a) the roles and responsibilities of their co-teachers; (b) their learning progress (self-evaluate); and (c) their feelings about their own and their classmates’ social participation in the co-taught class. Similarly, we asked co-teachers to describe their actions working as a team and to comment on issues related to their co-teaching relationship such as (a) their same or different perspectives on teaching; (b) their style of communication; (c) their understanding of their roles (e.g. different or complementary); (d) their views on inclusion; and (e) any positive or negative co-teaching experiences they wanted to share. The main differences between the individual and group interviews were that during the group interviews, the co-teachers were asked to describe the models they use while co-teaching and to provide explanations with regard to the selected instructional practices. Additionally, had there been anything an individual co-teacher might share one-on-one but not when his or her partner was present, the opportunity was there for that. We also asked them to reflect more on their co-teaching relationship. In general, our aim was to unravel the relationship of teachers’ actions and students’ learning.

We used the first two interviews with the students and co-teachers respectively to pilot the interview guides, but because we did not identify any issues in its structure and content, we did not provide any changes. To ensure trustworthiness in our findings, we collected data from different participants (i.e., students, teachers), and we implemented individual and group interviews because, according to Trainor and Graue (2014), the perspectives of multiple stakeholders are central to our understanding and practice. As a member check, at the end of each interview the interviewer summarised the main points of the students’ and teachers’ accounts and asked whether the interviewee agrees or disagrees, and whether he/she desired to add any new information to it (e.g. So, if I were to summarise what you’ve said, I would say that …). Only one participant added new information after this question. This practice was also followed throughout the interviews by repeating some answers to students and teachers (e.g. ‘I’m hearing you saying that…or ‘By saying that do you mean…?’), asking them for confirmation.

**Analysis**

In analyzing the interview data, we followed the basic principles of grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2008): open coding, focused coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling for the development of emerging theory. Based on these systematic coding steps, all the interviews were compared for similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2008).

First, interviews were transcribed into text and read many times to obtain a sense of the topics that were embedded in the data. Students’ and teachers’ interviews were analyzed separately and later compared. After importing all interviews in Nvivo, we produced the initial codes depending on the different meanings of each phrase, line, or paragraph of the text (i.e., initial coding; line by line coding) in order to elicit the specific practices and explanations described by students and teachers. Then we created lists of all the extracts of the data for all the different codes and for each participant student and teacher. We grouped the different codes to create categories and subcategories, and then we compared all the different categories to remove redundant categories and put together categories with similar meanings (i.e. focused coding).

As a result, we elicited four main categories (or themes) from the students’ interviews at this stage: ‘students’ descriptions of co-teaching,’ ‘students’ evaluation of co-teaching,’ ‘students’ evaluation of own learning,’ and ‘students’ evaluation of social participation.’ Then, we elicited several subcategories out of the four main categories (e.g. ‘my membership in the class,’ ‘good progress in the co-taught class,’ ‘co-teaching creates positive feelings’). After that we compared the final subcategories to find links between students’ and co-teachers’ accounts. At this stage, we decided to mainly focus on the categories elicited from the students’ interviews and to compare these with similar categories emerged from the co-teachers’ (i.e. theoretical sampling). As a result of this constant comparison between the categories and subcategories produced from students’ and teachers’ interviews, we identified two unexpected through-thread categories (i.e. ‘co-teaching is extra help’ and ‘co-teaching is fun’). These categories were commonly used in students’ and teachers’ discourse as elements of successful academic and social participation in the co-taught class. Thus, we used these categories to support our main argument with regard to the practices/ actions that enhance co-teaching as elicited from the data (see results and discussion sections).

 To ensure reliability in the analysis of interviews, the two authors worked together in analyzing the first two interviews. Initially, the two authors independently analyzed two interviews in order to identify similarities and differences in the process of coding the data. After discussing the similarities and differences with regard to open codes that could be applied to each line/ paragraph of the text, a high consensus was achieved with regard to the main themes under investigation. After that, the first author independently coded all transcripts to uncover themes with particular attention to the overarching research questions that had been articulated before the collection of data (i.e. What are co-teachers’ and students’ perspectives on learning and teaching in co-taught classes? Do the experiences of and perspectives from SWD in co-taught classes differ from the experiences of and perspectives from their peers without disabilities?). However, through selective coding, the two researchers identified the most important themes for further discussion and mutually agreed on the new research questions based on the most important themes and categories.

