

Contribution of Research

The Effectiveness of Co-Teaching in Middle School ELA Inclusion Classrooms

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which co-teaching strategies were used in 4th to 8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Through the use of a qualitative approach, data collection included interviews, a focus group, and surveys. The following themes were revealed: advantages of co-teaching, weaknesses of co-teaching, and planning. In addition, a theme of inconsistency was discovered. Results indicated that all of the participants used the one teach, one assist approach regularly. Teachers identified problems with implementing co-teaching such as lack of time to plan, classroom support, and professional development.

Key words: Inclusion, coteaching, preparation

Co-teaching strategies have been widely researched (Weinberg, et al., 2020) and used in inclusion classrooms. Nevertheless, teachers in middle school inclusion classrooms tend to rely on one of the approaches more than the others: *one teach, one assist* (Friend & Cook, 2017). With this strategy, the general education teacher provides instruction to the whole group while the special education teacher circulates the room, assisting students at their tables (Friend, 2015).

In a study by Hazlett (2001), it was reported that 16 co-teachers in an elementary setting relied largely on the one-teach, one assist approach to ensure that students received assistance on a daily basis. Likewise, in secondary inclusion settings, general education teachers lead instruction, with special educators taking the role of assistant (Scruggs, et al.,

2007). While this strategy is helpful for supporting students, there are six research-based approaches that can be utilized for academic support in inclusion classrooms. These include the *one teach, one observe* approach as well as *station teaching* and *parallel teaching*. Co-teaching strategies also consist of *alternative teaching* and *team teaching* (Friend & Cook, 2017).

For students with a specific learning disability in reading comprehension, co-teaching strategies benefit students daily. When co-teaching is used in English Language Arts classrooms, students have access to the general education curriculum, stay engaged in the content, and receive individualized instruction. Instead of leaving the classroom for intervention, targeted instruction is provided using alternative teaching as well as station teaching (Friend &

Cook, 2017). Similarly, academic achievement and student engagement increase when smaller student-teacher ratios are used (Eschete, et al., 2016; Jackson, et al., 2017). As reported in Scruggs, et al. (2007), fifty-four secondary students shared that they benefitted from participating in a co-taught classroom (Dieker, 2001).

According to Scruggs, et al. (2007), co-teaching is a partnership between professionals. A general education teacher and a special educator are placed together within an inclusion classroom to serve general education students as well as students with disabilities (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Each co-teacher plays an important role in educating students within an inclusion classroom setting (Friend, et al., 2010). It is a collaborative relationship in which a general education teacher and a special educator are equals in the classroom. Jointly, they share instructional responsibility, teach lessons, and design instruction to support students with special needs (Friend, et al., 2015).

The goal of co-teaching is to provide a classroom environment that is nurturing, collaborative, and supportive of students with special needs. Studying co-teaching practices in secondary settings is essential to determine if students are receiving access to the general education curriculum, modifications, and strategies appropriate for their learning (Battaglia & Brooks, 2019). As educators, it is important to learn about co-teaching strategies to ensure that differentiation of instruction is provided in inclusion classrooms.

According to Sinclair, et al. (2019), teachers expressed a desire to learn about co-teaching strategies in depth. They shared interest in professional development sessions that focused on the use of co-teaching strategies and how to incorporate them into their lessons. For successful co-teaching to take place, professional development must be provided regularly to help teachers and administrators understand the definition of co-teaching and the unique co-teaching approaches.

Correspondingly, teachers need feedback from administrators about the implementation of co-teaching strategies in their classroom. Having regular walk throughs and open discussions can help teachers grow in their knowledge of co-teaching. Without training and expectations for the implementation of co-teaching, secondary teachers tend to rely on the one teach, one assist approach (Sinclair, et al., 2019).

Additionally, for productive co-teaching to take place, both teachers need to be regarded as equal instructional partners. Allowing time for teachers and special educators to plan, discuss learning styles, and develop behavior management strategies is key to having a successful co-taught classroom. Similarly, having a master schedule for co-taught classes and building in planning time will help promote effective co-teaching practices. Doing so will prevent difficulties that can arise from lack of planning, training, and incompatible schedules.

Co-teaching lesson plans include the 5E planning model. Components include engagement, exploration, and explanation. The 5E model also consists of elaboration and evaluation. On the lesson plan, teachers list materials, modifications, and instructional accommodations that they will use during the lesson. The coteaching model that is used is then aligned with the Texas Education Standards (TEKS) and lesson objectives (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which general education teachers used co-teaching strategies in 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Specifically, which co-teaching strategies did they utilize to support students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension? Participants included 4th-8th grade English Language Arts teachers that participated in inclusion classes. A qualitative approach, with a phenomenological research design, guided this study. Data sources included participant interviews, a focus group, and surveys.

