

Co-teaching in Classrooms: Literature review of teachers' perspective, readiness, and knowledge

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a literature review of teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding co-teaching. It offers an analysis of studies that address how teachers of students with disabilities viewed co-teaching in the classroom. The resultant discussion indicates that co-teaching is a supportive and meaningful teaching practice for increasing the access of students with disabilities to general education. The literature review shows that a positive perspective on the use of co-teaching has been observed. However, this review also highlights the need for additional training to create an appropriate learning environment while co-teaching. Finally, this paper discusses how educators can support the use of co-teaching and how to resolve barriers impeding successful co-teaching.

Keywords: Co-teaching, teaching students with disabilities, special education teachers, inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Education is recognized as a crucial element of a functioning community, meaning that the effectiveness of approaches towards its implementation is a major concern of society. Enhanced demands regarding the quality of education and its specific character introduce the need for new methods of teaching that will be able to combine different fields of science and knowledge to attain positive outcomes (Gately & Gately, 2001). Under these conditions, the approach known as 'co-education' has acquired top priority in the modern educational sphere. Thus, this paper explores and tests the notions that co-teaching demonstrates high efficiency in different settings and is positively evaluated by educators if they have appropriate collaborative skills.

Co-teaching is the continuous cooperation between two or more educators with the central aim of organizing, instructing, and making assessments of the same group of pupils (Gately & Gately, 2001). Today, co-teaching between general and special educators has become a common method to deliver services and ensure that all pupils will understand the presented material (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). The efficiency of the approach is based on the teamwork of several specialists who possess expertise in different spheres (Gerlach, 2017). By combining their perspectives on the delivery of educational service and sharing experience, such co-teachers create a new working environment characterized by enhanced results (Magieram, Smith, Zigmond, & Gebauer, 2005).

Co-teaching therefore presupposes the close cooperation and establishment of specific relations between all educators who use the model. There are eight components of a co-teaching relationship that impact the final result and should be considered when examining the efficiency of the approach and its potential impact on students. These are: interpersonal communication, physical arrangement, familiarity with the curriculum, goals, instructional planning, presentation, classroom management, and assessment (Gately & Gately, 2001). All of these aspects are critical for the acquisition of enhanced outcomes and the successful implementation of co-teaching in real-life conditions. Murawski and Swanson (2001) suggest that the inclusion of all these components – with the primary aim of creating a joint approach – has become one of the most important tasks of educators today. However, there are different perspectives on the methods by which co-teaching should be used and introduced. Moreover, teachers' readiness to engage in the type of relations necessary for successful co-teaching has also been doubted and requires further research.

Therefore, the central aim of this literature review is to fill this gap in knowledge about co-teaching and educators' readiness to participate in this specific activity. Simultaneously, the relevant scientific literature and research convey diverse perspectives on this issue and reveal teachers have varying experiences when working with other specialists. By analyzing the sources selected for the current review, we will be able to compare the existing findings and discuss them in relation to the efficiency of co-teaching and specialists' readiness. This literature review also aims to find credible evidence regarding the enhanced efficiency of co-teaching in terms of modern society and the complexity of tasks students and their educators might encounter.

While co-teaching can be implemented at different grade levels and in under varying conditions when educators believe its use can achieve appropriate results, its use is most commonly explored in elementary and middle schools (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). Students with disabilities might also require specific tailored instruction during their middle or high school years, and thus educators often use co-teachers to meet these particular needs at the secondary level (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). At the secondary level, the method faces numerous challenges due to the specificities of the environment and individuals' needs. This literature review might help provide insight into these problems and highlight teachers' actions that can overcome these potential barriers.

Despite the problems that might arise during the implementation of the co-teaching approach in real-life settings and its further use, students generally have a positive response to the method's efficiency. However, teachers' opinions regarding the approach are mixed (Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, & Patterson, 2016). Different educators demonstrate various perspectives on the further development of co-teaching and its apparently positive impact on the educational sphere. This diversity in attitudes is preconditioned by the complexity of the tool and significant differences in teachers' readiness for and beliefs about co-teaching. A more comprehensive investigation into the efficiency of the method might be needed to prove its promising potential and the necessity of its use in diverse conditions.

