Perceptions of Novice Co-Teachers on Co-Planning, Co-Teaching and Co-Assessing

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This study examines the perceptions of novice, voluntary, general and special educators on co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing in an attempt to provide all students increased learning outcomes in a high school setting. After careful examination of the data emergent themes included commitment to the voluntary teaching approach of co-teaching, the need for professional development, and a dedication to implementing research validated practices within the co-teaching model to improve student outcomes.

Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate the perceptions of novice co-teachers whom are engaged in the change process with support at the high school level. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and calls for increased accountability through testing, and annual yearly progress (AYP) for all students, including those with disabilities.

The reauthorization of ESEA requires educators to use scientifically-validated research-based instructional practices to increase all students’ performance outcomes. In addition to using evidenced based practices, ESEA mandates that public schools close the achievement gap in education based on race, ethnicity, language, and disability. Congress included all students to ensure that students with disabilities would benefit from improved instruction and places additional attention on academic achievement (NCLB, 2001; Yell, Rogers, & Lodge Rodgers, 1998).

Given the current focus on raising disadvantaged students’ achievement, teachers at a local Florida high school engage in co-teaching as the possible answer to increasing student outcomes. Researchers quickly found that one participant’s statement became the groups’ paradigm “we are constantly reflecting in between classes, always talking about
what we need to do next period to make it smoother or what didn’t work and be like, wow that didn’t work, what do we need to do next”. The teachers in this study share a refreshing perspective on a teaching approach that does not always receive positive praise.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study, Perceptions of Novice High School Co-teachers on Co-Planning, Co-Teaching and Co-Assessing, was to evaluate the perceptions of general and special educators on the conventions and implementations of co-teaching in an inclusive environment that includes all dimensions of the teaching and planning cycle as it pertains to collaborative teaching literature. The study focused the early phases of co-teaching and delivery of joint instruction, role parity and the collaborative plan for implementation in co-teaching. The following are the research questions this study addresses:

- What are novice high school teacher perceptions of their current co-teaching assignment?
- Do novice high school co-teachers reveal unique characteristics while engaged in a professional learning community transitioning from isolated teaching to collaborative teaching?

**Literature Review**

Mandated accountability measures requires school districts to make AYP, the federal government monitors the achievement that all students have retained annually (Hallahan & Kaufman, 2004). The goal of AYP is to have 100% of the students, including students with disabilities, achieving the set state academic standards. In order to make AYP, school districts must meet the student performance requirements in each tested subject area, include 95% of the student population in the assessments, and meet the overall school progress standards. States must provide evidence that indicates measurable progress towards the goal of all students achieving state academic standards in the specified content areas. Schools that fail to meet AYP are at risk of consequences including state takeover (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007).

**Learning Disabilities**

Students with disabilities in the 4th and 8th grades scored approximately one standard deviation lower than their grade level peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Wave 2 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study reported that 77% to 86% of students with disabilities continue to score below the mean of the general education population (SEELS.org).

The majority of grade eight students are transitioning to secondary school already below proficiency according to the NLTS2 research summary which states “…more than three-quarters of youth with disabilities score below the mean across subtests”. The achievement gap between students with and without disabilities is evident.
Because of ESEA and AYP, students with disabilities have been integrated into the general education setting to receive instruction by highly qualified content area teachers. On average, over 90% of general education teachers provide academic instruction to students with disabilities.

With as many as two million adolescents identified with having a learning disability, the inclusive model of education requires general education teachers to use instructional practices that meet the needs of all students and to understand the nature of the students’ disabilities (Anderson, Yilmaz, & Wasburn-Moses, 2004).

Co-Teaching

The principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004, and NCLB require all teachers to be highly qualified. As a result, students with disabilities must receive content instruction from highly qualified content area educators that provide evidenced-based instruction in the least restrictive environment while also being provided with mandated accommodations by highly qualified special educators (Turnbull III, 2005; Zigmond, 2003).

In efforts to provide the LRE for students with disabilities, public schools have included students with disabilities in the general education classroom, which also sets the stage for a collaborative environment for special and general education teachers (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005).

Collaboration among teachers in general is often impromptu or is initiated by administrators during school in-services and professional developments. Teachers commonly work in isolation and maintain their individual classroom responsibilities without extensive support or communication with other teachers (Hindin, Morocco, Mott, & Aguilar, 2007). Hindin, Morocco, Mott, & Aguilar defined collaboration as planning, enacting, and reflecting upon his/her own teaching. Teacher collaboration provides opportunities for teachers to learn from one another in a safe context.

Collaboration facilitates the exchange of pedagogical content knowledge and instructional strategies between teachers. All students benefit when teachers work together. Lesson planning between the general and special educators is especially beneficial because of the combination of expertise (Cawely, 1994). Although there is a limited amount of research focused on co-teaching at the secondary level, schools are increasingly turning to co-teaching models due to the transition to inclusive classrooms (Dieker, 2001).