Co-Teaching Approaches

Six co-teaching approaches have been recognized in literature (Friend & Cook, 2003; Walther-Thomas, et al., 2000). These include *one teach, one observe, station teaching*, and *parallel teaching*. Research based co-teaching approaches also include *team teaching, alternative teaching*, and *one teach, one assist*. In co-taught classrooms, co-teachers collaborate and utilize the co-teaching method that is best for their students, adjusting instruction as needed. (Friend & Cook, 2017). In the secondary setting, general education teachers are considered content experts, while special education teachers are proficient at modifying curriculum and providing student support. When teachers collaborate effectively, they provide a positive classroom environment for all (Cook et. al., 2011; Jackson, et. al, 2017).

The *one teach, one observe* approach includes the general education teacher as the primary instructor. The special education teacher acts as the observer, taking anecdotal notes on student behavior and giving individual assessments to specific students. He or she may collect data for one student or a small group of students to track student needs and progress. (Friend & Cook, 2017).

Station teaching involves each co-teacher providing small group instruction at a station. A third table is set up for independent work (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Students move from station to station, allowing them the opportunity to work with each teacher on specific tasks. In *parallel teaching*, the class is separated into two groups. Each co-teacher instructs one group on opposite sides of the classroom (Friend & Cook, 2017; Scruggs, et al., 2007). The method is ideal for review, drill and practice, and supervision of projects.

Team teaching is an approach in which both co-teachers provide instruction to the whole group of students simultaneously. Each teacher is responsible for instruction, monitoring students, and planning. With this style, teacher compatibility is essential. For instance, if the co-teachers' instructional styles or personalities are too divergent, this method may not be favorable for teaching (Friend & Cook, 2017). In contrast, *alternative teaching* includes the

special education teacher working with a small group of students while the general education teacher provides instruction to the whole group (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Small group instruction may consist of specific content for students that is based on individualized education plan (IEP) objectives (Friend & Cook, 2017).

The most widely used approach includes *one teach, one assist* (Scruggs, et al., 2007), in which the general education teacher provides instruction while the special education teacher assists students as they work (Scruggs, et al., 2007; Walther-Thomas, et al., 2000). For example, the instructor leads the whole group lesson while the special educator circulates the room, answering questions, and providing personalized assistance. This approach requires little planning and is often used in secondary classrooms (Scruggs, et al., 2007; Solis, et al., 2012, Friend & Cook, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Two philosophical approaches guided this study. These included social constructivism and the social constructivist disability theory. "Social constructivists seek to understand the world we live in by interactions with others" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). As an educator, it is the researcher's belief that individuals work together to construct knowledge. Co-teaching allows educators to work together to serve both general education students and students with special needs. Together, they are able to construct knowledge and bring their own unique perspective and experience to the inclusion classroom. Understanding how educators obtain the knowledge to teach students with disabilities is imperative.

Similarly, when examining co-teaching strategies in inclusion classrooms, one must consider the social constructionist disability theory. This theory seeks to understand the individual, rather than focusing on one's disability. According to Anastasiou & Kauffman (2011), society's view of individuals with disabilities can be detrimental to their growth and success during their lifetime.

Today's society does have many defects. It structures many unfair social relationships, including those

based on gender, wealth, ethnicity, and disability. But a view of disability as a matter of social oppression separates people with disabilities from people without them who could help to maximize functioning or overcome much of their disablement (e.g., medical and paramedical professionals, special educators, engineers who develop assistive technologies) (p. 377).

Additionally, the social constructivist disabilities theory investigates the ways in which students with disabilities are included in the mainstream classroom. With this viewpoint, individuals with special needs are viewed as having differences rather than disabilities. Learning about the ways in which students with disabilities were supported within an inclusive environment was critical (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

A phenomenological research design guided the study to explore the phenomenon of coteaching. According to Beck (2021), Edmund Husserl described phenomenology as searching for “the possible meaning of an experience through viewing it from different perspectives and different positions” (p. 12). In this study, comprehensive descriptions were written to examine the co-teaching experiences shared by the participants. To understand the participants’ experiences to the greatest extent, the researcher put aside personal thoughts and biases to view the data and information analytically (Tatano Beck, 2021). Doing so, the researcher engaged in Epochè, or the ability to separate one’s experiences and opinions from a phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Phenomenological data analysis included examining the data found in surveys, interviews, and a focus group discussion. Phenomenological reduction was utilized, with the use of horizontalization. This method included documenting relevant expressions and themes. Data sources were compared, and textual descriptions

were created to describe participant experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Next, imagination variation was utilized with the use of individual and composite descriptions. The essence of the study was then attained by synthesizing the data into an expression of meaning (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Additionally, transcendental phenomenology guided this study. It includes two counterparts: noema and noesis (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). With these principles in mind, one can contemplate present and past experiences with the phenomenon (Beck, 2021). According to Yüksel & Yıldırım (2015), “Noema is the object of experience or action, reflecting the perceptions of feelings, thoughts and memories, and judgments regarding the object. Noesis is the act of experience, such as perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging” (p. 6).

