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Patricia Holsey

Georgia College & State University

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What are the Benefits and Barriers of Collaborative Teaching in the Inclusion Model?

Patricia Holsey

Dr. Rui Kang
Faculty Sponsor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to identify the benefits and barriers of collaborative teaching in the inclusion model. It was assumed that the findings of this study would provide teachers with information on how to utilize effective collaborative practices in order to obtain positive results for both regular and special education students. Forty teachers who have had prior experiences with the co-teaching model completed questionnaire written on a Likert scale; eight of them also participated in a semi-structured, individual interview. The results of this study indicate that in general, both special and general education teachers had a positive experience with co-teaching. The overwhelming majority of the teachers also believe that sufficient teacher training, appropriate pairing, and volunteering are crucial factors that will contribute to the success or failure of the co-teaching model. In order to reduce or remove the various challenges and barriers related to co-teaching, adequate training in co-teaching should be provided before teachers are actually assigned to co-teach.

INTRODUCTION

With an increasing number of students with disabilities being served in the general education classrooms, there is a need for special education teachers in this setting (Rice, Drame, Owens, & Frattura, 2007). As stated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), this school reform plan requires states to set high standards for all students and holds schools accountable for the results. NCLB includes significant new accountability measures for all public schools. It is based on the ambitious goal that ALL children will be proficient in reading and math by 2014. The law requires that all children be taught by “highly qualified” teachers. The law also emphasizes improving communication with parents and making all schools safer for students (Cole, 2006). Although NCLB and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) are explicit in their views that the key to success for students with disabilities lies

in access to the general curriculum, the issue has engendered substantial and often heated debates in the field of education (Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to identify the benefits and barriers of collaborative teaching in the inclusion model. It was assumed that the findings of this study would provide teachers with information of how to utilize effective collaborative practices in order to obtain positive results for both regular and special education students in the inclusion settings. In particular, two sets of research questions guided this study:

1. What are special and general education teachers' views of collaborative teaching or co-teaching? How are their views compared to each other?
2. What factors contribute to the potential success or failure of the co-teaching or collaborative teaching model? How can the challenges and barriers be reduced or removed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

More than two decades ago, former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Madeline Will, indicated certain problems with the service delivery system of special education. She proposed a consolidation of categorical programs and general education to create an educational system that acknowledged and taught to the individual differences of all children in the general education classrooms with joint accountability and responsibility between the special and general education teachers. Educators, policymakers, and parents continue to look for a universal understanding of Will's vision (Cole, 2006).

Although the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) originally focused on the national discussions about how to guarantee access to education for students with disabilities, the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 extensively broadened the debate on the federal role in educational policy. With threatening and at times provocative language, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared that U.S. public schools were not making the grade (Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

In 2001 President Bush passed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. The law stipulates statewide systems of accountability based upon challenging academic standards and assessment systems with content aligned to those standards. As a result of this law, data on students with disabilities is now readily available and is being compared to those obtained from the previous

years. Furthermore, NCLB has provided the impetus for special education and general education teachers to work together in new and different ways (Cole, 2006).

According to Scruggs, Norland, McDuffie, Mastropieri, Graetz, and Gardizi (2005), because of the increased diversity in twenty-first century classrooms, there are a rising number of students with disabilities who are integrated in the general education class environment. As a result, collaboration has become widely practiced in today's schools. Associated with this enlarged collaboration is the emergence of various models of collaboration or co-teaching. The major goals of the collaboration or co-teaching model include increasing access to a wider range of instructional options for students with disabilities, enhancing the participation of students with disabilities within general education classes, and enhancing the performance of students with disabilities.

There have been some reports of positive benefits of collaboration in the inclusion setting. It is noted that the voluntary participants tended to report more positive perception of co-teaching than the ones who were assigned to their positions. More positive perceptions were also linked to administrative support, additional planning time, and related beliefs about teaching and mutual respect of one another (Scruggs & et al., 2005).

In accordance with Rice, Drame, Owens, and Frattura (2007), support for co-teaching varies significantly among school districts and buildings, from clear administrative support for co-teaching to separate case loads and a lack of physical proximity. The authors stated that in their research it was reported by general education teachers that their most effective co-teaching relationships were with special education teachers who had strengths in the following specific areas: professionalism; ability to meet student needs; ability to accurately assess a student's progress; ability to analyze teaching styles; ability to work with a wide range of students; and knowledge of, or interest in developing knowledge of course content.

