

Common Co-Teaching Issues

Based on extended observations and interviews with more than 70 general education/special education teacher teams, we have identified several issues that co-teachers must address if they are to be successful.

Whose students are these?

Address this issue before co-teaching begins: Who is responsible for the students in the classroom? The general education teacher is responsible for all of the students in the class, but how do these responsibilities change when the special education teacher is in the room? Who is responsible for the students with special needs? Under what conditions do these responsibilities change?

Who gives grades? How do we grade?

Perhaps the issue that warrants the most discussion prior to co-teaching is grading. Special education teachers are accustomed to grading based on the effort, motivation, and abilities of the students. General education teachers are accustomed to grading based on a uniform set of expectations that is only slightly adjusted to reflect issues of effort, motivation, and student abilities. Making joint decisions about how grades will be handled for in-class assignments, tests, and homework will reduce the frictions frequently associated with grading special education students in general education classrooms. Working together, teachers can develop guidelines for grading to use with both students and parents.

Whose classroom management rules do we use?

Most general and special education teachers know the types of academic and social behaviors they find acceptable and unacceptable. Over the years, they have established consequences for inappropriate behaviors. Rarely is there disagreement between teachers about the more extreme behaviors. The subtle classroom management difficulties that are part of the ongoing routines of running a classroom, however, can cause concerns for teachers. Often, the special education teacher is unsure about when he or she should step in and assist with classroom management. Teachers should discuss their classroom management styles and the roles they expect of each other in maintaining a smoothly running classroom.

What space do I get?

When special education teachers spend part of their day instructing in general education classrooms, it is extremely useful to have a designated area for them to keep their materials. A desk and chair that are used only by special education teachers provide them with a "base" from which to work and contribute to their position of authority.

What do we tell the students?

An issue repeatedly brought up by teachers is how much information should be given to students. Should students be informed that they will have two teachers? Should students know that one of the teachers is a special education teacher and that she will be assisting some children more than others?

The students should be informed that they have two teachers and that both teachers have the same authority. We think it is a good idea to introduce the special education teacher as a "learning abilities" specialist who will be working with all of the students from time to time. It is our experience that students willingly accept the idea of having two teachers and like it very much. In interviews we have conducted, many students who have participated in co-teaching classrooms tell us that having two teachers is better because everyone gets more help.

What do we tell the parents?

Teachers are often unsure of how much they should tell parents about their new teaching arrangement. One of the concerns that teachers have is how parents might react to having a special education teacher in the classroom for part of the day. It is our experience that these programs are most successful when parents are brought in early and are part of the planning process. Thus, parents are part of the process from the beginning and are able to influence the development of the program. Parents of average- to high-achieving children may express concerns that their children's education may be hampered because students with special needs are placed in the classroom. Teachers report that these students fare as well or better, academically and socially, when students with special needs are in the general education classroom; and all students benefit from the support provided by the special education teacher (Arguelles, Schumm, & Vaughn, 1996).

How can we get time to co-plan?

The most pervasive concern of both general and special education teachers in co-teaching situations is obtaining sufficient time during the school day to plan and discuss instruction and student progress. This is of particular concern for special education teachers who are working with more than one general education teacher. Teachers report that planning often comes on their own time. Even when a designated period is established for co-planning, teachers report that this time gets taken away to be used for meetings and other school management activities. Teachers need a minimum of 45 minutes of uninterrupted planning time each week if they are likely to have a successful co-teaching experience. One suggestion made by several of the teacher teams with whom we have worked is to designate a day or a half-day every 6-8 weeks when teachers can meet extensively to plan and discuss the progress of students, as well as changes in their instructional practices.

Article was adapted from the Teaching Exceptional Children, Vol.30, No.2, NOV/DEC 1997, page 8
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