Furthermore, to engage in Epochè, one must put away prior experiences and judgments about the phenomenon of study (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Moreover, bracketing, or setting aside preconceived ideas and beliefs, is imperative when conducting phenomenological research. With this method, the data can reveal the essence of the phenomenon without the interference of the preconceived notions of the researcher. Furthermore, eliminating redundant and overlapping information helps to reduce elements that are not connected to inclusion. Finally, imaginative variation further investigates the phenomenon to search for meaning (Beck, 2021; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

A qualitative approach was used to study the ways in which 4th to 8th grade general education teachers use co-teaching strategies in English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Data collection included surveys, interviews, and a focus group to address which co-teaching strategies were being used as well as teacher perceptions of their effectiveness. Research investigated the experiences of 4th-8th grade English Language Arts general education teachers within inclusion classrooms, and addressed the following research questions:

1. Which research-based co-teaching strategies are utilized within 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms?

2. What are English Language Arts teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching for students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension?
3. How are research-based co-teaching strategies implemented in English Language Arts inclusion classrooms?

Participants

To recruit participants, a Facebook post was created to invite fourth-eighth grade English Language Arts teachers to participate in the study. An email with the consent form was sent to individuals who expressed an interest in participating. The consent form included the purpose of the study, data collection methods, and a confidentiality statement. In addition, participants had the right to withdrawal at any time and the risks and benefits were included. Following this, a link to the Co-Teaching Approaches Survey (created by the researcher) was sent to the individuals that signed and returned the consent form. The last survey item of the survey asked, “Are you willing to complete a follow up interview and a focus group?” The options included yes and no. Purposive sampling was used to determine the participants that would take part in the study. For example, the first six individuals that completed the survey and indicated that they would participate in the interview and focus group were chosen as participants.

Individuals were recruited to determine how co-teaching strategies are used in English language arts inclusion classrooms and to discover teacher perceptions about the effectiveness of co-teaching. Inclusion criteria included 4th-8th grade English Language Arts teachers between the ages of 25-60 years of age that had both typically achieving students as well as special education students with a specific learning disability in reading comprehension in their English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Exclusion criteria comprised special education teachers and paraprofessionals. In addition, this excluded teachers that did not work with special education students in an inclusion setting. Educators that taught in a general education classroom without the assistance of a special educator were not included within the study.

The participants included two sixth grade teachers, three seventh grade teachers, and one eighth grade teacher from different school districts in Texas, between the ages of 25-60 years of age. Middle school English Language Arts inclusion teachers participated in the study. They each had typically achieving students as well as special education students with a specific learning disability in reading comprehension in their English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. Participants are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Participant identification

Pseudonym	Grade Level	Experience in ELA inclusion classroom	Overall Teaching Experience
Kim	6 th grade	3 years	10 years
Samantha	7 th grade	6 years	8 years
Matt	7 th grade	1 year	4 years
Dana	7 th grade	19 years	19 years
Emily	8 th grade	4 years	5 years
Laney	6 th grade	1 year	1 year

Epochè

Before engaging in the research process, the researcher considered past experiences with co-

teaching within inclusion classrooms. As an educator, the researcher observed middle school inclusion classrooms often, along with the ways in which co-teaching strategies were utilized.

Classroom observations revealed that *one teach, one assist* was used as the primary co-teaching strategy. The researcher wondered if the teachers used *one teach, one assist* as their primary co-teaching strategy and if they were familiar with the other approaches. To put aside personal experiences and thoughts, the researcher needed to engage in Epochè (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015) to fully contemplate the experiences and opinions of the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of surveys, interviews, and a focus group, conducted online. Surveys were uploaded into the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. The interviews and focus group were recorded and transcribed by using Otter.ai. video transcription software. Each interview was conducted separately, using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each interview was 30 minutes, with one session conducted per participant. One focus group session was completed with the participants, using the Zoom video conferencing platform. The duration of the focus group session was one hour.

Data sources were read carefully and organized to look for codes and emergent themes. The data were loaded into MAXQDA, and queries were completed to ascertain commonly used words and phrases in the data sources. Quotes from participants were considered and examined. Textual descriptions were created for each participant to represent their experiences in the inclusion classroom. Furthermore, a composite description was completed to illustrate the participants' experiences with using co-teaching strategies in sixth grade to eighth grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms.

To ensure confidentiality, only the researcher and the supervising professor had access to the participants' identities and the information that was associated with their identities. Participants remained anonymous and were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Persons that had access to the records, data, recordings, or other

documentation included the researcher and the primary investigator involved in the study. Possible risks for subjects did not exceed the minimum risks of daily life. The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to conducting the study.