**Results**

 **Co-teaching models**

Almost all SWD and SWOD indicated that the supportive co-teaching model (one teach-one assist or observe) was frequently used by their co-teachers. The students described the common use of supportive co-teaching using different words for the subject teachers in comparison to the special teacher. The subject teachers were commonly referred to as ‘our class teachers’ whereas the special teacher as the ‘helper’ for all the students or for some of them. No differences were identified between the descriptions of SWD and SWOD. The following quotes are indicative of students’ perspectives with regard to the co-teachers’ roles. Note that the females are the subject teachers and the male teacher is the special educator in the quotes:

*‘Ms. Z is usually the main like math teacher. Mr. X is always like the extra help.’ (SWOD)*

*‘Ms. Y is mainly like the main teacher and Mr. X is the help teacher to go to if you don’t understand something from Ms. Y’s teaching. He’s like the help teacher.’ (SWD)*

*‘Um, well like Ms. Z teaches like the basic lessons on the smart board and she asks Mr. X ‘Mr. X do you have anything to add?’ and he may add something to that. And then she is like oh that’s good because now they know and we understand more.’ (SWD)*

 Even though the common use of supportive co-teaching was evident in the students' accounts, some referred to other co-teaching models such as parallel or team teaching.

*‘...on social studies and science, both teachers can kind of go around to everybody not only one teacher trying to get to everybody, there are two teachers splitting up the class so we can get more things done since there is more people.’ (SWD)*

*‘Researcher: Tell me about when he [special educator] does math? What might he do that’s different way?*

*Student: Sometimes he might show it differently on board then have Ms. Z will show it then he might...’ (SWOD)*

 Similar to the students’ descriptions, the three co-teachers indicated the supportive co-teaching model as the most common model used both in social studies/ science and mathematics classes. It is indicative that in the co-teachers’ accounts, there were references to ‘my kids’ [SWD] and ‘her kids’ [SWOD], providing evidence of the differences that existed in the perceptions of co-teachers with regard to the education of SWD in the co-taught classroom. However, the co-teachers reported the use of alternative teaching as well as their flexibility to work with different student groups as common approaches in their practice. In particular, they mentioned that they usually start the session following the ‘supportive’ co-teaching model but then they use other models according to the needs of the class. They justified the use of more than one model as necessary because there are SWOD in the class who often need more help than the SWD.

**All students learn**

We asked all the students whether they believe that their learning has been improved in the co-taught class. Nine students indicated that they are ‘doing well’ in the co-taught classrooms, while one student without disabilities was unsure. They explained their positive responses either by referring to their good grades or to the co-teachers' informal evaluations.

*‘They kinda’… mainly say that I’m really good in each class, both classes.’(SWOD)*

*‘I think I did actually pretty well...Mostly I’ve got above Es on math test and I’m getting, plus I’ve got really good grades on the social studies.’ (SWD)*

*‘Not sure, I’m not really thinking about that.’ (SWOD)*

Six students explained their good progress due to the fact that they have two teachers in the class. Interestingly, all these were SWOD.

*‘Last year I had only one teacher, she turned her back and like I had a question and other one like can pick on me so like help me get it, not like wait until she turns back so she sees like everyone is having hands up.’ (SWOD)*

*‘It changed my learning because last year I didn’t we didn’t have third teacher like Mr. X so I wasn’t really focus about it and pay attention as well. So this year, because of Mr. X, I’m more like focused and stuff I’m learning more and paid attention and solve stuff easily than last year... they push me to do it on my own, yeah...It always goes smoothly.’ (SWOD)*

 The co-teachers were also supportive with regard to the progress of all students in the co-taught class indicating that flexibility in the co-taught classroom has positive effects on students’ learning. The special educator very vividly summed up the three teachers’ perceptions on the impact of co-teaching on all students’ learning:

*‘I also, think that they benefit from the small group. You know having two certified teachers in the classroom, that cuts the ratio in half. So, any given time if they need a help whereas the classroom there aren’t co-teachers you have to wait your turn.’ (special educator)*

**Students feel members of the class**

In addition to the students’ perceptions about their learning progress, we asked students whether they felt like members of the class and if they believed that their classmates felt like members of the class. All students indicated that they felt safe at school. Two of them mentioned that they had been ‘picked on’ by their classmates in the past but not anymore. All students said that they felt like members of the class, but only one student with disabilities was found to be unsure. He justified his low membership as the result of the time he spends out of the class for individual sessions. The majority of the students justified their positive feeling of ‘membership’ based on their active class participation as a result of their improved learning in the co-taught class.

*‘Because I’m participating and raising my hand to ask questions.’ (SWD)*

*‘Because I know now what’s going on and how to do everything so if I called on I’m not like that kid scared and just sits quit.  I know the answer to it.’* *(SWOD)*

 Almost all students supported that the majority of their classmates were good members of the class. In line with their own participation, the students justified their classmates’ membership based on active class participation.

*‘Because I have one friend and she asks a lot of questions which I feel like if you ask more questions you feel like more part of the class because then we learn more stuff.’ (SWOD)*

*‘Some kids I wouldn’t agree but I think most of them, yes... Because they don’t really pay attention and stuff, they don’t really like work but chit chat and sort of.’ (SWD)*

**Co-teaching is extra help and fun for all students**

 Almost all students talked about co-teaching as a positive experience which provides extra help and is fun. In the students' accounts, we identified many references about the funny atmosphere that co-teachers created in classes by teasing one another or the students themselves.

*‘Well like I said they make jokes. That helps that funniness and learningness. These jokes go with answers. Huh.’ (SWOD)*

*‘I would actually say you should be in this class and you actually will have fun.’ (SWD).*

*‘Um, like they don’t always make it boring like they make it fun...I don’t know how to say it but it’s like playing, yeah...that makes me like a loose and makes me laugh.’ (SWOD)*

 Similar to students’ descriptions about the fun atmosphere of co-teaching, the teachers also indicated the use of jokes as a positive aspect in the co-taught class. The three co-teachers talked extensively about their good interpersonal relationship, the respect they have for each other, and their constant communication in and out of the classroom as the ‘recipe’ for the development of a flexible and effective co-teaching relationship. The following quotation very vividly sums up the situation:

*‘We have some similar personalities in that we joke around things like that so, it’s I think the kids benefit from that. Because they see positive interactions between us you know and it causes positive interaction with them and us as well. It’s fun and they have fun. They do, I think they interact well with each other as well.’ (special educator)*

 All students used the words ‘more help’ or ‘extra help’ to describe how they feel about having two teachers in the class. Both in social studies/science and mathematics, the students referred to the presence of the second teacher as an extra resource for all students.

*‘The benefits would be if you are not really solid at it and if you need some help, you could easily ask Mr. X to help you so you could excel more. Same like math.’ (SWOD)*

*‘I like it how there is always extra person to help out.’ (SWD)*

*‘For one to teach and if kids don’t get it the other one goes around it and helps them.’ (SWOD)*

 An unexpected finding was that some students identified benefits of co-teaching for all students in the class and not only for the SWD.

*‘I like that I can rely on someone is there if I don’t understand something and I’m not holding the whole class up.’ (SWOD)*

*‘Another thing is when we are working groups Ms. Z will take one group and then Mr. X will take another group if they need help. So it’s not like people are waiting for her help when it’s like two different teachers...It’s easier to go to someone if you need help instead of stopping a whole lesson.’ (SWD)*

 When one student without disabilities was asked if the extra help that some students need affect her learning, she replied that

*‘It doesn’t really faze me because its, um I get that some kids need help and people shouldn’t judge them... it doesn’t really affect me.’*

In addition to the above positive evaluations of co-teaching, two students said that co-teaching gives satisfaction and makes them feel comfortable.