Not only must researchers present success stories in their findings, but they must also tell stories about the failures experienced by implementers who attempted to serve in the collaborative or co-teaching model. These stories will help identify the factors that enhance and impede attempts to move beyond merely cosmetic changes that plague efforts to improve instruction for all students (Trent, 1998). Co-teaching can be a challenge even for the competent, veteran teachers (Rea & Connell, 2005). According to Scruggs et al. (2005), some barriers included circumstances in which students with disabilities did not have access to high levels of direct skill instruction and interaction with teachers. Only a small amount of time was provided for special education teachers to deliver or modify instruction.

Overall, general education teachers were identified as content specialists, and all the special education teachers, at some point, took on the role of instructional aide. When teachers co-teach, they rarely assess all the components identified as important for co-teaching, such as using a variety of instructional models and co-planning, which in turn have a negative impact on student performance. Differences in individual teaching styles, behavior management, and ideas about class preparation are also reported as barriers to the success of collaboration or the co-teaching model.

The key element of co-teaching is how to determine what instructional techniques or strategies are the most efficient and effective in meeting students' academic needs (Murawski & Dieker, 2004). It is a continuing process to determine these instructional techniques to ensure collaboration or co-teaching is successful for both teachers and students.

Although co-teaching models have increased greatly, there are still disagreements on the specific features required, such as the precise roles and responsibilities of both the general and special education teachers and the best way to determine the effectiveness of co-teaching. Recent literature reviews on co-teaching have concluded that efficacy data provide only limited support for the use of co-teaching programs (Scruggs et al., 2005).

METHOD

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey and personal interviews were the two major data collection tools used in this study. The survey questions were administered in a period of one to two days. Some teachers received their surveys via email, whereas others received a paper copy in their school mailbox. The personal interviews were conducted over a period of two to three days in a private setting. Some interviews were conducted in my classroom, while others took place in the classroom of the teacher interviewee.

Participants

The study was conducted at Baldwin High School located in middle Georgia. This school is a Title 1 school with an enrollment of 1,355 students and consists of grade levels ninth through twelfth. According to the 2005-2006 State of Georgia K-12 Public Schools Annual Report Card for Baldwin High School, there are five administrators, 113 other full-time personnel, and three part-time personnel. Of these full-time and part-time personnel, there are thirty-four males and eighty-two females. Their certification levels are as follows: fifty-two with four-year Bachelor's, fifty-three with five-year Master's,

seven with six-year Specialist's, and two with Doctoral degrees. The racial demographics of this school's faculty are twenty-nine blacks and eighty-seven whites. The years of experience for the faculty at this school varies from less than a year to over twenty years.

The faculty members surveyed and interviewed were those who were involved in the collaborative teaching model in an inclusive setting. A purposive sampling with a maximum variation design was used in this research. The sample included teachers representing a wide range of demographics such as first year teachers involved in the co-teaching model, veteran teachers involved in the co-teaching model, male and female co-teachers, male and male co-teachers, female and female co-teachers, and educators of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. Forty teachers participated in the survey part of the study, among which eight participated in semi-structured individual interviews. The years of experience with co-teaching or collaborative teaching in an inclusive setting range from one to four among these teachers.

Instrumentation

Two major instruments, a questionnaire on co-teaching and an interview schedule, were used in this study. The co-teaching questionnaire was written on a Likert scale with options ranging from strong agree, agree, disagree, to strongly disagree. The score reliability of this instrument will be presented in a later section in conjunction with the report of the major findings. In addition, teacher participants were also asked to share their thoughts and experiences by answering questions designed by the researcher through an interview. There were a total of ten interview questions.

Data Analysis

Teachers' responses to the survey were first summarized using descriptive statistics and then subjected to multivariate analysis of variance. The interview data were subjected to content analysis with an aim to identify common themes and patterns.

RESULTS

Responses to the Co-Teaching Questionnaire

The original twenty-one-item survey was subjected to content analysis. Some items were combined in order to reduce the twenty-one items to a manageable set of variables. Seven variables emerged: team harmony and efficiency, collaborative decision-making, classroom management, student progress, benefits of co-teaching, administrative support, and use of teaching models. The team harmony and efficacy scale consists of eight items; the

collaborative decision-making scale consists of six items with the classroom management scale consists of three items. The first two scales demonstrated excellent score reliability; the classroom management scale demonstrated slightly problematic, but not unacceptable, score reliability. The fact that the classroom management scale contains only three items may contribute to its lower score reliability. The reliability coefficient corresponding to each of the three scales is reported together with the descriptive statistics in Table 1. The rest of the items each represents a different theme, and therefore, is not combined with any of the other items.