Multiple types of data were utilized to determine credibility and reliability within the study to triangulate the data (Decrop, 1999). Data triangulation was used in order to investigate the phenomenon of co-teaching approaches in 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms from multiple viewpoints. Data included surveys, interviews, and focus group notes. Expressions and themes were derived from each data set using horizontalization. Data sources were compared, and textual descriptions of participant experiences were created (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Imagination variation was employed with the use of individual and combined descriptions. The data was synthesized into an expression of meaning (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Furthermore, fellow researchers reviewed the data to ensure rigor and insight.

Results

Research Question 1

Survey items and interview questions helped to answer the first research question: Which research-based co-teaching strategies were utilized within 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms? The first survey item asked, "Have you utilized co-teaching strategies in your classroom?" Five out of six participants shared that they have used them. The second survey item asked participants to designate which co-teaching approaches they have used. All six participants indicated that they used one teach, one assist. Five participants reported using one teach, one observe. Three of the teachers used parallel teaching, team teaching, and alternative teaching. Two out of six participants had used station teaching. Figure 2 shows the strategies used by the participants on a regular basis.

Figure 2
Participant use of co-teaching strategies

Participants	One teach, one assist	One teach, one observe	Parallel teaching	Station teaching	Alternative teaching	Team teaching
Samantha	x	x				
Kim	x	x	x		x	x
Matt	x		x	x	x	x
Emily	x	x	x		x	
Dana	x	x			x	x
Laney	x	x		x		

The use of the strategy = x

Interview question two asked, “Is there a co-teaching strategy that you are using that wasn’t listed above? Please explain.” One of the participants shared that he likes to co-teach with a content area teacher and conference with students to help with the writing process. Two of the participants shared that they enjoy working with a certified teacher and having time to plan. Furthermore, participants shared that they like to use an online format to meet student needs. With Google Classroom, they were able to modify assignments, provide feedback, and utilize accommodations such as text to speech and visual aids. While these are not co-teaching strategies, participants shared their perspective

and additional ways that they meet student needs.

Research Question 2

Survey items 3 and 4 helped to answer question two: What are teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching for students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension? Survey item three asked, “Based on the co-teaching strategy(s) that you use, how effective do you feel the approach is?” Four of the six participants indicated that co-teaching strategies were effective. One participant replied that they weren’t effective, and one responded that they were very effective. Figure 3 shows participant responses on the effectiveness of co-teaching approaches.

Figure 3
Effectiveness of Co-Teaching Strategies



Survey item four asked, “Why do you feel it is or is not effective?” Samantha (pseudonym) specified that co-teaching strategies were not effective. She shared that, “there is no planning to create the best use of this strategy” (Participant 2, personal communication, March 7, 2022). Laney’s (pseudonym) response included, “I have had an inclusion teacher be very effective and I’ve had another that wasn’t. I have drawn a conclusion that it depends on the teacher and how well they build a relationship with the students” (Participant 6, personal communication, March 7, 2022).

Four participants shared reasons why co-teaching strategies are helpful in the classroom.

Matt (pseudonym) shared, “I feel it is effective because we can capture every student when there are two in the room. Nobody will be missed, and these are strategies that ensure equity. One teacher cannot do it all to provide equity in a class of 20-30 different individuals” (Participant 3, personal communication, March 2, 2022).

Interview questions one, five, and six were utilized to better understand the teachers’ co-teaching experiences. Interview question asked, “Of the co-teaching approaches that you do not use, why are they not used in the classroom?” Participants reported that co-teaching approaches aren’t used due to problems with class sizes, inconsistency in support, and little to no training in co-teaching approaches. Four of the six participants shared that they have more than 27 or more students and they are more focused on behavior management. Also, support varies greatly. Three of the six participants have paraprofessionals assisting in their room. However, this is not true co-teaching. As they are not certified teachers, their knowledge level of content and classroom strategies varies.

Interview question five asked, “What is your perception of the impact of co-teaching strategies on students with disabilities?” All of the participants responded that they are beneficial and have a positive impact on students. Interview question six asked, “What are your feelings about co-teaching strategies?” Similarly, all of the participants replied that they like co-teaching strategies. They shared the importance of working

alongside a certified teacher. In addition, they shared concerns working with paraprofessionals and discussed the importance of professional development planning. For instance, Samantha shared, “I wish they were taught to the teacher and the co-teacher. Like, this is what we need from you. This is what it should look like. This is the perfect world idea scenario and go plan together. Teachers and co-teachers need to have planning time together” (Participant 2, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

Additionally, focus group questions nine, ten, and eleven addressed the second question: “What are teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching for students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension?” Four teachers participated in the focus group discussion. Focus group question nine asked, “What co-teaching strategy do you prefer to use in the classroom and why?” Two participants shared that they prefer the one teach, one assist method because it ensure that the students’ needs are met while in class. Four of the participants responded that they have large classes and tend to rely on the one teach, one assist approach.