Co-teaching's efficiency is not always apparent when applied to complex cases and in highly specific conditions. For instance, providing meaningful education to children or students with disabilities is often complicated by the numerous additional factors that must be taken into account by educators in such settings (Hanover Research, 2012). The question of whether co-teaching can be utilized in work with students with disabilities while adequately providing them with the knowledge needed has become topical. The diverse perspectives on this question are reflected in the following literature review, which assesses teachers' beliefs about the impact of co-teaching on different groups of students and how it affects their academic successes.

Finally, co-teaching creates the basis for instigates vigorous debates related to other innovative methods of teaching (Friend & Barron, 2016). There is a wide array of tools available to educators striving to attain enhanced results. (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & Mcculley, 2012). While some of these innovative approaches do not involve co-teaching, many of them do combine with the co-teaching method to obtain better results and ensure that all groups of students – including those with disabilities – will be able to acquire the necessary knowledge. For this reason, this literature review also suggests the need for a comprehensive investigation into teachers' perspectives regarding how co-teaching could be successfully integrated with other approaches.

Thus, this literature review covers the most important aspects of co-teaching in contemporary education. It provides an in-depth overview of educators' beliefs related to the implementation, use, and effectiveness of this approach. Moreover, teachers' readiness and understanding of the basic characteristics and modules of co-teaching is explored. Finally, the document reveals the issue of professional needs that might arise in terms of the implementation of co-teaching. Overall, the primary purpose of this research is to fill the gap in knowledge regarding this method, its characteristics and effects, and educators' perspectives on it.

2. Sources of Information

Several databases were employed in the research for this literature review. The EBSCO databases, including the *Academic Search Complete*, *Education Full Text*, *OmniFile Full Text Mega*, *General Science Full Text*, *EBSCO Professional Development Collection*, and *Social Sciences Full-Text* databases, provided most of this study's sources. In addition, the EBSCO's *eBook Collection* and *ebRARY*, which contain the full texts of books, were utilized, as were the databases *Google Scholar*, *Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC)*, and *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*. The search was limited to academic journals and books and, where possible, only peer-reviewed sources were employed. The articles included in this literature review were published between 1997 and December 2017. The keywords searched included individual or paired searches of the following terms: *Co-teaching*, *co-teacher*, *co-planning in teaching*, *collaboration in teaching*, *special education and general education teachers*, *competencies*, *knowledge and skills*, *special education*, and *co-educating*. To ensure a comprehensive result, research was expanded to encompass all teachers (i.e., including special education, general teachers and administrative staff).

3. Discussion

Teachers' attitudes towards co-teaching must be determined as a starting point. Austin (2001) analyzed the beliefs of 139 collaborative teachers from nine school districts in New Jersey regarding the co-teaching approach. The researcher adopted a single survey approach to collect their information. The findings show that the majority of teachers consider co-teaching worthwhile (Austin, 2001). Additionally, respondents agreed that

general education co-teachers do more than their special education partners to implement the approach (Austin, 2001). In such a way, a particular difference in perspectives, duties, attitudes, and responsibilities could be observed. Hang and Rabren (2009) are also interested in the examination of co-teaching and the central indicators of its efficiency. They conducted their study on 31 general and 14 special education teachers who had just started using co-teaching (Hang & Rabren, 2009). Using the data collected with the help of a survey, the researchers found positive attitudes to co-teaching among both students and teachers (Hang & Rabren, 2009). Moreover, they found that the method becomes extremely efficient regarding students with disabilities and their specific needs.

In their article *Professional Development Experiences in Co-Teaching*, Pancsofar and Petroff raise the question of the correlation between particular qualities of teachers and outcomes. Using an online survey of 129 teachers from five districts in the Mid-Atlantic states, the data collected proved that professional development of co-teaching is associated with each teacher outcome (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). Additionally, educators who had opportunities to improve their understanding of co-teaching from in-service teaching were more interested in co-teaching and demonstrated better attitudes toward it. Therefore, the paper reveals a relationship between teachers' readiness and co-teacher outcomes, and their beliefs about it.

Indelicato's research emphasizes the significance of the creation of effective co-teaching relationships and environments. The central aim of her study was to determine the most efficient way to enhance collaborative teaching relationships (Indelicato, 2014). During her investigation, Indelicato assessed 1st- through 4th-grade teachers to evaluate their attitude and readiness to engage in co-teaching relations (Indelicato, 2014). The majority of the participants mentioned a direct correlation between the degree to which they were successful in cooperation and communication and their attitude to the method and their overall success. This suggests that, to build an effective relationship between co-teachers, additional training increase in their readiness to implement the method is needed.

