



Achieving symbiosis: Working through challenges found in co-teaching to achieve effective co-teaching relationships



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Achieving effective co-teaching relationships is a complex process.
- Obtaining external dimensions is not enough for effective co-teaching partnerships.
- Teachers can use individual differences as strengths to overcome challenges.
- Compatibility can be achieved through being similar or complementary.
- In an effective co-teaching state, teachers are interdependent of each other.

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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory study explored how secondary school co-teachers in an urban Eastern Iowa school district resolved challenges to co-teaching relationships. Five partnerships ($N = 10$) participated in focus group interviews, interpersonal behavior questionnaires, classroom observations, and individual interviews. The resulting theory, Achieving Symbiosis, explains how co-teaching partnerships became effective in their collaboration through using personal differences and strengths to become interdependent. This theory provides helpful strategies grounded in the field for co-teachers as they seek to begin or improve collaborative teaching relationships, for administrators as they support co-teachers, and for teacher educators as they prepare students for collaborative partnerships.

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1. Introduction

While historically general education and special education teachers have been isolated and separated, collaboration is the standard in today's educational climates (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013; Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012; Timmons, 2006). Indeed, since inclusive education has become an international expectation, teachers work together for the benefit of all students, including those with special learning needs (Ainscow, 2000; Ainscow & Cesar, 2006; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE), 2012; UNESCO, 1994). Additionally, accountability requirements throughout Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States have changed considerably over the past two decades to include students with disabilities (Ainscow & Cesar, 2006; EADSNE, 2012; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Johnson & Pugach, 1996; Leatherman, 2009; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; UK Department for Education, 2010; Winzer, 2009).

Co-teaching is a widely used instructional model that allows schools to meet mandated requirements for inclusion and assessment of students with special learning needs, while at the same time strive for effective use of teacher expertise through collaboration (EADSNE, 2012; Friend & Cook, 2010). Research has established that co-teaching benefits both students with and without disabilities (Hang & Rabren, 2009; McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009; Wilson & Michaels, 2006), while providing peer mentoring for teachers in new instructional methods (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006; McDuffie et al., 2009; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010). Making co-teaching relationships beneficial for students and teachers requires careful consideration and a willingness to address challenges that naturally arise when two people work collaboratively. This paper reviews research on the challenges in forming successful co-teaching relationships and then presents new findings in this area.

1.1. Literature review

While co-teaching can provide effective instruction, teachers often encounter challenges that hinder successful collaboration. In

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particular, co-teachers find it difficult to establish parity in classroom roles (Leatherman, 2009; McDuffie, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2007; Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008; Tannock, 2009). Special education teachers often act as assistants, creating an imbalance in use of expertise and skills which greatly hinders effective instruction and learning for all students (Besette, 2008; Bouck, 2007; Harbort et al., 2007; Naraian, 2010; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). This inequality is generally attributed to special education teachers not being as familiar with the content material (EADSNE, 2004).

Other challenges to co-teaching include interpersonal differences, insufficient time for planning, and lack of administrative support (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009; Friend & Cook, 2010; Jang, 2006). McDuffie et al.'s (2007) report of qualitative research studies ($N = 32$) on co-teaching in Australia, Canada, and the United States found incompatibility of co-teachers was a commonly reported challenge. Differences in attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2006; Leatherman, 2009) and interpersonal differences in gender, personalities, communication styles, and conflict styles can create tensions that teachers need to address (Conderman, 2011; Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, 2009; Cramer & Stivers, 2007; Gately & Gately, 2001). Furthermore, teachers might find it difficult to schedule a common planning time, especially if they do not have administrative support for navigating the pressures and demands in building co-teaching relationships (Carter et al., 2009; Friend & Cook, 2010; Jang, 2006). For example, Jang reported that two secondary school teachers in Taiwan would have benefited from administrative support in reducing their teaching hours to allow for common planning time, as well as providing information to students and parents about the nature of team teaching.