Focus group question ten asked, “Are there opportunities for you and a special education teacher to plan lessons together? Please explain.” Kim (pseudonym) shared that she has “a common planning time with the special education inclusion teacher” (Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2022). However, three participants communicated that there is a lack of planning time and inclusion aides help their classrooms.

Focus Group question eleven asked, “When it comes to co-teaching, what would help it be more successful? What suggestions would you have for the administration?” All four participants stated the importance of working with certified co-teachers. Their classes are supported by paraprofessionals, rather than a co-teacher. Problems arise when paraprofessionals are absent, and administrators do not provide a substitute. In this case, students with special needs do not receive the support indicated on their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Research Question 3

A focus group was conducted to address the third research question, “How are research-based co-teaching strategies implemented in 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms?”

Teacher participants were asked to share how they implement co-teaching strategies in their middle school inclusion classroom. Focus group question three asked participants, “For those who use one teach, one observe, how do you use it in the classroom?” Dana (pseudonym) responded that she was “familiar with the approach. However, one teach, one observe typically includes the special education teacher observing a particular student or group of students for assessment” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Focus question four asked, “When using one teach, one assist, how is it implemented in the classroom?” Samantha shared,

I teach. And then the inclusion teacher comes in, goes to her specific students, and sees that they need help. She's really good about going to everybody, but our numbers are really bad right now. So, it's most of the classes, part of hers. So, she makes sure that everybody is understanding, then all the kids know if they need anything that she's able to help them (Participant 2, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Focus group question five asked the participants, “For those of you who use Parallel Teaching, how is it implemented in the classroom?” Momentarily, no responses were given. Following this, the researcher gave an explanation about parallel teaching. In response, one of the participants shared that she and “the co-teacher will be teaching different parts of the room. She will teach one group and the co-teacher will teach the other. Then, they will flip flop and teach the other group” (Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Focus group question six asked, “When using station teaching, how is it used in the classroom?”

One of the participants shared her experience with station teaching. Emily (pseudonym) said she, “likes to have the students rotate to different tables. At one station, she will teach a certain skill and at another station the inclusion aide will teach a skill. Then, the last station will include independent work” (Participant 5, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Focus group question seven asked, “For those who like to use team teaching, how do you interact with the special education teacher?” Kim shared that,

Maybe she'll do one portion. I'll do the journal and the grammar and then she'll do kind of the main content. Maybe the next period we'll flip that or something because I know a lot of times, she likes to see how I do it with other periods that I don't have inclusion to kind of get an idea of what I'm doing or what that looks like...then she is able to kind of put her own spin on it as well if she teaches that main content for that class or day (Participant 1, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Lastly, focus group question eight asked, “When using alternative teaching, how is this implemented in the classroom?” Dana shared that she uses it regularly. For example, while teaching the whole group, the special education teacher will work with a small group to teach specific skills. The other participants did not respond to this question.

Theme 1: Advantages of Co-Teaching

After reviewing the data sources, four themes emerged. These include the advantages of co-teaching, weaknesses of co-teaching, and planning. A fourth theme was inconsistency. According to Butler-Kisber (2018), the phenomenological methodology includes extricating significant quotes, assigning meaning to them, and organizing the data into themes. Following this, rich textural descriptions are written.

The first theme includes the advantages of co-teaching. Responses from the participants indicated the benefits of using online learning,

collaboration with peers, and general strategies. Additionally, participants shared that a common theme was inconsistency.

For instance, both co-teachers can utilize online tools such as Google Classroom. The application allows teachers to modify student assignments, deliver instant feedback, and provide student accommodations such as text to speech, visual aids, and recorded lessons.

Next, participants shared that they value collaboration with another certified teacher. They shared the need to join forces with another teacher to share ideas and plan together. Studies show that when teachers collaborate, they learn from each other (Buckley, 2005; Carlson, 1996; Curtin, 1998; Luckner, 1999; Rice & Zigmund, 2000; Salend, et al., 1997; Tarrant, 1999; Thompson, 2001; Trent, 1998). When teachers collaborate, they grow professionally (Scruggs, et al., 2007).

Another advantage includes the use of general teaching strategies. Data revealed that when co-teachers work alongside each other in the classroom, they are more likely to use everyday teaching strategies such as pairing special education students with a general education peer, utilizing small group instruction, and guiding a student through a lesson. Moreover, they are more likely to individualize instruction with online learning.

Theme 2: Weaknesses of Co-Teaching

Secondly, weaknesses of co-teaching emerged. Participants shared that weaknesses included large class sizes, managing student behavior, and a lack of professional development. Administrators determine how co-teaching will be implemented on their campus. It is essential that co-teachers be able to volunteer to participate in co-taught classrooms, have adequate planning time, and are provided with professional development about the usage of co-teaching strategies (Sinclair, et al, 2019).