*‘Um it’s more like satisfying. Because it’s like Mr. X will be doing something and Ms. Z will then like…’ (SWOD)*

*‘I think makes me feel like more comfortable, because I don’t have to struggle with one teacher. Maybe another teacher will get me or maybe Mr. X gets me or yeah.’ (SWOD)*

 Similar positive evaluations were elicited by the co-teachers. It was very interesting that the co-teachers referred to the positive feedback they receive from parents about their co-teaching relationship and its impact on their children in order to explain the positive implications of co-teaching on students’ learning.

*‘I have to say in years past we have parents come to us and said we are so, glad our kids are with this the relationship between three of you have. Because it maybe they come from the team that they didn’t teach together. Maybe they have had teachers that very strict. But they said we appreciate you the three of, the three of you interact and our kids to get to see that. Because they are not going to see in the future because they are not a lot of co-teaching teams, certainly not the teams of three. You don’t look at us the team of three but we always think ourselves as a team of three.’ (general educator)*

*‘At Christmas time, we get gifts [laugh] we get the gifts from the kids.’* *(special educator)*

 Seven out of the ten students could not identify any drawbacks of co-teaching. However, three of them said that sometimes they get confused with the two teachers or feel that there is too much control in the class.

*‘Um, if maybe we have a project or something maybe all teachers put pressure on you. [small laugh] feel like stress or that’s about it. Maybe if you feel like you don’t need any help and they tell like things that you already know and you feel like maybe you annoyed or something because you are already know.’ (SWOD)*

*‘Um, if one teacher is talking in the back, it’s hard to catch if you are doing it right.’ (SWOD)*

*‘Student: Um, what I don’t like about having two teachers is like well they are always watching you. [small laugh]*

*Researcher: So do you mean by that if you want to do something that you are not supposed to be doing?  It’s like four eyes on you instead of two eyes?*

*Student: Yeah. [laugh].’ (SWD)*

 Co-teachers did not indicate drawbacks about co-teaching apart from that there are some students who would not benefit from co-teaching if they needed constant attention.

*‘Um, I can’t say that there is negatives as a result of co-teaching. I really don’t think that there are too many negative things that come out of it other than maybe a student that was left in the program too long, … That’s a negative thing, knowing that maybe we could have done that sooner, you know or pin pointed sooner, you know things like that.’ (special educator)*

**Discussion**

In this research study, we asked co-teachers and SWD and SWOD to describe the roles of co-teachers and to evaluate the impact of co-teaching on students’ learning and social participation. In line with other research studies (King-Sears, et al., 2014; Hang and Rabren, 2009; Wilson and Michael, 2006), the participants in the current study talked positively about the impact of co-teaching on students’ learning and social participation, and they provided several explanations and interpretations with regard to these positive experiences. Among these are two interrelated issues which have not received substantial attention in the co-teaching literature: (a) the positive interactions of co-teachers in and out of the classroom, and (b) the use of supportive co-teaching in which the special educator does not feel subordinated.

**The positive interactions of co-teachers**

Both students and co-teachers talked extensively about the positive atmosphere in the class due to the good chemistry between the co-teachers, which created a friendly, humorous, and secure environment for all students. The good interpersonal relationship that these teachers had outside the class was also evident within the class, which seemed to result in the students feeling safe and motivated to learn. The fact that the co-teachers attributed the positive results of co-teaching to their good interpersonal relationship is very important and provides a good research evidence that supports Murawski’s (2010) argument that co-teaching is like a marriage. It is worth mentioning that some research studies at the early stages of co-teaching (see review by Scruggs et al., 2007) provided information about the compatibility of co-teachers or referred to co-teaching as a marriage that requires effort, flexibility, and compromise for success. More recently, a review on preservice teachers’ co-teaching experiences (Shin, Lee and McKenna, 2016) revealed that personality played an important role in the development of a good co-teaching relationship. Contrary to our research findings, the two review studies (Scruggs et al., 2007; Shin et al., 2016) identified several challenges in the interpersonal relationship of special and general educators threatening the effectiveness of co-teaching, primarily due to the special educators’ role as subordinate to the general educators’ role.

