



## Welcome to Co-Teaching 2.0

Marilyn Friend

The new co-taught classroom not only gives students with disabilities access to the general curriculum, but also provides the specialized instruction they need to succeed.

Co-teaching—the arrangement in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher or other specialist work together to educate students with special needs—has become relatively common.

But in a recent conversation, a principal raised this point:

"When co-teaching was new at our school, the achievement scores for students with disabilities improved. I think that was because they were getting access to the general curriculum that they hadn't had before. But lately, our achievement scores have stalled. When I conduct classroom observations, I see co-teachers who are clearly comfortable with one another and who seamlessly share teaching roles, and students who are engaged and apparently thriving in a two-teacher class. Am I missing something? What else should I be looking for in co-taught classes?"

The principal's comments reflect both the traditional notion of good co-teaching and the emerging expectations for co-teaching today—what we might call Co-Teaching 2.0.

As co-teaching was originally conceived, its most important goal was to place students with special needs in general education so that they could learn alongside their peers. Co-teachers were told that they should build a relationship that was like a professional marriage, sharing instruction equally. They typically used the general education curriculum as the basis for their shared work, and student mastery was demonstrated through improved performance on high-stakes assessments (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012; Walsh, 2012). What co-teachers often gave up was meticulous attention to the unique needs of students who had been identified as eligible for special services—and the individualized instruction necessary to meet those needs.

No more. In contemporary co-teaching, educators focus on integrating into daily lessons the special education strategies and techniques that will enable students to achieve the goals of their individualized education program (IEP). Instead of just providing on-the-spot prompting and coaching simply to get students with disabilities through the academic content at hand, the most effective co-teachers now also provide the same kind of explicitly designed and carefully documented instruction that has always characterized special education.

# The Right to Specially Designed Instruction

The basis for the redesign of co-teaching comes from renewed attention to the rights of students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 states that any student entitled to an individualized education program must receive specially designed instruction. Professionals generally agree that this means

- Instruction directly connected to the student's IEP goals and his or her documented needs.
- Teaching in any domain in which the student has special needs (for example, academic, organizational, vocational, communicative, behavioral).
- Changes in content (but usually not standards), methodology, or delivery of instruction.
- Ongoing monitoring of progress.
- The use of approaches and techniques that other learners do not generally need.

These guarantees apply regardless of the setting in which instruction takes place. So when special educators function as co-teachers in the general education classroom, they have the same responsibility to provide specially designed instruction that they would have in a self-contained special education classroom. Specially designed instruction is not the same as differentiation, which today is considered just good teaching. Nor is it the same as the accommodations that students with disabilities receive; those are tools given to students (story starters, word banks, calculators, and so on) that facilitate their learning. Specially designed instruction is what teachers must do to ensure that students reach their goals.

For some students, specially designed instruction entails highly structured remedial reading or math programs that are difficult to implement in a general education setting. But for most students with IEPs, specially designed instruction can be more specific, using evidence-based strategies to improve speaking, reading, writing, computing, problem solving, or other skills. The challenge facing co-teachers is how to incorporate such strategies into the already-crowded agenda of a contemporary classroom.

## The New Look of Co-Teaching

"[The Six Approaches to Co-Teaching](#)" (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend, 2014) are still the basis for Co-Teaching 2.0. The difference is that the new version of co-teaching uses these approaches to integrate specially designed instruction into the classroom. Here are some examples.

### Station Teaching

Station teaching is such a versatile way to co-teach that it offers almost endless options for integrating specially designed instruction. For example, Ms. Neal and Mr. Perkins are teaching Steve, a student with autism, how to participate more effectively in small groups by speaking, letting other students speak, and responding appropriately when peers ask him a question. During math, which is an area of strength for Steve, students at one station are learning about the commutative property of multiplication by completing an activity with a partner. At a second

station led by one teacher, they are learning about the associative property; at a third station led by the other teacher, they are learning about the distributive property.

When Steve is at the teacher-led stations, the teachers use a social story—a strategy that teaches social skills in a concrete, reassuring way—to guide him in taking turns while he interacts with his peers. The social story consists of several simple sentences illustrated with appropriate pictures. In part, it says, "At school we discuss many different things. When I am very interested in a topic, I like to talk about it. But it is important to let my classmates talk about the topic, too. This is called taking turns. If my friends don't get to talk, they may not be interested in the topic anymore. When we take turns, everyone gets a chance to talk and we learn from each other."

Ms. Perkins wrote this social story and introduced it to Steve one day while other students completed an assignment. Steve has the social story on his desk, and each teacher points to appropriate pictures and sentences to coach Steve during group discussions. Thus, Steve is learning and practicing skills related to his IEP goals without being separated from his classmates.

In another classroom, Ms. Garcia and Ms. Crichton also use station teaching, but in a slightly different way. Based on data they've gathered, they know that five students in their class who have learning disabilities, as well as three English learners, need intensive vocabulary instruction. When the class works at stations, the teachers sometimes group these students together so that when the students work at the vocabulary station, the special educator can focus on the most essential words, using a multisensory approach that other students don't need.

For example, the words *apprehensive* and *vigilant* are essential to an upcoming lesson. The special educator shows brief video clips that illustrate these words (and the others on this week's list) before she formally introduces them. Then she asks the students to demonstrate through facial expressions what it looks like when people are apprehensive or vigilant. She also systematically reviews previously taught words to make sure the students still know them.