Participants shared that their class sizes are typically large, containing 27 or more students. Classes of this size can be problematic as teachers may feel the need to manage student behavior to keep all of the students engaged. For

example, they may rely on the one teach one assist strategy to ensure that all of the students' needs are met rather than using additional co-teaching strategies. Dana shared,

I prefer to do the, you know, the one teacher one assist, just to make sure that, you know, there's more eyes on the student to make sure they're engaged. You know, when you have a class of 30, it's really hard to make sure that you have eyes on every kid and, you know, if they're engaged or if they are struggling or not (Participant 4, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Additionally, four of the participants shared that they have received little to no professional development on co-teaching strategies. There may be a one-hour session on co-teaching at the beginning of the school year, but no further trainings are provided to make the best use of the strategies. Five of the six participants were familiar with co-teaching, but one participant had not received any training or professional development.

Secondly, four of the teachers shared that they received little to no training on co-teaching strategies. For instance, during professional development sessions, an hour training may be provided on co-teaching. Following this, no further explanation or practice is given on how to use these in the classroom. One of the participants had not received any training. She shared that she was unaware of the strategies. In the future, it is essential that professional development sessions include co-teaching strategies and ways in which to implement them in the classroom.

Theme 3: Planning

Thirdly, the need for planning was evident. Teachers shared that difficulties include grade level support, teacher responsibilities, and teacher shortage. Sinclair, et. al. (2019) shared the importance of administrative guidance for the implementation of co-teaching strategies. However, at times, administrators need direction on how to support co-taught classrooms.

“Despite evidence that administrative support is essential to retaining special education teachers (SETs) and providing quality instruction in cotaught classrooms, there has been limited guidance provided to administrators on their role in supporting co-teaching practices (p. 308)”.

Because of grade level support, time for planning isn’t built in the daily schedule. A successful co-teaching relationship is dependent on having a specific planning time in which the teachers can discuss lessons, ways to modify content, and how best to use co-teaching strategies in class. When planning isn’t provided, the quality of instruction can be impacted as well as the ways in which students are supported. In a study completed by Hazlett (2001), co-teachers had forty minutes per week to plan together. Though they had time to collaborate, participants shared that more planning opportunities would be preferable.

Similarly, teachers have many responsibilities. For example, special educators may have multiple classes to support and students on their roster. Due to busy schedules, they may not have time to plan with the general education teacher. One of the participants shared that she had a designated time to plan with her co-teacher. However, five of the six participants did not have an allocated time to meet with a co-teacher. It is essential that administrators facilitate co-planning times during the school day (Sinclair, et. al, 2019).

Three of the six participants shared that they had paraprofessionals assisting in their inclusion classrooms. Because of this, they felt that there was a teacher shortage of special education co-teachers. Two of the participants did not consistently see their co-teacher. Emily (pseudonym) shared that,

I don't see my inclusion teacher often and I can see the lack of her presence, you know, especially with my kids that are very low, though. I'm needing to give constant reminders, you know, just it's, it's, it's gone down and, and it's very

unfortunate. I believe that they're really good. I believe that our kids need them, especially inclusion kids. They deserve to be in those classrooms, but they also deserve to be, you know, met. And it's a shame right now with my situation...Inclusion teachers are needed 100%. They know how to do what they need to do

(Participant 6, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

Theme 4: Inconsistency

The fourth theme is inconsistency. Participants shared the difficulties with year-to-year changes, content knowledge, and class period supports. To begin, year to year changes occur and are not limited to a change in co-teachers as well as grade level. For example, during one school year, a teacher may have a co-teacher. The next year, he or she may have a paraprofessional supporting their class. However, true co-teaching includes a general education teacher and a special education teacher, not a paraprofessional.

Paraprofessionals are helpful, but they may not have an understanding of the content being taught or how to use co-teaching strategies. According to Friend & Cook (2017), co-teaching includes the sharing of expertise and the collaboration of teachers, working side by side. General educators bring knowledge of content, instructional strategies, and pedagogy. Special educators share their expertise in individualizing instruction, modifying content, and support students with special needs (Friend, et al., 2015).

Likewise, classroom support is essential. Three of six participants shared that class period support is inconsistent. They reported that paraprofessionals support their classrooms regularly. In addition, they are often pulled from the classrooms for different reasons. Sometimes, they are needed as a substitute teacher or pulled from class to intervene with a student. Dana shared her worries:

“I’ve had, you know, three or four different aids, they keep pulling them for different reasons...but it’s really hard, you know, you just have it streamlined, you just want some consistency, especially for kids that probably need a little bit more structure” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 12, 2022).

