

CO-TEACHING IN REMOTE AND HYBRID LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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As schools deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, professionals are innovating to ensure that students with disabilities receive the free appropriate public education (FAPE) to which they are entitled. In many locales, the aim is to keep intact as much as possible IEP goals and the setting(s) in which special education services are delivered. For co-teachers, this has meant intensive collaboration resulting in the development of creative solutions to the challenges of remote, hybrid, and virtual environments

KEY POINTS

| Components of Contemporary Co-teaching | Remote Implementation Strategies | Ineffective Practices |
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| <p>The purpose of co-teaching is the provision of specially designed instruction (SDI), students' mandated special education services, within the context of general education lessons.</p> | <p>Co-teaching planning is especially important in remote environments. Professionals regularly plan, making key decisions about lessons, SDI, and co-teaching structures. Co-teachers then separately prepare the part of instruction for which they have primary responsibility.</p> | <p>Outdated co-teaching practices that rely on vague efforts to differentiate or provide accommodations do not improve student outcomes. They are not recommended in any setting, face-to-face, hybrid, or virtual.</p> |
| <p>Co-teaching evolved from the inclusive practices movement and is supported by federal law and guidance regarding the least restrictive environment and participation in general education as well as related data.</p> | <p>The majority of time in virtual co-teaching is spent with students in data-determined small groups, similarly to traditional co-teaching. These groups make possible the delivery of the general curriculum and the specialized strategies as well as techniques needed by students with disabilities.</p> | <p>When students with disabilities miss core general education instruction for the purpose of instruction in a separate setting, their achievement is likely to be lower than that for students educated in a general education setting.</p> |
| <p>Co-teachers have distinct responsibilities during co-teaching. General educators lead the design and delivery of the general curriculum; special educators lead the design and delivery of SDI.</p> | <p>Student assessment is critical in remote co-teaching. Formative strategies guide instruction; summative determines mastery. In asynchronous formats, co-teachers guide students in self-assessment and collaborate with parents to help provide immediate feedback to students.</p> | <p>Separate special education instruction not aligned with the core general curriculum reduces meaningful access. Such instruction is also extraordinarily difficult for students to apply in other settings.</p> |
| <p>Both teachers in co-taught classes have active teaching roles; students receive appropriate instruction through the six co-teaching approaches. This intensified instruction benefits all learners.</p> | <p>Virtual co-teaching does not eliminate all need for supplemental, separate instruction. As in traditional schooling, one size does not fit all; services for each student with a disability must be designed to meet individual needs.</p> | <p>In difficult times, the temptation is to revert to practices that are traditional and comfortable. What is needed is leaning in to find ways to maximize learning for students with disabilities in virtual general education settings.</p> |

Components of Contemporary Co-Teaching

Purpose. Co-teaching began in the 1980s as part of early efforts related to inclusion. The simple belief was that placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms with two caring professionals would result in positive outcomes. That hope was not realized, and too often the general educator continued to teach the group while the special educator functioned as a highly prepared classroom assistant. Although vestiges of this model are still found, contemporary co-teaching has two clear and ambitious goals: (a) ensuring that students with disabilities have meaningful access to the general curriculum while at the same time (b) integrating into lessons the specially designed instruction (SDI) required for identified students (Friend & Barron, 2020). Success will be realized when the achievement and other outcomes of most students with disabilities are comparable to those of peers.

Rationale. The first reason for utilizing co-teaching for the delivery of special education services is to ensure that students with disabilities do not miss learning opportunities as happens when they leave the general education setting for separate instruction. In addition, research suggests that students with disabilities who stay in general education settings outperform those who receive separate services (e.g., Tremblay, 2013; Wexler et al., 2018). This result is found regardless of student disability labels, ages (grades 3-8), and other demographics (Cole, Murphy, Frisby, Grossi, & Bolte, 2019). Finally, the bedrock belief system of inclusiveness argues that removing any student from a general education environment should be a strategy of last resort and include a careful analysis of costs to the student as well as benefits.

Co-teachers' Roles and Responsibilities. Co-teachers should have parity. That is, their contributions should be equally valued but not the same. In contemporary co-teaching, the general educator has primary responsibility for designing and delivering core curriculum, overall classroom management (for example, classroom routines), understanding of learners at the grade level and in the subject matter, and pacing. Special educators contribute expertise in specialized strategies and techniques to enable students with disabilities to learn, deep understanding of individual student needs, management of the special education compliance requirements, and commitment to students' learning mastery.

Co-teaching Approaches. In co-teaching, most instruction occurs in small groups. The widely known approaches (high use: station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching; low use: one teach-one observe, teaming, one teach-one assist) and variations of them facilitate both core instruction and SDI. Groups are often heterogeneous but sometimes skill-based, and decisions about group composition is data-driven. Effective use of the high-use approaches results in carefully tailored teaching practices, high levels of student engagement, and improved outcomes (Friend, 2019). Although to the casual observer it may appear that the teachers are equally engaged and possibly interchangeable, a closer look should demonstrate that each is completing his/her primary responsibilities as noted above.