The impact of co-teaching’ association with co-teachers’ interpersonal relationship requires further attention since it affects issues of parity, respect, and trust that are featured in the co-teaching literature as prerequisites for positive co-teaching impact (Cook et al., 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007). Most importantly, in the current study, the good interpersonal relationship between the co-teachers promoted the development of a caring environment or, borrowing one of our student participant’s words, an environment in which ‘There is always someone there to help me.’ Any student who needed extra help could approach any of the teachers. The fact that these words were stated by SWOD evidences acceptance of both co-teachers as supporting their learning; students did not express a division between SWD and SWOD. Shogren and her colleagues (2015) also reported similar findings from SWOD who described the presence of two teachers as ‘helpful’ (p. 252). As a result, SWOD did not seem to feel any stigma towards students who needed extra help. Similarly, SWD did not seem to feel alienated in the general education classroom as a result of teaching practices which overemphasise individual instruction only for them (Strogilos and Tragoulia, 2013). The students in the observed co-taught classroom were satisfied with the individual support provided by both co-teachers. Consequently, when the co-teaching model focuses on the special educator in an assistive role, more examination is needed to determine whether the role is subordinate such that SWD are not receiving the support they need (cf: Magiera, Smith, Zigmond and Gebauer, 2005; Magiera and Zigmond, 2005; Scruggs et al., 2007) or whether SWD and SWOD are receiving desired support, such as was found in this study.

**Supportive co-teaching**

Although students and co-teachers in this study indicated the use of different co-teaching models, they also identified supportive co-teaching as most commonly used. Many studies focusing on co-teachers’ perspectives have indicated issues of parity during supportive co-teaching describing a subordinated role for the special educator (Keefe and Moore, 2004; Scruggs et al., 2007). Issues of parity have also been highlighted by students as a critical factor in achieving positive co-teaching outcomes (Bessette, 2008; Embury and Kroeger, 2012). However, contrary to other research studies, the special educator in the current study did not feel subordinated to the general educators when he was in a supportive role. Both students and teachers felt that the co-teachers were contributing equally in the classroom for the benefit of all students. In addition, both teachers and students valued the individual support that the special educator offered to all students, and that both co-teachers were available to offer support.

The fact that co-teachers were offering help to all students promoted equality in co-teachers’ roles. It is indicative that students in Embury and Kroeger’s (2012) study voiced the need for inclusion to apply to all members of a classroom (i.e. students and teachers). Even though the co-teachers in the current study had different roles during supportive co-teaching, both teachers and students described these roles as complementary with positive implications for all students. This is an important finding which calls for more elaboration on the development of the supportive co-teaching model, especially as a model which takes into consideration the different training backgrounds that general and special educators bring into the co-taught classroom. Thus far, research has found approaches evidencing more division than collaboration of general and special educators in the co-taught classroom (e.g. Stefanidis and Strogilos, 2015; Embury and Kroeger, 2012; Harbort et al., 2007; Keefe and Moore, 2004; Leafstedt et al., 2007; Magiera and Zigmond, 2005; Moin et al., 2009). However, the participants in the current study identified positive learning and social outcomes for all students because of the co-teachers’ positive interactions and due to the fact that there was always one teacher available to help them.

**Reconsidering dominant assumptions about supportive co-teaching**

The three co-teachers in this study created a positive learning environment that was supportive of students’ learning and social participation due to the co-teachers’ good interpersonal relationships and the strong feeling of parity, even during supportive co-teaching. Because researchers identify concerns when the supportive co-teaching is the most frequently-used model by co-teachers (cf: Scruggs et al., 2007), more attention to the elements of its effectiveness should be given. As a result, we argue for a reconceptualization of the supportive co-teaching as a model which can be equally effective under two important conditions: (a) when it is applied for all students, and (b) when co-teachers alternate between the ‘leader’ and ‘assistant’ roles so that each co-teacher has each role, promoting parity. Thus, it is not the model itself that should be the focus of the controversy, but focus on how co-teachers carry out practices during delivery of supportive teaching to address issues of co-teachers’ parity.