Textural Descriptions

Participant 1: Kim

Kim, a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher, shared that she has 27 or 28 students in her inclusion classrooms. Because of her large class size, she has trouble implementing co-teaching strategies. However, she does implement team teaching. She shared,

...we both teach the lesson, like all the grammar and independent reading, and then she’ll do, like, her teacher will do the lesson and the closing... sometimes my inclusion teacher will, you know, watch me teach at second period, or teach, you know, kind of the main stuff, and then she’ll kind of mimic it in the seventh period (Participant 1, personal communication, March 7, 2022).

Moreover, she shared that she has experienced inconsistency with co-teachers in past years. For example, Kim said, “Last year, I had three. And then this year, I’m fortunate just to have one, and she’s a teacher that I’ve worked with every single year” (Participant 1, personal communication, March 7, 2022). She reported that co-teaching is important because you can monitor student progress, pull a small group, and pair students together. Kim was the only participant to receive a one-hour professional development session.

Participant 2: Samantha

Samantha, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, shared that she had not received professional development about co-teaching strategies. She had a paraprofessional provide

support in her classroom during her first year of teaching, but she was not sure how to interact with her. Samantha said,

...and like my very first year teaching, I had an inclusion aide, and I had no idea what I was doing. Like, nobody told me, hey, you’re supposed to give them your lesson plans or nothing. So, I was like, great, you’re in the room, go, go do something. I don’t know what you’re supposed to do...It’s kind of been like that for every year. Nobody’s ever told me exactly what we’re supposed to do with inclusion aids. So, it could be more helpful if there was more education on it (Participant 2, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

Generally, she shared the importance of professional development in co-teaching. She would like to receive training to understand how best to use each strategy. Samantha also shared that planning with a co-teacher is essential. During this year, she has a special education co-teacher. With her assistance, she feels the special education students in her class are well supported.

Participant 3: Matt

Matt a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, shared that his co-teacher doesn’t visit his classroom consistently. So, he feels that he tends to manage behavior on a regular basis. He will co-teach with the social studies teacher to share resources and share instruction. Matt shared that he utilizes online modifications to support his students. For example, Matt shared,

I like to record my lessons so that if they’re missing something, they can always rewind and go back to that... I’ll pre-record things, just so that they could use the audio and be able to listen to a story. If that’s absolutely what they needed. I also tried to provide as many pictures as I could...I’ll put the words with a definition and a picture onto the Google Doc and have that available for everybody (Participant 3, personal communication, March 5, 2022).

Matt shared the importance of using co-teaching strategies as they were intended. He feels that his peers tend to rely on the one teach, one assist approach. He imparted,

“I think co teaching strategies are great, as long as they're used really, really well. I think people can tend to lean on one teach, one assist when they're managing student behavior, which I'm not sure if that's necessarily the best practice in class” (Participant 3, personal communication, March 5, 2022).

Participant 4: Dana

Dana, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, shared that professional development is needed. She felt that she was introduced to co-teaching briefly and that the district budget didn't allow for further training. Likewise, Dana felt that her district hires paraprofessionals to support inclusion classrooms, rather than special education inclusion teachers. Dana said, “What usually happens is, they're aides that are, you know, assigned to...certain periods in our room. And so, they're not usually certified teachers (Participant 4, personal communication, March 1, 2022)”.

She also shared the importance of working with a co-teaching and having planning time. Moreover, she discussed to use of technology to support students along with large classes and problems with classroom support. She shared that over the years, she has rarely worked with a co-teacher. She shared, “There was probably a good 10 or 12 years we went without an aid.” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 1, 2022).

Participant 5: Emily

Emily, an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, communicated that she does not have a certified co-teaching assisting her this year. A paraprofessional supports her room. Emily shared the importance of assisting students with special needs.

I believe students with disabilities really do need someone to sit next to them sometimes, and walk them through an assignment either more fully, or in the kind of some kind of

language that they really need, or that kind of thing. I think it's very valuable, actually, to have a second adult in a room who just works with that population. Because it's just usually a teacher, I don't have enough time to sit down with everyone and give them the same one on one instruction (Participant 5, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Participant 6: Laney

Laney (pseudonym), a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher, shared worries about a teacher shortage. She feels that there are more students than teachers and that she experiences inconsistency in classroom support. Her co-teacher does not support her class regularly. She said,

He is not coming in sometimes and not like the one that I had last year that was actually coming in, actually going through the curriculum, preparing anchor charts, and already knowing what we were going to be doing and preparing. So that's why that's not happening now. So sometimes she comes in, she's like, do you need me? And I'm like, I mean, I would love to have you and that's really what's happening this year (Participant 6, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

Laney reported that because her students are not being supported, she has difficulties managing student behavior. “I don't understand why. But there's a lot of behavior. Students put in that same...a lot of you know, it sometimes comes with a territory, but it's really hard to cater to everyone” (Participant 6, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

Composite Description

Overall, all six participants discussed the importance of consistent classroom support. One of the participants had a co-teacher, while three of the participants had paraprofessional support. Two of the participants' co-teachers did not regularly visit their classroom. Each teacher had a different experience with co-teaching. Instructionally, they

shared the importance of technology as a means to modify content and provide accommodations. They were able to chunk assignments, provide feedback, and build in features like text to speech. Additionally, student progress can be tracked and monitored online.