Researchers who have studied the nature of co-teaching relationships recommend certain components for building effective collaborative relationships. Professional development should involve not only skills necessary for implementing co-teaching effectively in the classroom, but also communication skills to avoid or mediate interpersonal conflicts (Carter et al., 2009; Friend & Cook, 2010). Administrators need to support teachers in scheduling professional development and common planning times (Idol, 2006; Leatherman, 2009; Santoli et al., 2008; Scruggs et al., 2007). Similar philosophies about teaching and inclusion of students also prove helpful in building compatible co-teaching relationships (Brownell et al., 2006; Leatherman, 2009). Effective co-teaching models such as station teaching, team teaching, or parallel teaching enable teachers to meet differing students' learning needs (Friend et al., 2010; Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). Furthermore, reflection enables teachers to improve their co-teaching relationships and instructional practices (Jang, 2006; Roth, Masciotra, & Boyd, 1999). Researchers believe these components all play a part in the outcome of co-teaching partnerships, although only one study (Leatherman, 2009) cited in this literature review considered how teachers attempt to resolve challenges found in co-teaching and was limited to the elementary level. The research literature lacks results from empirical investigations of what components co-teachers use to overcome commonly faced challenges in collaboration, particularly at the secondary level.

1.2. Theoretical framework

In consideration of the process teachers go through to build effective co-teaching relationships, experts from the field generally cite Tuckman's (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) stages of group development (Friend & Cook, 2010).

1.2.1. Stages of group development

Tuckman (1965) first presented four stages including forming, storming, norming, and performing. Forming refers to the initiation of a group and member orientation to the group's purpose. Storming involves conflict, which can be emotional and hinder performance, as members notice differences in personalities and perspectives. Norming consists of members adopting roles to become more cohesive. Finally, performing is achieved when goals are met. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) later added a fifth stage, adjourning, to represent when groups terminate. Research has confirmed groups go through all these stages, but the length of time in each stage varies (Bonebright, 2010; Runkel, Lawrence, Oldfield, Rider, & Clark, 1971). However, Bonebright criticized the linear format of this model and Runkel et al. discussed the lack of attention to interpersonal factors. Ultimately, the credibility of generalizations to co-teaching relationships is questionable due to the lack of testing done in educational contexts (Cassidy, 2007).

1.2.2. Interpersonal behavior theory

Schutz's (1958, 1992) interpersonal behavior theory addresses how people interact and work together. The three interpersonal dimensions people need in their relationships with others include inclusion, control, and openness. Inclusion encompasses how people associate with others, establish their identity, communicate whether someone is welcome, and make a commitment to the group. The desire for control describes how people balance making decisions, influence each other, and rely on others. Thirdly, openness considers the level of privacy people desire in sharing thoughts and feelings.

1.2.3. Application of theories to this study

Both theories (Schutz, 1958, 1992; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) discussed above describe different aspects of co-teaching relationships that informed the research I conducted on how effective co-teachers resolve challenges to collaborative partnerships. Tuckman's (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) stages of group development portray groups experiencing challenges that must be addressed to become productive in their work. Schutz's (1958, 1992) theory highlights interpersonal desires people have to feel respected, valued, and fulfilled in their relationships with others. While these theories provided a theoretical lens for the collection and analysis of data on the interpersonal relationships found in co-teaching partnerships, neither of them fully explain the process of overcoming challenges inherent in collaboration, nor have the theories been confirmed through research to fit co-teaching relationships.

1.3. Purpose of the study

Florian (2008) stated educational research should focus on *practice* or what teachers can do to solve constricting challenges to inclusive education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to extend the literature by addressing how effective secondary co-teachers found solutions for common co-teaching challenges. I defined co-teaching relationships as a style of interaction between a general education and special education teacher engaged in shared decision making to attain the common goal of instructing students with and without disabilities (Friend & Cook, 2010). In choosing effective co-teaching teams, I developed criteria from the research on co-teaching, including equality of teachers' roles in decision making and instruction (Scruggs et al., 2007). Partnerships needed to: (a) consist of one general education and one special education teacher, (b) co-taught for at least one year together, and (c) use co-teaching instructional relationships with equal roles in planning for instruction and teaching students. If teams used the model of one

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