Chitiyo also investigates factors that could promote or hinder the use of co-teaching. Of the 77 teachers that participated in this research, 67 were general education teachers, 14 had a bachelor's degree, and the remainder worked in inclusive classrooms (Chitiyo, 2017). Using a questionnaire that included sections about demographics, experiences in co-teaching, the ways educators learned about it, and barriers to the implementation of the method, the researcher concludes that a low level of competence preconditions most obstacles or negative attitudes (Chitiyo, 2017). For this reason, educators should be trained comprehensively to guarantee positive outcomes.

In terms of the challenges that might arise during the implementation of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, Hussin and Hamdan (2016) support the idea that a poor culture of collaboration and a lack of the administrative support might be considered central obstacles that educators face. Data from 162 respondents (150 teachers, 30 parents, and 60 administrators) in Malaysia proved the overall efficiency of the method if it is supported by the appropriate alterations in teachers' behaviors and skills (Hussin & Hamdan, 2016).

Hamilton-Jones and Vail (2014) highlight the importance of teachers' readiness to collaborate and contribute to positive outcomes of co-teaching. To collect information about pre-service teachers' beliefs and ideas about collaboration, the authors used data provided by 12 paraprofessionals regarding the approach (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). The results showed that educators have diverse perspectives on the definition of collaboration, which might create particular barriers in the future use of co-teaching and collaborative practices. It also means that additional training aimed at the creation of enhanced understanding about collaboration between teachers results in better attitudes toward co-teaching and good academic success in students.

Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) also investigate educators' attitudes toward co-teaching in their paper. In an attempt to understand the attitude specialists have towards the method, they conducted 32 qualitative investigations on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms (Scruggs et al., 2007). The data they acquired showed that most educators support the approach (Scruggs et al., 2007). However, they also outlined numerous needs that should be satisfied to guarantee the positive outcomes of co-teaching and create a collaborative setting. These are: planning time, student skill level, additional training for teachers, etc. (Scruggs et al., 2007).

Reviewing the literature devoted to co-teaching and its peculiarities in different settings, Rice and Zigmond (1999) suggest that the method provides numerous opportunities for educators to improve outcomes and help all students regardless of their cognitive abilities or health status. However, assessing data from different schools in Queensland and Pennsylvania, the researchers emphasize the existence of similar approaches to facilitate the inclusive methods, as well as similar barriers, such as attitudes rejecting inclusion or administrators'

unwillingness to provide the necessary resources and time (Rice & Zigmond, 1999). In this sense, the groundwork and additional training achieved among co-teaching specialists becomes central for its success.

To effectively assess the most important aspects of co-teaching, its benefits, and the emerging problems, Walther-Thomas (1997) conducted a long-term study (three years) engaging 23 school-based teams in it. The total number of participants was 143. Data was collected via a semi-structured interview. The findings proved that co-teaching demonstrates high efficiency in students with disabilities and other pupils who participated in the study. Moreover, significant improvement in their self-confidence and self-esteem could be observed. At the same time, many co-teachers reported that their professional skills improved because of their close cooperation with their experienced colleagues (Walther-Thomas, 1997).

Strogilos, Stefanidis, and Tragoulia (2016) used data from 400 surveys completed by teachers working with children with disabilities and from 10 semi-structured interviews for investigating their attitudes toward co-teaching practices. The results of this research align with the previous studies mentioned in the paper and again prove the efficiency of the supportive co-teaching model. At the same time, almost all of the educators emphasized the need for planning time and administrative support to ensure their ability to engage in efficient collaboration to provide students with the needed knowledge.

King-Sears, Brawand, Jenkins, and Preston-Smith (2014) conducted research devoted to a similar issue. They investigated the particulars of a co-teachers' practice team and their students in a real life setting, with the central aim of determining how each educator perceived different aspects of their teaching experience and what barriers in the delivery of needed services they observed (King-Sears et al., 2014). Thus, using data from the research, the authors concluded that science educators most often play leading roles in presenting new information and increasing the efficiency of the whole process.

