



Contextual antecedents of co-teaching efficacy: Their influence on students with disabilities' learning progress, social participation and behaviour improvement



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We study teachers' attitudes towards curriculum modification, mixed ability groups, mainstream teachers' involvement.
- We examine the role of the above factors in perceived co-teaching efficacy for students with disabilities.
- Teachers consider that all three factors improve social participation.
- Teachers consider that all three factors improve behaviour.
- Teachers consider that mixed ability groups and mainstream teachers' involvement improve learning progress.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether the attitudes of co-teachers towards the efficacy of co-teaching for students with disabilities are related to their preferences towards the modifications of the curriculum, the participation of students with disabilities in mixed ability groups and the active involvement of mainstream education teachers in co-teaching students with disabilities. A survey questionnaire was used to explore 400 co-teachers' attitudes towards the efficacy of co-teaching. In general, the findings demonstrated that the attitudes of co-teachers towards specific activities and responsibilities are positively related to their attitudes towards the social participation, behaviour improvement and learning progress of students with disabilities.

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For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), Nicomachean Ethics.

1. Introduction

International and national laws and policies have supported the practice of inclusive education for students with disabilities. The

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development of inclusive schools where learning and participation is provided for all students seems to be an important goal for most education systems around the world. As a result, the number of students with disabilities in mainstream schools has increased and mainstream classrooms nowadays include diverse student populations. As Nind and Wearmouth (2006) indicate, inclusive schools are those which make major changes to their organization and processes to meet the needs of diverse populations.

In response to these recent trends, many schools have promoted the development of different service delivery options for students with disabilities. Among those options is the growth of co-teaching between mainstream education teachers (METs) and special education teachers (SETs). According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2006), co-teaching usually consists of a MET and a SET in a

mainstream classroom, where students with and without disabilities learn together. Roth and Tobin (2004) indicate that ‘co-teaching is not just a way of going about the everyday work of accomplishing a teacher’s task but, equally important, it is a way of changing the way one teaches... about developing as teachers while teaching (p. 165)’. As Thousand, Villa, and Nevin (2006, p. 241) support, ‘coteaching is a vehicle for bringing together people with diverse backgrounds and interests to share knowledge and skills to generate novel methods to individualize learning’. Similarly, Murphy and Beggs (2010) argue that co-teaching promotes a more democratic approach to teacher education and classroom teaching, and identify a positive impact for student teachers, classroom teachers, children and teacher educators.

Although co-teachers have indicated several positive outcomes for themselves and their students with disabilities (Saloviita & Takala, 2010; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Strogilos, Tragoulia, & Kaila, 2015; Thousand et al., 2006), research on the efficacy of co-teaching remains limited (Cook, McDuffie-Landrum, Oshita, & Cotheren-Cook, 2011; Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Research results on the efficacy of co-teaching is still considered sparse and inconclusive (Cook et al., 2011), since some studies have indicated a medium to strong positive relationship between student outcomes and co-teaching (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002), while others have failed to identify benefits for students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms (Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler, 1997; Murawski, 2006).

2. Theoretical framework

The empirical research on co-teaching has focused on the impact of instructional activities and procedures (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; McDuffie et al., 2009; Moin, Magiera, & Zigmond, 2009) and the responsibilities of co-teachers (Dieker, 2001; Harbort et al., 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002) in order to evaluate its efficacy on the education of students with disabilities.

Our theoretical framework consists of certain dimensions which have been identified in the research literature as important for the effective development of co-teaching. More specifically, this study conceptualises the efficacy of co-teaching in relation to inclusive practices within the mainstream class, elements that are considered important in the development of inclusive education. As Bandura (1997) argues, within organizations there are contextual influences, specific sociocultural factors, which have an impact on individual and organizational performance. The impact of these factors on efficacy is mediated through motivational and learning mechanisms operating at the individual and organizational level. As previous studies highlight (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007), meaningful participation of students with disabilities in the mainstream class is integrally linked with certain contextual variables that promote social and academic learning. Thus, the identification of contextual variables that are associated with students with disabilities’ social participation, behaviour improvement and learning progress can be instrumental in enhancing our knowledge towards the understanding of a complex service delivery option such as that of co-teaching (McDonnell, 2011).

Based on the findings of past literature, we reconcile a theoretical framework that could potentially explain the scope and intensity of building efficient co-teaching environments. We empirically research whether the modifications of the curriculum, the participation of students with disabilities in mixed ability groups and the active involvement of METs in the education of students with disabilities could robustly explain the perceived efficacy of co-teaching in inclusive contexts. Thus, examining issues

related to the above activities and responsibilities are deemed important and were included in the development of this study, which aims at investigating the attitudes of co-teachers towards the efficacy of co-teaching and certain contextual antecedents of these attitudes.

In designing this study we considered that the attitudes of co-teachers towards the efficacy of co-teaching for students with disabilities could be related to their preferences towards the modifications of the curriculum during planning time, the participation of students with disabilities in mixed ability groups and the active involvement of METs in co-teaching students with disabilities. These instructional strategies and responsibilities, or contextual factors, promote learning progress and social participation according to the main values of inclusive education. Thus, in this study, the attitudes of co-teachers towards the efficacy of co-teaching are being examined on the premise that the above activities and responsibilities promote the main values of inclusive education and thus justify the education of students with disabilities along with their typically developing peers. Since no other studies have investigated the efficacy of co-teaching in relation to certain antecedents, we consider the potential contribution of this study significant.

3. Co-teaching in Greece

In this study, we investigate certain antecedents of the efficacy of co-teaching in Greek mainstream classes. Our motivation to look into the unique environment of Greece stems from the implementation of the country’s recent policies that intend to integrate more students with disabilities in mainstream classes following the international inclusion movement.

Greece was among the countries which agreed to follow the principles of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) for the education of students with disabilities within the mainstream education system. As a result, new legislation promoted the development of new pedagogical practices that promote inclusion (Law 2817/2000; Law 3699/2008). Among these practices, co-teaching was introduced for the enhancement of the education of students with disabilities in mainstream classes. Since 2000, Greek legislation (Law 2817/2000) has provided a co-taught model in a move to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities within mainstream classes and to promote inclusion. However, research on the development of co-teaching as a means to inclusive education in Greece is very limited (Strogilos & Avramidis, 2013; Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013; Strogilos et al., 2015).

Since co-teaching is not necessarily understood or implemented in the same way across countries (Roth & Tobin, 2004), many differences concerning its development and *praxis* are evident in the Greek mainstream schools. Being responsible for all educational initiatives in Greek schools, the Ministry of Education promoted the development of co-teaching by employing SETs to directly work with a student with disabilities on a full time basis in all curriculum subjects in the mainstream class. Thus, these SETs are allocated by the Ministry not to a school or to a class, but to a student with a diagnosed disability, after the parents’ request. It is obvious that the Greek Ministry of Education promoted the development of the ‘one teach one assist’ model of co-teaching, as a recent study by Strogilos & Tragoulia (2013) has indicated.

Students who learn in co-taught classrooms include those with autism, sensory and physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, health disorders and emotional and behavioural difficulties. Concurrently, although students with specific learning difficulties are accommodated in mainstream classes, the parents of these students cannot have a SET assigned to their children, since these students are partially educated in resource rooms. Similarly to the

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