Remote Implementation Strategies

Planning. In a remote environment, planning is especially important, even for co-teaching veterans. Initially, it includes clarification of roles and expectations in the virtual setting, development of an ongoing planning schedule and process, and selection of data collection strategies. In ongoing planning, co-teachers separately prepare for planning sessions by addressing their own primary areas of responsibility; when they periodically meet electronically, they discuss upcoming instruction, the provision of SDI (e.g., academic, social, behavior, or any other domain) within that instruction, co-teaching approaches that will facilitate student learning, and data to be gathered.

Instruction. From the first day of remote instruction, co-teachers demonstrate to students that they are partners. They carefully plan how they will introduce themselves to communicate their partnership. They also put students into heterogeneous breakout groups (two stations or parallel teaching) on the first virtual day so that both teachers teach, even if briefly. The teachers develop a system to adjust as needed the quantity of work and provide learning scaffolds and other SDI. Co-teachers should strive for remote co-teaching to mirror as much as possible face-to-face co-teaching by using the three high-use approaches--stations, parallel, alternative--to keep students engaged and participating as full members of the learning community.

Co-teachers use as many technology tools as they can to keep students engaged and improve learning outcomes. They use breakout rooms for individual conferencing, pre-teaching, or specific strategy instruction, basing decisions about group participants on data. They also may intentionally group students to encourage discussion or ensure that each group has peer models. Some students may receive considerable intensive small-group instruction; others may not need it. Co-teachers also create for students with disabilities supplemental learning resources such as instructional videos, additional practice materials, and resources parents may wish to access as they assist their children. As with all teaching, flexibility and patience are important attributes of successful remote co-teaching.

Assessment and progress monitoring. Remote assessment and monitoring of progress toward IEP goal and grade level standards attainment may look very different in remote instruction. Co-teachers may privately communicate during synchronous virtual sessions to make sure students with disabilities understand the lesson. Ongoing assessments also may rely sometimes on oral responses, and co-teachers should provide immediate feedback and correction. They also may closely monitor data gathered as students use an online program that has lessons and built-in benchmark assessments. Students may self-assess, especially when they are working in an asynchronous environment. In some instances, co-teachers may find that students in a remote setting need additional supports that would not necessarily be required in a face-to-face environment.

Need for separate instruction. Co-teachers follow students' IEPs. If an IEP calls for separate instruction, special educators must identify an appropriate time to schedule that instruction. However, they should remember that changes to how a student receives special education services is a team decision and follows any pandemic-related policies established in their state and local school district. Before exploring the need for additional separate instruction because of the remote learning environment, co-teachers should first ask themselves how they could increase the instructional intensity of co-teaching before pursuing that approach.

Ineffective Practices

Vaguely defined co-teaching practice. When co-teaching practices lack precision, positive results are unlikely to occur. Thus, if this service option is conceptualized as the general practice of differentiation (which is a responsibility of all teachers) or the provision of students' accommodations (which, in general education, is primarily the responsibility of the general educator), SDI is not in place and students are not receiving the tailored instruction that will accelerate their learning. When reviewing research on co-teaching, this dilemma is clear: In most studies in which the term co-teaching is used, criteria for effective practice are not set, and so reported results are difficult to interpret.

Poorly conceived separate instruction resulting in missed general curriculum access. Particularly in virtual environments, the amount of time that students interact with teachers and peers for core instruction is limited. Students with disabilities can ill-afford to miss these learning opportunities. Further, if students with disabilities are expected to fully participate in a co-taught lesson and then have additional direct special education instruction, care must be taken that students are not overwhelmed by the added virtual learning time. Co-teachers, in conversation with parents and students, should find a balance so that students are not inadvertently placed at a disadvantage by missing grade level curriculum.

Separate instruction without attention to generalization or skill maintenance. It has long been known that instruction in a separate setting often results in students who have a set of isolated skills that they do not transfer to the general education setting. In fact, one benefit of co-teaching is that it fosters learning relevant skills and strategies that comprise SDI within the context of the general curriculum, thus increasing the likelihood of skill maintenance and making it more feasible to teach generalization.

Tendency to revert to what is known during stressful times. Teachers, administrators, other school professionals, families, and students are still developing their understanding of effective virtual instruction. Not surprisingly, stress levels are high. The tendency when stressed is to abandon innovative educational approaches and rely on what is most familiar and comfortable. For students with disabilities, this may mean a decision to provide all special education services as separate instruction. Two problems immediately arise with this approach: First, IDEA clearly establishes that students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and most students' IEPs are written with a large majority of their school day spent in that setting. If services are changed to a separate setting, a real risk exists that FAPE is not being delivered. Second, this approach is likely to make it that much more difficult to foster inclusive practices when daily brick-and-mortar instruction again becomes the norm.

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