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A Guide to Co-Teaching for the SLP: A Tutorial

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Abstract

Co-teaching is when two or more people share instructional responsibility for all of the students assigned to them. There are many benefits to students when speech–language pathologists (SLPs) participate in co-teaching relationships with other educators and specialists by working on functional goals in the natural environment of the classroom. With co-teaching, SLPs are able to provide services to students who are eligible for special education and also support their school community through a model of multitiered system of support for all children. The purpose of this tutorial is to provide SLPs with a rationale for collaborative interventions and co-teaching, information about the four co-teaching approaches, planning and collaboration issues partners need to address, and tips for success.

Keywords

collaborative intervention, co-teaching, multitiered system of supports, Response to Intervention, speech–language pathologists, special education, students with Individual Education Program plans

The purpose of this tutorial is to review current knowledge and best practices in co-teaching to support all students including ways in which speech–language pathologists (SLPs) can collaboratively plan and co-teach with other school personnel to improve outcomes, generalization, and maintenance of skills for students with language and other learning disorders while providing additional support for all children in the classroom. We describe the four approaches to co-teaching, discuss issues that can arise in planning, outline strategies for successful collaboration, and offer tips for success.

Collaborative Interventions as a Legally Available and Best Practice Service Delivery Model

Federal mandates such as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA, n.d.) promote interventions being delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE). For most students with disabilities, the LRE is deemed to be with nondisabled peers in an inclusive classroom. The 2015 reauthorization of the ESSA strongly supports literacy development and the delivery of interventions in the LRE through a multitiered system of support (MTSS) designed to help struggling students early through interprofessional collaboration. MTSS ensures that supports are provided based on student need to prevent failure. The Response to Intervention (RTI) process is a multitiered approach that supports struggling students with data-based decision making to increase intensity of support when needed (Ehren, Montgomery, Rudebusch, & Whitmire, 2006). Justice, McGinty, Guo, and Moore (2009) outlined how SLPs can take a greater role in collaborative classroom–based intervention to support students through the RTI process. By employing collaborative interventions such as co-teaching, SLPs can support literacy and communication development in the classroom not only for students with disabilities, but also for any struggling student who may need additional support, thus allowing SLPs to support more children prior to entry into special education and possibly reducing overidentification of children.

What is Co-Teaching and Who Can Be a Co-Teacher?

Co-teaching may simply be defined as two or more people sharing responsibility for the instruction of all of the students assigned to them (Villa & Thousand, 2016; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Co-teachers have traditionally

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been viewed as pairs of teachers, usually general and special educators (Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, & Patterson, 2017). But this limited view can and needs to be expanded to include SLPs and other related personnel as well as paraeducators and other specialized personnel (e.g., English-language development educators, reading specialists; Villa et al., 2013). A successful co-teaching relationship requires a high level of coordination and planning and a commitment to the belief that all students ultimately benefit from combining the unique expertise of each co-teaching partner (Pratt et al., 2017).

Research Supporting Collaborative Interventions and Co-Teaching

A growing research base suggests that one form of collaborative intervention—co-teaching—can benefit both students and service providers (Nevin, Cramer, Salazar, & Voigt, 2008; Schwab Learning, 2003; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). With regard to students, co-teaching has been demonstrated to meet the educational needs of students with a variety of disabilities and instructional needs (Bronson & Dentith, 2014; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Walsh, 2012), including language impairment (Glover, McCormack, & Smith-Tamaray, 2015). With co-teaching, students do not miss class time to participate in pull-out interventions. By collaboratively delivering interventions in the natural environment of general education, SLPs increase the likelihood of students not only achieving but also generalizing and maintaining priority goals (McGinty & Justice, 2006; Pershey & Rapking, 2003; Prelock, 2000). Purposeful collaboration of SLPs with educators enables SLPs to make their partner educators aware of students' Individual Education Program (IEP) goals and affords them opportunities to model and coach strategies to promote students' speech and language development when the SLP is not in the classroom, potentially increasing treatment intensity. And it has been demonstrated that increased treatment intensity facilitates increased student growth (Moore & Montgomery, 2008).