Overall, therefore, numerous research studies have suggested that co-teaching has outstanding efficacy and a positive impact on academic successes. However, in the majority of cases, the results of the intervention depend on the efficiency of collaboration between educators and their readiness to engage in co-teaching. Malian and McRae (2010) prove this assumption. Using results of a statewide survey of Arizona general and special educators teaching in inclusive classes, they concluded that there is no significant difference between general and special educators in their beliefs and approaches to co-teaching (Malian & McRae, 2010). At the same time, these ideas might be shaped by training and readiness to work in the inclusive environment. Abbye-Taylor (2014) also associates successful co-teaching experiences with the level of teachers' preparedness and their attitudes to the suggested method. Having conducted a phenomenological study among efficient co-teachers and administrators, the author concluded that a positive perspective on co-teaching is mainly achieved due to additional training and educators' competence in particular spheres (Abbye-Taylor, 2014). The majority of researchers agree that teachers demonstrate positive emotions if they attain success and have enough skills. This means that engaging teachers in co-teaching professional development with the primary aim of achieving positive shifts in their attitudes and better outcomes is fundamental. Shaffer and Brown (2015) prove this idea by organizing two teams of participants consisting of two general teachers and a shared special education teacher. Using informal conversations and interviews, the researchers concluded that teamwork is critical to ongoing co-teaching professional development and improvement (Shaffer & Brown, 2015). Teamwork between educators becomes the key to their positive attitude toward co-teaching and success.

There have been attempts to implement the co-teaching model of instruction into a particular teacher education program to enhance teacher readiness, retention, and preparedness (Huff, 2016). Huff examines these attempts and their overall impact on the effectiveness of co-teaching. 20 beginning teachers participated in the study. The results of the research demonstrate that such training might be useful in cultivating enhanced competence among students and increasing their preparedness to perform particular tasks within the co-teaching model (Huff, 2016).

Discussing the challenges of co-teaching and the most important aspects that appear during its implementation in different settings, Tandon (2016) investigates the co-teaching partnership between Kristin (general educator) and Dan (special educator) and their functioning in a U.S. school. Information was collected through interviews. Thus, Tandon (2016) concluded that prolonged cooperation between co-teaching partners enhances their collaborative practices and results in better outcomes. For this reason, it is recommended that existing pairs should not be re-grouped. Woods (2017) also discusses the efficiency of table pairs of educators in his research. Interviewing English Language Arts high school teachers and special educators who engage in collaborative relationships, he finds that long-term cooperation is the key to better attitudes toward co-teaching and successful outcomes (Woods, 2017).

3. Conclusion

This literature review reveals tendency trend towards the gradual rise of the significance of co-teaching. Defined as the cooperation between teachers who possess knowledge in different fields, the effectiveness of co-teaching approaches is a topical point of discussion in modern education. The majority of authors covered in the review agree that co-teaching produces outstanding results, especially regarding students with disabilities. Most researchers believe that both students and teachers benefit from an inclusive classroom environment. The former group gains better academic results, social skills, and behavior, while the latter, by engaging in collaborative relations with their experienced colleagues, acquire the opportunity to share their perspectives on different methods and ways to deliver knowledge most efficiently.

Teachers' attitudes toward co-teaching are impacted by the level of their preparedness and readiness to engage in collaboration and work together. All of the articles reviewed emphasize that a positive perspective on co-teaching is observed among successful specialists who can work in a team and perfectly realize the basic aspects of the approach. Therefore, additional training is essential to creating an appropriate environment and ensuring that educators will be ready to implement co-teaching successfully.

Nevertheless, several obstacles appear when implementing this method. These include a lack of time for planning and the absence of administrative support. The majority of respondents who participated in the studies mentioned above agreed that these two factors might negatively impact final results. Additionally, poor collaborative behavior could also restrict positive outcomes.

Overall, most teachers demonstrated a positive attitude toward co-teaching and have a good understanding of its basic characteristics. They could contribute to the further development of the method so it can become one of the most efficient practices in education. For this reason, additional research is needed to fill remaining gaps in knowledge about how co-teaching can be facilitated in the modern education sphere as its efficiency preconditions the necessity of its further exploration. The aim of the future research should therefore be focused on the methods for the effective implementation of co-teaching in different settings.

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