## **Parallel Teaching**

Co-teachers can use parallel teaching to implement two different instructional approaches that address their students' learning needs. For example, in the culminating project of an interdisciplinary unit on nutrition and health, students create an imaginary family of four, outline a healthy exercise regimen for each family member, create a weekly menu for each member, identify the ingredients for making that menu, and determine the budget for purchasing the items. Students are expected to provide evidence for the exercise regimen, the menu selections, and the budget. Four students—Tomas, Emily, Richard, and Michael—have IEP goals that address their difficulties completing complex tasks and staying organized. Another student, James, has a behavioral disability and often expresses frustration with angry outbursts; his IEP includes a goal regarding working with peers and self-managing his behavior.

The co-teachers decide to divide the students into two groups. One group includes James, as well as Sonia, another student whose IEP goals relate to reading comprehension, and a heterogeneous sample of 12 other learners. The other group includes Tomas, Emily, Richard, and Michael (the

students with IEP goals related to organization); Sean and Stephanie (two more students who often seem overwhelmed with multiple-step activities, although they don't have IEPs); and a heterogeneous sample of seven other learners.

The general educator facilitates the work of the students in the first group. They have several guiding questions, primary sources to use, and access to online resources. They divide up the tasks, choose partners, and proceed with the project. As they work, the teacher closely monitors James's participation. As needed, she coaches him to use the self-monitoring strategy he has learned to deal with his behavior problems, including leaving the group for brief periods to calm down.

In the second group, the special educator implements a more direct and explicit approach to support students who have difficulty with complex tasks (including the students with IEPs and those without them). She divides the task into several parts: creating the imaginary family and assigning them characteristics, identifying and creating exercise regimens, developing menus, and relating food costs to budgeting. The students have the opportunity to discuss each segment before they work on it, and the teacher helps them outline the steps they need to follow, making checklists to aid their understanding. The project takes several class sessions to complete, but all of the students are successful.

## **Alternative Teaching**

Co-teachers sometimes decide that several students would benefit from instruction in a teacher-led small group. For example, Judy, Lynne, and Paul have IEP goals related to explaining the relationship among literary elements, such as character, plot, setting, tone, point of view, and theme. While other students complete a warm-up activity, Mr. Lessen introduces these three students to today's material on tone and theme. Three other students are also assigned to the group: Sammy, who just moved into the district; Carlos, an English learner; and Sharon, who likes to participate in such small-group activities. In just a few minutes, the students learn the meaning of the terms *tone* and *theme* and begin generating their own examples. They are now primed to be successful when these concepts are introduced to the whole class.

Some teachers find other ways to employ alternative teaching to meet student learning needs. For example, while students read independently in their 1st grade classroom, Ms. Taylor and Ms. Harris sometimes provide supplemental phonics instruction to students with IEPs as well as other struggling learners. Sometimes each teacher works with a small group during different parts of this independent reading time, and one or two students work with both teachers so that they are receiving the maximum individualized instruction possible.

In 6th grade, Mr. Robinson and Mr. Walker periodically assess all students' math skill acquisition by working with a series of small groups until all students in the class have been assessed. As a natural part of this assessment, the teachers check on students' progress toward meeting IEP goals without taking these students out of their class or treating them differently.

## **The Other Co-Teaching Approaches**

Co-teachers are finding that they can incorporate specially designed instruction into every co-teaching approach. For example, as Ms. Collins and Ms. Bailey team teach, they have an agreement that if the three students in class with documented language processing problems seem to be getting confused, whichever teacher is not speaking will skillfully interrupt the other teacher, asking all students to answer a question with a partner or to brainstorm ideas related to the topic at hand. These deliberate pauses help ensure that the students with IEPs get snippets of time to process the information that's been presented and to get assistance from the teachers. When students are presenting, the co-teachers use the same approach, interjecting questions designed to manage the rate at which the information is communicated.

## **Ripple Effects**

Co-teaching 2.0 is not only transforming the delivery of instruction; it's also causing educators to reconsider other dimensions of co-teaching. For example, co-teachers are redefining the professional relationship: It's less like a marriage and more like a business partnership. Each teacher brings important knowledge and skills to the classroom, and they learn from each other without trying to be interchangeable. They strive for true parity, being equally valued for their individual contributions, rather than being identical. Their aim is to create a classroom culture of acceptance, in which learning variations and strategies to address those variations are the norm. The result is that students with disabilities learn the grade-level curriculum but also learn the strategies that will help them succeed throughout their lives (Conderman & Hedin, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2015).

So the principal's question about what to look for when visiting co-taught classes does have an answer: Principals should look for the traditional indicators that both teachers have a strong partnership and that the instructional environment is supportive. But they should also seek evidence that the teachers know students' IEP goals and are implementing the strategies, techniques, and programs that will lead to the achievement of those goals. Co-Teaching 2.0 enables students with disabilities to access the general curriculum in meaningful ways, without leaving behind the specialized instruction to which they are entitled—instruction that will enable them to reach their potential.

## The Six Approaches to Co-Teaching

**1. Station Teaching.** Students are divided into three (or more) groups. Each teacher delivers part of the lesson at a station; independent work occurs in the third station. Students rotate through all stations, so both teachers work with every student in the class.

**2. Parallel Teaching.** Students are divided into two groups, and each teacher works with a group. Sometimes the teachers do identical work (such as test review), and sometimes they present instruction in two different ways (for example, using content at different reading levels or offering different ways to learn multiplication).

**3. Alternative Teaching.** Most students remain with one teacher while the other teacher instructs a small group for reteaching, enrichment, assessment, preteaching, or another purpose.

**4. Teaming.** Students remain in a single group and the teachers co-instruct, integrating their contributions throughout the lesson.

**5. One Teach, One Assist.** Students remain in a single group; one teacher leads instruction as the other briefly interacts with students individually, answering their questions, re-explaining concepts, focusing attention, and so on.

**6. One Teach, One Observe.** One teacher leads instruction while the other gathers observational data on one student, a group of students, or the entire class.