Research findings supportive of collaborative models of service delivery for speech and language services such as co-teaching are not new. In the mid-1990s, Bland and Prelock (1995) analyzed language samples of students who received intervention through an in-class collaborative model versus traditional pull-out therapy and found that students who received the collaborative intervention had more complete and intelligible utterances than their pull-out counterparts. In 2000, Throneburg, Calvert, Sturm, Paramboukas, and Paul examined vocabulary intervention across three service delivery models: (a) collaborative intervention between an SLP and a classroom teacher, (b) classroom-based intervention with either the SLP or teacher working independently rather than collaboratively, and (c) traditional pull-out therapy. Given the same vocabulary targets, intervention materials, and intervention time under the three intervention models, the first collaborative intervention revealed a marked advantage, with students showing the greatest gains. And in 1999, Farber and Klein examined the value added when SLPs co-taught with kindergarten and first grade general educators following a jointly attended training program aimed at maximizing academic growth. Teachers and SLPs co-taught three times per week for a total of 2.25 hr for the entire school year. Results showed that students in the collaborative classroom performed significantly better in the areas of listening, writing, understanding vocabulary, and understanding cognitive-linguistic concepts than students in comparable classrooms with teachers who had received the same training but who did not have an SLP co-teaching partner.

More recently, Archibald (2017) conducted a review of articles related to SLP and teacher collaboration to evaluate the sufficiency of existing evidence. She found that current research supports collaborative practice as most effective to improve vocabulary and phonological awareness. Outcomes for other expressive language targets and narratives were weaker but still suggested a positive trend. In 2019, Wilson, McNeill, and Gillon analyzed the effectiveness of SLP graduate students and teacher candidates co-teaching during school externships. The study evaluated the outcomes of children with speech or phonological difficulties who were taught by the pairs. Results showed improvements in speech and phonological awareness for most children.

Four Approaches to Co-Teaching

There are four co-teaching approaches for improving curriculum access for all students (Devecchi & Nevin, 2010): supportive, parallel, complementary, and team co-teaching. SLPs traditionally have not employed these approaches to collaborate with other educators to address curricular and communication goals. Given the emphasis on listening and speaking and other communication skills in every state's set of common core standards, the introduction of SLP expertise in the classroom through co-teaching is needed more than ever to facilitate success for all students.

Supportive Co-Teaching

Supportive co-teaching is when one co-teacher takes the lead role instructing the class, whereas the other co-teacher circulates among students to provide direct support, redirection, or prompting (Villa & Thousand, 2016; Villa et al., 2013). The individual who takes on the supportive role observes and monitors students, stepping in to support individual students when needed, whereas the other co-teacher continues to direct the lesson. The SLP may take on the lead role to model for a teacher a particular language intervention. The SLP also may take on the supportive role for any

number of reasons. For example, the SLP may prime responses for students reluctant to respond. If a student is working on increasing grammatical complexity, the SLP may assist the student in developing a complex utterance to use in response to the lead co-teacher's question. The SLP may take the support role to check for understanding of curricular vocabulary in the moment that it is being taught. During group work, the SLP may facilitate social interactions among teammates or support a student in demonstrating knowledge of a concept by supporting the student to explain the concept to peers. The supportive co-teaching approach also provides an excellent opportunity for SLPs to collect data on student performance in the classroom.

A caution when using the supportive co-teaching model is that the person in the supportive role needs to move around the classroom and assist *all* students rather than just one or a few students with communication needs and/or IEP goals. Focusing upon one or a few students can have the impact of stigmatizing the focused-upon students as different and not real members of the class. Supportive co-teaching is often a starting point in a co-teaching relationship. It offers SLPs the opportunity to scaffold students' practice of new skills in a natural environment.

Parallel Co-Teaching

Parallel co-teaching is the only one of the four approaches that does not involve whole-group instruction. Parallel co-teaching is when two or more people work with different groups of students in different areas of the same classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2016; Villa et al., 2008, 2013). This co-teaching approach is probably most familiar to SLPs. Parallel teaching includes several variations. In the *split class* variation, co-teachers split the class, taking responsibility for providing guided instruction for their particular group. In the *station* or *learning center* variation, each co-teacher is responsible for creating, leading, and monitoring one or more different learning centers within the classroom. Either students or teachers may rotate among stations. If teachers rotate, they may teach different components of a lesson. In the *supplementary instruction* variation, one co-teacher works with the class on a lesson, whereas the other co-teacher provides targeted students extra guidance in learning, applying, or generalizing a concept or skill or enrichment opportunities.