Three of the participants shared the need for a common planning time. Due to paraprofessional support, often there is no time to plan. Furthermore, they shared the importance of hiring certified co-teachers. They understood that working with a paraprofessional is not true co-teaching. Lastly, understanding how to use each co-teaching strategy is imperative as the participants had used at least two of the six research-based strategies.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways that co-teaching strategies were used in 4th to 8th grade English Language Arts classrooms. Particularly, which co-teaching strategies did they utilize to support students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension? 4th -8th grade English Language Arts teachers were asked to participate in the study. However, participants included teachers in 6th to 8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms. With a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach was utilized. Data collection included participant interviews, a focus group, and specific open-ended questions with a questionnaire. The research questions included (1) Which research-based co-teaching strategies are utilized within 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms? (2) What are teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching for students with specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension? (3) How are research-based co-teaching strategies implemented in 4th-8th grade English Language Arts inclusion classrooms? After reviewing the data sources, the researcher was able to understand the teachers' experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of co-teaching strategies. During data analysis, four themes emerged. These include advantages of co-

teaching, weaknesses of co-teaching, planning, and inconsistency.

Conclusion

Findings indicated that all of the participants had used the one teach, one assist approach regularly. Moreover, each participant had experience with two or more of the strategies. Teachers shared that the benefits of coteaching included collaboration between the general education and special education teacher as well as the ability to support students and provide positive peer role models (Cook, McDuffie-Landrum, & Oshita, et al.). Each co-teacher brings their own expertise and unique experiences, enriching the classroom environment (Texas Education Agency, 2018). In contrast, difficulties with time to plan, classroom support, and professional development were discussed. Teachers felt the need to learn more about co-teaching to effectively implement co-teaching strategies.

Teachers identified problems with implementing co-teaching effectively due to lack of time to plan, classroom support, and professional development. These results indicate the importance of administrative support. For a successful district wide co-teaching program, professional development must begin at the administrative level. It is important that administrators understand the definition of co-teaching, the co-teaching approaches, and how to appropriately implement co-teaching. Additionally, the program needs to be monitored by completing regular walk throughs and teacher evaluations based on research-based co-teaching practices. Walk throughs will evaluate teacher interaction, lesson presentation, and the co-teaching approaches that are used. Following the observation, a follow up meeting will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the co-taught lesson (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

For productive co-teaching to take place, both teachers need to be regarded as equal instructional partners. For instance, both teachers' names need to be on the door, board, and included within instructional materials such

as newsletters and syllabi. It is essential that both teachers establish classroom routines, set up expectations, and share in classroom management (Texas Education Agency, 2018). To develop a positive coteaching relationship, teachers should meet prior to the start of the school year (even if a specified time isn't set by administration) to discuss their teaching style, determine first day procedures, and plan the first week's lesson plans. Regular meetings help teachers maintain open communication (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

According to this study, the one teach, one assist method continues to be used as a primary means of co-teaching due to class sizes, the use of paraprofessionals, and a lack of campus protocol. Further research is needed to investigate how professional development is being provided at the administrative level. Successful co-teaching programs start with administrative support. If there is no guidance from campus administrators, it is likely that teachers will rely on the one teach, one assist approach. It is important to determine how administrators are prepared at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. For example, are they receiving professional development in research-based co-teaching strategies? Are they sharing the information with their campuses and developing a campus protocol? Understanding the ways in which administrators receive professional development for co-teaching strategies is crucial to

determine the need for training at the administrative level.

Limitations

A limitation in this study included the number of participants. While vital information was gathered from the participants, the views of six educators were represented. Due to the sample size, one focus group was completed rather than multiple groups. The amount of data needed to make general conclusions was limited. Likewise, the study had been condensed to 4th-8th grade general education English Language Arts teachers. A larger sample would provide more information about the experiences of English Language Arts teachers in inclusion classrooms.

Future Research

In the future, research is needed with a larger sample of participants. A greater sample would offer a wider range of the implementation of co-teaching strategies. Though the study intended to include 4th-8th grade general education teachers, 6-8 grade teachers participated. Studies that include elementary teachers would provide awareness into how co-teaching strategies are used in K-5th grade inclusion classrooms. Similarly, including 9-12 grade teachers would provide a different insight to how co-teaching strategies are used at the high school level.

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