Co-teaching is one of the most used instructional models that incorporate the collaboration of general education and special education teachers. According to Cook & Friend (1995), co-teaching is defined as two professionals delivering instruction together to an inclusive body of students in a single physical space. Cook and Friend (1995) further defined co-teaching:

Co-teaching…encompasses collaboratively assessing student strengths and weaknesses, determining appropriate educational goals and outcome indicators, designing intervention strategies
and planning for their implementation, evaluating student progress toward the established goals, and evaluating the effectiveness of the co-teaching process. (p. 2)

There are five types of co-teaching: (a) one teach, one lead; (b) station teaching; (c) parallel teaching; (d) alternative teaching; and (e) team teaching. Each model offers benefits to the learning environment (Dieker, 2007; Cook & Friend, 1995).

In accordance with IDEA and NCLB, students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms to benefit from instruction delivered by content area experts. Co-teaching provides a solution for the separation of the content specialist and learning strategies specialists (Zigmond, 2006) and creates a learning environment where general education science teachers and special education teachers successfully collaborate to improve academic outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities (Cawley, 1994).

**Methods**

A qualitative study was used to examine the perceptions of general and special educators of content instruction in co-teaching classrooms of novice co-teachers. Grbich (2007) states conducting phenomenological studies apart from individual research questions an overarching question may include “how does the individual’s understanding of the label impact on his/her experience of self in relation to others” in studying the phenomena of co-teaching methods, this question helped guide researchers in the process of this research (pg 93).

The participants were highly qualified in either a content area or special education and located in Orange County. All of the participants were from the same school and the school was chosen based on a research partnership with the research team at the University of Central Florida (UCF). UCF is providing on-going professional development and is also the host site for dissertation research this school year. The participants were recruited using an informative flyer about the study.

Participants included in the study were required to be highly qualified in their field and deliver content area instruction (general educator) or special education support (special educator) in a co-taught classroom. Interested participants provided the consent protocol in accordance with the University’s International Review Board (IRB) process. Their agreement to participate was acknowledged and they indicated their understanding and agreement to participate in the study.

Interviews were then scheduled on a professional development day and was provide a menu like option for the teachers’ convenience and allowed for the teachers’ the option to refuse participation because there were other professional development session they could have chosen.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected by conducting interviews on a professional development day created for co-teachers in an effort to support the transition to co-teaching. The interviews were voluntary as the teachers held a schedule that was much like a menu and they had the
choice of participating in the interviews each of the scheduled 30 minute rotations in the professional development day. The interviews were convenient for the participants as they were not required to take any additional time out of their day and the interviews all occurred in the school were the teachers instructed.

The interviews were conducted and audio taped in order to gather information directly from the participants and to be transcribed on a later date. In order to maintain participant confidentiality and to comply with Institutional IRB approval, all interviews were coded with an interview number and audiotapes were destroyed following transcription.

Data Analysis

Data was collected in the form of running field notes in addition the interviews were audio taped to capture all of the details in the interviews. Subsequent to all interviews being conducted and recorded, the researchers reviewed and transcribed the audiotapes in order to extract common themes. The videotapes were destroyed after the transcriptions, per IRB approval.

The major themes that emerged as data were analyzed were teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and limitations of co-teaching for educators and students: and the strategies and accommodations used in order to address the academic needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Detailed discussion about the themes will be presented in the study’s findings section.

Findings

Three major themes emerged as the data was analyzed. Commitment to co-teaching as a new model for student achievement, the need for professional development and a dedication to implementing research validated practices within the co-teaching structure to impact student outcomes was the overarching themes that emerged. The major themes will be explored in the section below.

Commitment to Co-Teaching

From the work of Cook and Friend (1995) individual teachers who voluntarily come into co-teaching assignments bring certain characteristics, knowledge, and skills to the co-teaching situation. Teachers who, (a) have personal characteristics that enable them to work effectively with another adult, (b) have sets of common knowledge and skills, (c) have discipline-specific knowledge and skills and, (d) come into co-teaching voluntary are better suited for collaborative engagement. The interviews exposed all of the above qualities and an overall satisfaction with co-teaching.

The teachers were comfortable sharing the teaching responsibility with their co-teacher and all eight expressed an overall satisfaction with their current co-teaching placement and role. However, the special education teachers in the study express an overall dissatisfaction with the amount of time they have to collaboratively co-plan as they are stretched thin because of large caseloads (22+) managing Individual Education Plan (IEP) data and federal compliance issues regarding IEPs.
General education teachers also expressed dissatisfaction with planning time as well but understood that their respective co-teacher had to manage what one teacher expressed as a “second full-time job”. This study closely mirrors larger studies addressed in co-teaching.