Descriptive statistics show that teachers who completed the survey held, on average, a positive view toward co-teaching in the inclusion setting. On all of the seven variables, teachers' average ratings were above the midpoint of the designated score range. The ratings given by the special education teachers were slightly higher than those given by the general education teachers, but the two sets of ratings are highly comparable with each other. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) results confirmed the comparability of the ratings given by the special education and general education teachers ($\lambda = 0.88$, $F = 0.60$, $df = (7, 32)$, $p = 0.752$). In addition, no statistically significant differences were found among teachers who taught different school subjects ($\lambda = 0.49$, $F = 1.18$, $df = (7, 32)$, $p = 0.291$).

The results of the correlational analysis between the study variables and years of teaching experiences, and between the study variables and years of teaching in the inclusion setting, are summarized in Table 2. There was a positive correlation between years of teaching experience and all the study variables except administrative support. In other words, teachers with more experience tend to hold slightly more positive views toward co-teaching in the inclusion setting than less experienced teachers in terms of team harmony and efficacy, collaborative decision-making, increased student progress, and reduced classroom management problems. Teachers with more experiences also tend to hold stronger beliefs in the benefits of the co-teaching model and in the possibilities of using diverse teaching models in the inclusion setting. However, none of the above correlations were statistically significant. Similar patterns were found between the study variables and years of teaching in the inclusion setting. Teachers with more experience in the inclusion setting tend to have slightly more positive views toward co-teaching than those with less experience in the inclusion setting on all the study variables except administrative support. On the other hand, teachers with less experience in the inclusion setting seemed to believe that they received more support from the school administration. However, only team harmony and efficiency was significantly correlated with years of teaching in the inclusion setting;

even this correlation was not particularly strong. The results of this study should be interpreted with caution. The participants of this study taught at the same school and agreed to participate in the survey voluntarily. In addition, the sample size was small. Furthermore, some of the variables were measured by only one item.

Interview Results

Four major themes emerged from the interview responses. First, being aware of some of the problems with this co-teaching model at my school, I was somewhat surprised but pleased to hear many positive comments about co-teaching and the enthusiasm expressed by the teachers throughout the interviews. For example, when asked whether they would select to return to the resource classroom, all but one teacher interviewees said no. Similar results were found when teachers were asked whether they believed the inclusion model to be beneficial for both the regular education and the special education students. All but two teacher interviewees believed so. For example, one special education teacher shared, “having two teachers to help students is beneficial, also students watching team work in action.” Another regular education teacher echoed that “yes, I believe the regular education students do benefit from having the extra teacher in the classroom; they are allowed to get individualized assistance.”

Second, voluntary participants tended to report more positive attitudes toward co-teaching than those who were assigned to their positions. This is consistent with the findings from previous studies (Scruggs & et al., 2005). For example, one special education teacher who volunteered to co-teach stated, “I have been pleased in my co-teaching experience. I have learned a lot from my co-teacher dealing with the content.” On the contrary, a teacher who was asked to fill in the position of another teacher who suddenly resigned shared a different experience: “I am very much a fan of the collaborative mode, but my personal experience was disappointing due to lack of communication, differences in philosophy, and work ethics, etc.”

The third theme that emerged from the interview was appropriate pairing. Many teacher interviewees believed that co-teachers should not be thrown together. For example, one teacher put it this way, “in my mind, I know that the model can work very well, but the pairing has to be right.” When the regular education teacher and the special education teacher show respect and trust toward each other and share responsibilities, the co-teaching experience typically is positive. For example, one special education teacher said, “I enjoy this setting. My regular education teacher has been willing to accept me and make the classroom ‘ours.’ I have been a part of a team. The students are aware that there are two teachers—not a parapero.” Quite the opposite, a regular

education teacher expressed the following mentality, “I do not share a room. The collaborative teacher comes in at his convenience and leaves at the bell, oftentimes before several students. I do the vast majority of the teaching and the students know that it is my class and my classroom!” Not surprisingly, this regular education teacher did not have a positive experience with co-teaching. Shared responsibility is also an important contributor to the success of co-teaching. For example, both of the following teachers expressed very positive attitudes toward collaborative teaching. One of them recalled discussing students and their progress and how to present class materials with her co-teacher. She said, “We are both in charge of grading, entering grades, and make copies.” The other teacher recalled similar experiences, “we share all classroom responsibilities, so no one person has all the work. We have worked well together and discuss any areas of possible disagreements before they become problems.”

