Teachers’ Philosophical Views of Co-teaching Literacy

Carrie Sherman

Literacy Department

St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York

August 2008
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One teach, one assist</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station teaching</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel teaching</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative teaching</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team teaching</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is co-teaching?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What roles do co-teachers have?</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges and barriers impact co-teaching?</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do co-teachers perceive themselves?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it take to make co-teaching literacy instruction work?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom contexts</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom assessment</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and Discussion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal level of teaching among co-teachers</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unequal level of teaching among co-teachers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy instruction within a co-teaching partnership</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions and Implications</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Questionnaire Questions</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

The relationship between general and special educators is one that is designed in order to create an optimal growth of learning within a diverse setting of students with a variety of learning abilities. Co-teaching is a type of partnership that has begun to increase in regard to the design of a classroom environment. This unique pairing of individuals has taken a new turn towards creating a classroom environment, which is based around different philosophies that connect with the idea that two is better than one. The question at hand that needs to be answered is how do teachers philosophically view themselves as co-teachers of literacy and how does this orientation play out in their teaching? This question was posed to a group of general and special education teachers who co-teach within an urban setting. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted in order to help discover how co-teachers work in collaborative settings.
Introduction

The relationship between general and special educators is one that is designed in order to create an optimal growth of learning within a diverse setting of students with a variety of learning abilities. Co-teaching is a type of partnership that has begun to increase in regard to the design of a classroom environment. This unique pairing of individuals has taken a new turn towards creating a classroom environment, which is based around different philosophies that connect with the idea that two is better than one. The question at hand that needs to be answered is how do teachers philosophically view themselves as co-teachers of literacy and how does this orientation play out in their teaching?

In order to answer this type of question research is required to be conducted to better understand the reasoning behind this truth-seeking question. Two minds coming together as one is a learning experience for both teachers and students that will have both its ups and downs towards an outlook on this type of learning environment. Most people would say that two is always better than one especially when you put great minds together in order to become one. Co-teaching is a collaborative relationship that works just like the ins and outs of a marriage. The co-teaching partnership becomes that rollercoaster ride where you never know how the end result will turn out. As a union, two teachers that work hand and hand with one another have to build a lasting trust that will grow into a lasting future of positive cooperation for all.
Theoretical Framework

“Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people” (Barton & Hamilton 1998; taken from Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 10). Being socially accepted among cultures is what makes literacy a factor that encompasses the aspects within one’s life. As a whole, literacy is everything that surrounds a human being. The magnitude of literacy is “grounded in social, cultural, historical, and political practices” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 1). Through experiences that fall within a co-teaching environment, literacy is brought into account through the many practices that the general and special educators follow in order to deliver instruction. Through understanding, educators who teach within a co-teaching atmosphere are able to build upon literacy through tasks that are being acquired within his or her discourse.

Literacy is proficiency in secondary discourse. Discourses include ways of thinking, believing, talking, acting, reading, and writing that represent different social groups and their ways of life (Gee, 1989). Theories help teachers to design a firm acceptance of what literacy is and how it is woven into everything within society. As Steiner states, “theories serve three functions; “they allow for a greater understanding of a phenomenon, allow for the generation of predictions concerning the phenomenon, and allow us to influence the phenomenon itself” (Steiner, 1978; taken from Kucer, 2005, p. 123). With these factors in mind, co-teachers are able to create a surrounding for learning
that is based around theories that influence, form understanding, and help to create predictions through out the literacy practice that is demonstrated within the classroom setting. Through research, teachers are able to help shape their own roles and perceptions that embody their own ideas of being co-teachers of literacy.

The ongoing process of research development helps to inform the general and special educator to instruct at developmentally appropriate levels that will integrate mediation through the use of scaffolding each student within the classroom. In order for literacy as a whole to be seen as dynamic or even multidimensional, teachers within a co-teaching environment have to use the four dimensions of literacy. The uses of cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions will help each teacher within this partnership to form a classroom atmosphere that goes beyond the surface level of literacy. For literacy to become completely balanced, one has to tap into each of the four resource models that have been previously stated in order to form a strong foundation of literacy.