We maintain that there can be a shift from a subordinate supportive co-teaching role to a valued and valuable observation and assistant role, but only when the co-teaching team members determine the supportive behaviors to occur throughout the co-taught lesson in which either co-teacher is the lead. Indeed, the supportive co-teacher must be attentive to what students are doing during the instruction and be active in responding to students’ needs. The supportive co-teacher should be proactive in anticipating students’ needs. For example, McKenna et al. (2015) analyzed co-teachers’ behaviors to determine evidence-based practice use during co-taught lessons and found little use of opportunities to respond and specific praise statements, behaviors that both co-teachers should use, but surely targeted for use by the supportive co-teacher who is in a better position to observe students exhibiting behaviors worthy of such praise.

**Limitations**

The above findings must be cautiously viewed and interpreted due to the limitations of this study. These limitations reflect the many challenges associated with qualitative research, interview studies in particular. Since through interviews we measured the perceived efficacy of co-teaching, we are not sure that our findings represent the actual impact of co-teaching in the researched classroom. Qualitative unstructured observations would have helped in verifying the implementation of the described co-teaching models, and the corresponding outcomes to the participating students. In addition to the above limitations, the participants selected in this study represent a purposive but small sample and, hence, comparisons cannot be made across a wide range of co-taught classrooms. In addition, a very small number of SWD was included, limiting the representation of this group

**Future research and implications for instruction**

For future research, although some studies investigated the learning of SWD and SWOD in co-taught classes (Brusca-Vega et al., 2011; Hang and Rabren, 2009; Murawski, 2006), more research is needed in this area. Do SWD learn more in solo-taught versus co-taught classes? Examining learning outcomes for SWD and SWOD is critical because learning should be evident for all students, not just one group or the other. Future research should also continue to include SWD and SWOD so that their voices influence what and how co-teachers plan and deliver instruction.

Professional development for co-teachers should focus on how two teachers in a co-taught class can build a good relationship and consensus for their forthcoming roles and responsibilities. For example, what practices empower special educators during the supportive co-teaching model? If the general educator is often or always the lead teacher, why? Communication skills, as evidenced by the co-teachers in the current study, leads to examining the interpersonal relationships between co-teachers. Professional development could focus on effective ways to use personal strengths in communicating as well as realizing each has non-preferred communicative skills – which may be their partner’s preferred skills. Compromise must occur, because in no areas should one co-teacher predominate.

One of the things that came out clearly in all interviews was the positive relationships and respect the students had for the teachers and vice versa. From their descriptive words, one could envision a supportive versus pressure-filled learning environment. The relationships create the environments, and the relationships cannot be taught, per se. That is, co-teachers do not have to be personal friends, but that these co-teachers had professional respect and listened to each other to develop, or change, learning activities seemed to be at the core of their relationship.

We close with four guidelines for co-teachers to consider when the supportive model is being used. The first guideline is about whether the same co-teacher is often or always assisting or observing. If so, make sure to change up those roles frequently. The second guideline is whether the co-teacher in the assistive or observing role feels he or she is in a lesser role, is subordinate to the other co-teacher, or is not being allowed to take on a greater role. If a co-teacher responds affirmatively to these queries, then parity is an issue that should be explicitly and immediately addressed. The third guideline is whether a co-teacher who feels in a lesser role is advocating for him or herself; if not, he or she should advocate. Finally, the last guideline is that it is critical that the co-teacher in the assist or observe role is intentional about the role. That is, grading papers or working on laptops or similar tasks do not equate to assisting or observing. Be clear and intentional: What is being assisted and for whom? All students or just SWD? What is being observed for, and to what end? That is, plan for the assist role; plan for the observe role. These can be important roles, but must be intentional.

Conclusion

The importance of the current research is in the voices from SWD and SWOD who take researchers beyond observing what students are doing to what students are feeling. Absent hearing their voices, one might observe the classroom instruction and relegate it to the one-teach one-assist/observe, generally considered the less effective co-teaching model, primarily because it is not clear the co-teacher in that role is an active contributor to students’ learning during instruction. As such, generally this is thought to promote the lack of parity between co-teachers. But feedback from students in the current study revealed they did not feel lack of parity was occurring, at least in ways that adversely impacted their learning. Conversely, students liked having two teachers in the classroom because there was always someone to ask for help, the co-teachers created a ‘fun’ learning environment, and students felt they were learning well.

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