Planning time is pin-pointed as being the derailment of the co-teaching. Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007) identify planning in co-teaching as a key variable that leads to success. Little and Dieker (2009) offer collaborative planning as being necessary to better prepare the team for in class delivery of the content in secondary settings and suggest this planning time never be compromised.

Dieker (2001) suggests important characteristics to implement in a successful secondary co-taught classrooms are setting aside plan time that is sacred. Yet, when asked, teachers are unsatisfied with the volume of time allotted to planning for co-delivery of curriculum (Scruggs et. al 2007, Dieker 2001). The teachers in this study have all stated planning is difficult and that they give up personal time, lunch, after school, before school and in the evening to plan appropriately for in class delivery.

Teachers also stated that the reflection process or assessment of daily lessons where the focus was more on their teaching behaviors is beneficial. Yet, they shared that time was not available to reflect and implement adjusted lessons from reflective practice. At best, one teaching pair reflected between classes and made instructional decisions on the fly. For instance one teacher commented that the depth of her and her co-teacher’s reflection sounded like this, “wow that didn’t work, what do we need to do next?”.

Brody (1994) uses a systematic reflective practitioners’ approach within the co-teaching construct, this approach uses three phases (a) establishing trust with an interview guide and setting goals, (c) reflection on action and unique to this program is (c) reflections-in-action. These teachers are exercising the reflections-in-action portion of this reflective practice and given time would most likely implement the three pronged approach to reflection and develop more in-depth lessons where professional growth and implementation is apparent. Another teacher who suggests time is constantly an issue says:

“Well I got the planning book [referring to the collaborative co-plan book by Dieker] and gone through a lot of trainings about how you plan with co-teachers, but the model that I use for teaching is a lot of technology. I mean, she [referring general education teacher] had already taught these classes and has emailed me the calendar and says this is what we are going to do and whenever you think there is a need, please add it. And whenever a new lesson has started, she [referring to the general education teacher] would email me the powerpoints and the content and then I would make adaptations to it. I really feel the standing model we use would be technology. We have done a lot with the emails and our I-phones and so I think even though we don’t have too many planning times, we still continue modifying and changing curriculums and we are really good and respectful to each other and we would jump in and assist without feeling like we are stepping on the other person’s toes because each of us has something of value to offer.”
Through technology mediated planning tools, Langone (1998) offers the use of technology tools as solutions to teachers facing the dilemma of not enough planning time. Another teacher captures the idea that they want coaching, but yet they do not want to leave their respective classrooms.

“So far, we have done stuff [professional development] for the Florida Inclusion Network where they came to the school and they did co-teaching training along with the in-service we are doing today. That’s about it. Some of the training that she [referring to her co-teacher] has gone through, I have already done, so I don’t want to get out of work for a training that I have already done, because that would mean a sub would be with our kids. I would love to have specific coaching from content co-teachers who have already been through what we just are starting [referring to co-teaching] and help us to implement positive co-teaching so all the kids do better.”


Pairing technology planning tools and on-line coaching had a positive effect on teachers planning and provided support for successful implementation of inclusive practice. Teachers need support and expanded planning time especially in the early phases of co-teaching implementation, the teachers in this study shared that technology is a useful tool for such endeavors.

**Need for Professional Development**

Lack of professionally trained teachers in co-taught settings contribute to the volume of students performing poorly even after placed in a co-taught classroom. Dieker and Little (2005) argue professionally trained teachers monitor data, make assessment and instructional decisions based on the data obtained.

When two professionals are assigned one classroom the roles are often undefined leading to confusion. Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox, and Wassell (2008) believe that starting a dialogue of co-teaching responsibilities is appropriate for the pre-service science teacher; when given co-teaching responsibilities, they found teachers develop collaborative skills and are able to communicate and co-deliver lessons for the advancement of the students.

However, for teachers currently in the classroom who are co-teaching, on-going professional development is advised (Little & Dieker 2009, Dieker & Little 2005, Dieker & Murawski 2003). Dieker and Little (2009) use a co-teaching implementation planning form that itemizes professional development and planning time as key elements to best-practices of collaborative teaching in secondary settings.

With more and more students with disabilities being placed in the general curriculum, schools turn to collaborative teaching. Without sufficient planning time and
pedagogical instruction on the implementation of effective co-teaching, students with disabilities will not increase their overall outcomes. However, when given training the classroom teachers still lack the ability to transfer skills into co-taught classrooms.

Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007) found teachers who had received professional development still implementing practices that are not considered best practice in co-teaching, in all co-teaching studies at the secondary level. Researchers have identified a lack of urgency or a perceived importance on behalf of the classroom teacher to implement professional development; therefore, they do not incorporate the practices into their classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Kennedy, 1997).

