Specially Designed Instruction: Realizing the Potential of Co-Teaching

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The principle of least restrictive environment (LRE) requires schools to provide instruction in the general education classroom for students with disabilities unless the "nature and severity" of the student's disability prevents it (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004). Additionally, the IDEA mandates access to the general education curriculum with instruction from qualified teachers. To meet the LRE and access requirements, many schools choose co-teaching as a service delivery model. Access to a co-taught classroom alone, however, does not satisfy the legal requirements. Access must also result in improved academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recent research provides evidence that, when implemented as intended, co-teaching leads to increased academic success in the general education curriculum and classroom for students with disabilities (Huberman, Navo, & Parrish, 2012; Rigdon, 2010; Tremblay, 2013; Walsh, 2012). While expectations for co-teaching remain high, disappointing results on high-stakes tests for students with disabilities suggest that many co-teaching teams are not providing instruction in ways that realize the tremendous potential of this service delivery model (Murawski, 2006; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

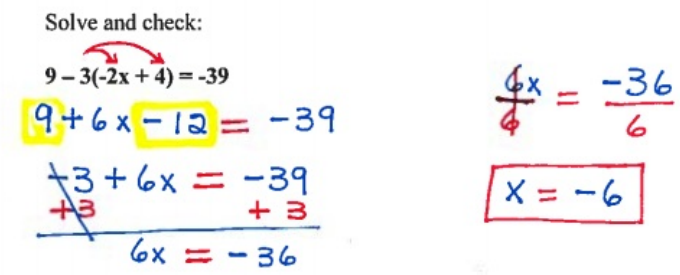
Recognizing that co-teaching is a promising vehicle for the delivery of special education to students with disabilities, how can we maximize its potential? The fuel for this vehicle is effective core teaching paired with specially designed instruction (SDI) tailored to the individual needs of students with disabilities. SDI is "instruction directly connected to the student's IEP goals and his or her documented needs … in any domain in which the student has special needs … [with] changes in content (but usually not standards), methodology, or delivery of instruction … [using] ongoing monitoring of progress [and] approaches and techniques that other learners do not generally need" (Friend, 2016, pp. 18-19).

Teachers can intensify instruction by choosing co-teaching approaches that reduce group size and allow for more individualization. Such approaches include station teaching, parallel teaching, and alternative teaching. Table 1 lists examples of how co-teachers might use these higher-intensity co-teaching variations to deliver SDI to meet individual student needs in general education classrooms.

Table 1

Embedding SDI into Co-Taught Classrooms

Co-Teaching Approaches	Opportunities to Embed Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)
Station Teaching	During small-group math groups focused on subtraction with regrouping, two groups use representational models to solve, while the third group uses concrete models, computational tools, and organizational aids, including • base ten blocks • number lines • graph paper to line up numbers
	Multisensory language instruction for one guided reading group while other groups focus on basal skills using leveled readers
	Explicitly teaching students with recall challenges to engage interactively with reading material using • Self-Questioning Strategic Instruction Model Learning Strategy (SIM®) • ability-level reading passages Other groups learn basic annotation strategies on grade-level material
Parallel Teaching	During project requiring work with multiple partners, behavioral support for one student using • visual/verbal cueing • self-monitoring strategy instruction
	Paragraph writing for students with organizational or task-completion difficulties using • visual/kinesthetic props for brainstorming/prewriting • a writing frame/graphic organizer for composing • a task list for editing

	Direct, systematic instruction in solving multi-step algebraic equations using:
	• visual cueing
	• color coding
	• verbal "think aloud" for strategy
	  ◦ look at the equation from left to right
	  ◦ draw arrows to distribute
	  ◦ highlight like terms
	  ◦ combine like terms
	  ◦ move terms across the equal sign
	  ◦ solve
	 

Alternative Teaching	Using data from progress monitoring, one teacher reviews/re-teaches science vocabulary with five students immediately prior to a lab activity, while the other teacher and students review morning work
	Explicit instruction on multiplication strategies for students with retrieval concerns using • mnemonics • hundreds chart with manipulatives
	Reviewing video models for a small group of students to teach/reinforce turn-taking skills prior to cooperative group activity

Adapted from Friend (2016, pp. 19-21).

Working to realize the promise of co-teaching honors our commitment to the success of students with disabilities. It is not enough to have two teachers in a classroom. Co-teaching with fidelity, special and general educators must work together to provide purposeful and targeted interventions to students with disabilities. Co-teaching can help educators not only comply with legal requirements but also commit to the generous spirit of IDEA, which allows all students access to the great equalizer – a quality public education.

For a detailed description of the co-planning and co-teaching processes, along with implementation resources, see the following *Considerations Packets*:

- Co-Planning for Student Success
- Co-Teaching

- For an overview of the co-taught classroom as a service delivery model for SDI, see Debbie

Grosser's encore article, The Nuts and Bolts of Co-Teaching, in our September issue of *Link Lines*.

- For information on the crucial connection between student data, SOLs, and SDI, see Cathy Buyrn's article from our February 2016 issue of *Link Lines* entitled Strategic and Specially Designed Instruction: Leveraging Data Sources to Ensure General Curriculum Success.
- For information on providing students with SDI through strategy instruction, see Cathy Buyrn's article from our November 2015 issue of *Link Lines* entitled Specially Designed Instruction: The Importance of Specific Strategy Instruction.

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