As with supportive co-teaching, there are cautions with implementation for parallel co-teaching. There is the possibility of creating a "special" class within a class by routinely grouping the same students in the same group with the same co-teacher. It is important to keep groups heterogeneous whenever possible. That avoids stigmatization that may arise if someone other than the classroom teacher (e.g., special educator or SLP) always teaches one subset of the students. With all members of the co-teaching team familiar with all students, teachers are better able to work together to problem-solve difficulties students may have accessing academic curriculum, communicating in the classroom, and developing social skills. There are many benefits to parallel co-teaching. It decreases the student-to-instructor ratio, better enabling the teacher and SLP to differentiate and individualize instruction, collect data, and monitor behavior and progress in learning. Students have the opportunity to work on many different goals as they rotate through different stations in the classrooms, and SLPs can target syntax, narrative, vocabulary, social communication, and speech production for both students with IEPs or those struggling in a particular area of speech and language development.

Complementary Co-Teaching

Complementary co-teaching is when, during whole-group instruction, one co-teacher enhances the instruction provided by the other co-teacher (Villa & Thousand, 2016; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2010; Villa et al., 2013) through complementary techniques such as providing visuals and illustrative examples. For example, the complementary co-teacher might paraphrase figurative language, write down difficult or new vocabulary, or model metalinguistic and critical thinking skills. The beauty of complementary co-teaching is that an SLP can collaborate with any content teacher to enhance access and learning for all children in the classroom.

A commonly expressed concern with complementary co-teaching is that the co-teacher who is complementing instruction (i.e., the SLP) does not have the same level of content mastery as the content area partner. However, as Hadley, Simmerman, Long, and Luna (2000) point out, no single professional has the expertise to meet the differentiated needs of all students. What SLPs bring to the task of differentiating instruction is an in-depth understanding of the level of support and modifications that children with speech or language impairments need to access the curriculum (Bauer, Iyer, Boon, & Fore, 2010; Myhill & Warren, 2005; Palincsar, Collins, Marano, & Magnusson, 2000). It may take time and effort, but an SLP or "access specialist" can and should take the time to develop an understanding of the content area of focus. This can be accomplished naturally through the process of co-planning lessons and reading of relevant material (Pratt et al., 2017). With ongoing co-planning and co-teaching, all members of a co-teaching team acquire one another's skills, an authentic professional learning phenomenon known as *role release*. Whereas the SLP learns new science content, the science teacher acquires skills to differentiate curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Two additional cautions when using the complementary co-teaching approach are to beware of too much teacher talk and repetition and beware of not interacting with and closely monitoring students, as both co-teachers are "on the stage."

Team Co-Teaching

Team co-teaching is when two or more people do what a single teacher has traditionally done alone—plan, teach, assess, and assume responsibility for all of the students in the classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2016; Villa et al., 2013). Team co-teachers share the leadership of the class and simultaneously deliver lessons to the entire class. For an SLP, team co-teaching involves sharing responsibility for all of the students in the classroom, not just those who are eligible for special education and who have IEP and/or speech and language goals. In team co-teaching, lessons are developed in ways that capitalize upon the strengths and expertise of each teaching partner, and partners fluidly alternate between the lead and supportive or complementary roles. Team co-teaching comes with cautions. As with complementary co-teaching, team co-teachers need to beware of too much teacher talk and reduced interaction with and monitoring of students.

It should be noted that beginning co-teacher partners often start with supportive and parallel co-teaching approaches, as these approaches require less structured coordination in planning than do the complementary and team approaches. As partners' skills and relationships strengthen, co-teachers then typically progress to also using the complementary and team co-teaching approaches, which require more planning time, coordination of teaching actions, and knowledge of one another's strengths and skills.