Fuchs and Fuchs state, “…given, the widespread illiteracy and innumeracy among children with (and without) disabilities, it would seem incomprehensible and inexcusable that practitioners fail to use available, research-backed solutions to these important problems” (p.126). Research is not persuasive enough to translate into mobilizing teachers willing to expand practices. Kennedy (1997) suggests “…if research encouraged teachers to reconsider their prior assumptions, it might ultimately pave the way for change” (p. 7).

In co-teaching there are best practices that have been isolated (Dieker 2001; Dieker & Murawski 2003), that when implemented by teachers, results improve student outcomes, yet the characteristics of effective collaborative teaching are seldom observed (Scruggs et al 2007). The teachers in this study however, are convinced and perceive an urgency that calls them to implement research validated practices but are conflicted on how best to do it. One teacher expresses:

“I want to make a difference and do for the kids what they need, I am just not sure how to get off the map [district pacing guides] of what the district requires and do what the research says, I mean I would, I just am not confident that I can, and I mean, I can leave the map as I have a duty to teach and a duty to help kids too, yeah I, I know some are failing [referring to kids assigned to the class] and I want to do whatever it takes to help them achieve, I am just not sure how within the restraints that my districts implies”.

Dedication to Implement Research Validated Practices

There are five typical models of co-teaching as defined by the literature, (a) one teach, one support/drift/assist; (b) station teaching; (c) parallel teaching; (d) alternative teaching; and (e) team teaching. Each model offers benefits to the learning environment (Dieker, 2007; Cook & Friend, 1995). Within the co-teaching structure of the novice teachers all eight confirmed the primary method employed has been one-teach, one-drift.

This parallels the research of Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007) as they point out in a meta-synthesis that the one-lead one assist model, although not best practice in co-teaching, is the model most widely observed in all co-teaching studies at the secondary level. The teachers in this study express that the model is new and that they are figuring out ways to implement the research-based models:
“So, she [referring to the general education teacher] will be saying, this is what we need to teach or this is what I will be doing with my other classes and I will try and be like maybe the two lowest kids we have we will review a concept. For example, many kids are struggling in writing and I am going to, after thanksgiving, teach mini-lessons on writing strategies, like in station teaching, I think that, I know, I will adapt too and fit that to what they [the students] need and if that is not effective at that point, we will use the other model [alternative teaching] where there are people [students] we will pull out and give the ones, give them lessons to remediate writing skills further and see how that goes.”

Effective co-teaching requires teams of teachers to co-plan, co-assess, and co-instruct (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker 2007). These three components are the keys to effective co-teaching and are also the genesis of challenges that teachers experience, however the teachers in this study understand the models and are working towards implementing models other than one-teach one-assist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study, Perceptions of Novice High School Co-teachers on Co-Planning, Co-Teaching and Co-Assessing, was to evaluate the perceptions of general and special educators on the conventions and implementations of co-teaching in an inclusive environment that includes all dimensions of the teaching and planning cycle as it pertains to collaborative teaching literature from the novice co-teachers’ perspective. The study focused effective co-teaching requirements where teams of teachers to co-plan, co-assess, and co-instruct (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker 2007). The data gained from the interviews helped the researchers answer the research questions. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are novice high school teacher perceptions of their current co-teaching assignment?

Contrary to the co-teaching literature, all of them are positively taking on the co-teaching role, they are commitment to co-teaching, they all view the students as “our” kids, they agree on the need for professional development, and are dedication to implementing research validated practices within the co-teaching model to improve all student outcomes. As seen in the above figure, when novice co-teachers take on co-teaching in a voluntary manner the formula is commitment + on-going professional development + a dedication to implementing research validated practices = positive student focused environments where change is possible.

When addressing the second research question:

2. Do novice high school co-teachers reveal unique characteristics while engaged in a professional learning community transitioning from isolated teaching to collaborative teaching?
Overall, the high school teachers in this study are unique as they have already emerged as real teams, viewing the student as “our” kids. All eight of the teachers are positive and not willing to give up, none of the teachers held negative beliefs about one another or the kids that they were aiming to raise achievement scores for and more impressively “with”.

The overall satisfaction and dedication with co-teaching these novice high school co-teacher teams have exhibited is exciting and as the research suggests that voluntary teacher teams work towards inclusion (Cook & Friend, 1995) this study has strengthened that argument.

The findings in this study will credit the teams and perhaps motivate them to continue moving in the right direction helping all kids. The teachers in this study are uniquely positive, dedicated, willing to try new models of teaching and are able to implement the use of creative solutions to remedy the lack of planning time allotted all for the sake of student outcomes.
References


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