The final theme that emerged from the interviews is how the barriers and challenges regarding co-teaching in an inclusive setting can be reduced or removed. Sufficient training was the most commonly mentioned solution to the various potential problems that are likely to occur during co-teaching. For example, one teacher interviewee suggested, “training for first time teachers before school starts.” Another teacher echoed, “put teachers together in time enough to build a relationship before school starts.” Unfortunately, all the teacher interviewees in this study received some form of ad-hoc training in co-teaching or collaborative teaching after they had already been assigned to co-teach. In addition, several teachers who were able to get along with their co-teachers also believed that keeping the co-teaching team together all year around would help deal with the various challenges with co-teaching. The teacher who was reluctant to give up control in his classroom commented, “I believe the problems stem from lack of knowledge, motivation, and willingness to improve the collaborative model.” This argument is quite common among all of the teacher interviewees; all seemed to believe that a collaborative teaching model could be modified to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of my research was to investigate the benefits and barriers of collaborative teaching in an inclusion setting. It was assumed that the findings of this study would supply teachers with information of how to develop effective collaborative practices in order to obtain positive results for both regular and special education students in an inclusion setting.

Nationwide, schools are adopting the collaborative teaching model in an

inclusion setting. It is mandated by the NCLB Act of 2001. Much of the literature review pertaining to this topic revealed that many systems all over the country have experienced tremendous success, but many have also experienced extensive problems. The successes and failures of the schools involved in the inclusion model were considerably similar. It is crucial for both general and special education teachers to know some of the key factors that contribute to the success or failure of the co-teaching model in order to help all the students meet the academic standards.

The responses to the survey questions and interviews most undoubtedly shed some light on what it takes for the co-teaching or collaborative teaching model to work. All of the participants agreed that it is imperative that co-teachers are provided time to get acquainted, as well as enough time to make decisions about delivering instructions and managing their classrooms. In other words, they all agreed that the most important element for the success of the co-teaching model is that time for training is provided for all who are involved. In addition, matching general education teachers with special education teachers who shared a similar educational philosophy and teaching style will likely to increase the chance of a successful co-teaching experience. Many of the teachers also acknowledged that there are different models of co-teaching. Some reported that they are comforted with one model, whereas others reported that they may use a different model each day.

This research has been very helpful for me because I have struggled with some of the same barriers in this setting. Now that I have conducted research on this subject and have new ideas of how to be successful in a collaborative model setting, I plan to take heed to some of the suggestions and advice provided by participants and share this information with my co-workers. I know this will be an ongoing practice as we look for ways to make using the collaborative model in an inclusion setting better (Murawski and Dieker, 2004).

APPENDIX AND FIGURES

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables
(N=40)

	Special Ed		General Ed		N of Items	Score Range	Reliability (Cronbach α)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Team Harmony & Efficiency	25.71	2.31	24.95	3.70	8	8-32	0.82
Collaborative Decision-Making	19.14	1.68	18.11	2.83	6	6-24	0.81
Classroom Management	9.24	1.09	8.84	1.83	3	3-12	0.61
Student Progress	3.38	0.50	3.16	0.38	1	1-4	NA
Benefit of Co-Teaching	3.14	0.48	3.11	0.46	1	1-4	NA
Administrative Support	3.14	0.57	3.05	0.52	1	1-4	NA
Use of Teaching Models	3.10	0.44	3.05	0.52	1	1-4	NA

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations (Pearson's r) between Study Variables and Years of Teaching Experiences ($n=40$)

	Years of Teaching	Years in Inclusive Setting
Team Harmony & Efficiency	0.25	0.32*
Collaborative Decision-Making	0.14	0.18
Classroom Management	0.17	0.28
Student Progress	0.10	0.13
Benefit of Co-Teaching	0.12	0.27
Administrative Support	-0.05	-0.19
Use of Teaching Models	0.12	0.15

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