Collaborative Planning and Co-Teaching

Like any good relationship, an effective co-teaching relationship requires communication and trust. Effective co-teachers also need opportunities to plan face to face (and virtually; Pratt et al., 2017) so that they may pose and answer questions regarding lesson goals; student needs; classroom management; who adapts materials, instruction, and assessments; who completes paperwork for the students with IEPs; who meets with parents; how co-teachers will evaluate their effectiveness; and much more. As teammates gain experience with one another and experiment with the four co-teaching arrangements, the answers to these and other questions may change from "one of us" to "both of us."

Having these important conversations requires time, a limited resource for both SLPs and teachers. Although carving out time for planning is always difficult, it is a top priority in order for co-teaching partners to move beyond supportive co-teaching and use the other more powerful co-teaching approaches. Co-teachers can expand and enhance their planning time by taking advantage of technology that allows them to share materials and lessons through platforms such as Google Docs and to supplement face-to-face meetings with online video conferencing tools such as Zoom that allow for virtual planning, sharing of resources, and the co-designing of lesson plans. School administrators can also support co-teachers to have time to plan by arranging the master schedule so that co-teachers have some shared preparation time.

Tips for Success

Getting Started With Co-Teaching

An obvious first step in developing a successful co-teaching relationship is to identify willing partners. Building dynamic relationships takes time and effort and begins with establishing shared goals and collaborative norms for trust and respectful interpersonal interaction. It is very useful for actual and potential co-teaching partners to jointly attend professional learning workshops, so that they learn about the same conceptual framework and develop a common language about co-teaching and collaborative learning strategies. These shared experiences can build alliances and help minimize future misunderstandings when communicating about co-teaching.

When co-planning lessons, the devil is in the details of clarifying who is doing what, when, and with whom. And a plan does not have to be overly complex. It can simply identify the content goals for each block of instructional time and differentiated roles during instruction by completing the following sentence: "If one partner is doing this (e.g., providing direct instruction to the whole class), the other partner is (e.g., circulating, collecting data and providing one-on-one support as needed)." Scheduling shared time to meet is important not only for lesson planning but also for reflecting, debriefing, problem-solving, and celebrating successes. SLPs will focus upon how IEP goals can be targeted and embedded within a lesson and how the classroom co-teacher can reinforce the goal. This will help with generalization and maintenance. Collaborative planning and co-teaching in schools does not occur without effort. It requires individual commitment and dedication. It also requires a shift in university preparation of SLPs and teachers and school district administrative leadership.

Professional Preparation for Co-Teaching

For co-teaching to replace the traditional pull-out service delivery model of specialized services, at the university level, graduate programs in speech–language pathology as well as general education and special education teacher preparation programs must provide instruction in and modeling of effective co-teaching practices. Universities that have both a speech–language pathology department and a college or school of education can be more deliberate in structuring opportunities for SLP and education candidates to learn, plan, and work together in coursework (e.g., assistive technology,

special education law, ethics, and procedures). A survey of service delivery models used by school-based SLPs found that an SLP is five times more likely to practice co-teaching if they had training during their graduate education (Brandel & Loeb, 2011). Supporting collaborative practices during professional preparation increase the likelihood that practitioners will use co-teaching and other cross-disciplinary approaches as professionals.

School District Support for Co-Teaching

At the school district level, school administrators can promote co-planning and co-teaching among all professionals by making it the focus of ongoing in-service professional development. Administrators are key to instilling a culture of collaboration and co-teaching by designing master schedules with other incentives (e.g., compensation for extra planning time outside of school, substitutes to release co-teachers to plan on a regular basis) to free up time so co-teachers can plan to enhance the educational outcomes for all students.

Final Thoughts

Collaborative interventions such as co-teaching enable SLPs to not only make teachers aware of students' speech and language goals but also create opportunities to model and coach educators on intervention strategies they can continue to use throughout the day and week when the SLP is not present. With the MTSS rapid response approach to interrupting school failure for all children rapidly replacing the historic separate systems of general and special education, SLPs can take the lead in modeling how to increase the intensity of interventions and the probability of students generalizing and maintaining skills in their authentic classroom environments by shifting to co-teaching as a preferred service delivery option.

Future research should continue to document outcomes for students with and without disabilities who are co-taught by SLPs and other educators. In addition, research should chronicle the experiences of SLPs and other educators (e.g., increased capacity to employ the best educational practices) as they engage in co-teaching practices.

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