Common developmental patterns are used throughout oral and written language in order for individuals to develop literacy acquisition. The learner as a scientist, development as a recursive process, the adult as a guide, mediator, and demonstrator, and negotiating meaning are the four major principles that help to illustrate language as a whole. When the learner is a scientist, he or she is learning language through data collection, rule generation, rule testing, and rule modification. Discovery is a vital factor that takes place through the experimentation of learning language. Active engagement with the educational environment and the classroom setting help to form a basic platform for understanding language (Dyson, 1998). When a child is learning language by having development as a recursive process, he or she is learning language through their mistakes,
gaining understanding over time, and through interaction development (Dyson, 1998). Through the adult as a guide, mediator and demonstrator, a child is able to learn through support and scaffolding from his or her teachers and other adults. The adult is creating a comfortable atmosphere so that the child and adult are able to work socially and collaboratively in order to develop dimensions of literacy (Dyson, 1998). Finally, when negotiating meaning, one is learning both oral and written language in order to generate meaning to what is being said and uses a variety of cues to build upon understanding (Dyson, 1998).

“Despite their diverse backgrounds, all children bring to school rich linguistic abilities acquired through social interaction in their homes and communities” (Meier 2003, p. 242). This idea is brought on by what we call linguistic variation. Language in general is a highly complex and a strong foundation of linguistics (Meier, 2003). Each individual child that enters the classroom environment has a background that has been built upon his or her own linguistics within their culture. Children are going to be brought up to learn language in their own culturally specific ways as opposed to learning only one main language such as English. “Variation in speech is at the core of social and historical identity, interwoven into the fabric of cultural differences” (Wolfram 2002, p. 226). Cultural differences are another factor that helps to shape how literacy is acquired within society.

Teachers need to become involved with the different cultures that make up their classroom settings. For example, teachers can design cultural lessons that involve interactions with children’s family members and different community members (Meier, 2003). There are also three characteristics that teachers can do in order to bring
linguistic/cultural variations within a classroom. Choosing books that relate to children’s lives has a “powerful effect on children’s responses to text when they see and listen to books that connect in the meaningful way to their lives” (Meier 2003, p. 246). Teachers can instruct book reading behaviors explicitly in order to build upon students’ knowledge with open-ended questions and answer-known questions that will help children of all linguistic backgrounds to develop their own individual book reading behaviors (Meier, 2003). The idea behind making books come alive gives both the general and special educators the chance to show children how books can relate to their own lives in cultural and linguistic ways. Making books come alive will help children to form real life connections throughout their reading in order to link prior knowledge and newly acquired knowledge to what is being discovered (Meier, 2003).

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) gives us the theory that has to do with daily interactions. “New Literacy Studies emphasizes literacy as a more complex social practice that mandated curricula and assessments address” (Larson & Marsh 2005, p. 3). Throughout this theory, “learners use literacy in a variety of forms (multiple literacies) for a variety of purposes across contexts, both formal and informal” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 131). On the other side of the spectrum, “teachers are facilitators of learners’ use of literacy for a variety of purposes and participation in literacy events and practices” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 131). When taking a deeper look at this theory it is important for the general and special educator to teach beyond the curriculum alone. Bringing literacy events into the classroom will help students to make connections to what is being taught. “In order to facilitate communicative competence across multiple discourse communities, children need experiences participating in communities beyond their
classroom and local community” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 24). In today’s society the theory behind New Literacy Studies is all about opening up each individual students mind to new and exciting experiences that connect with learning on new levels. “The literacy practices constructed and used in this classroom are authentically related to practices in everyday life” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 31).

Critical literacy is yet another foundational theory that affects the different approaches co-teachers take to form literacy instruction. Within this theory “learners are positioned as active agents in relation to texts and social practices. Teachers facilitate the development of learners’ understandings of the way in which they are positioned in relation to texts and social practices” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 131). When students are critical readers they use the four resources models (code breaker, meaning maker, text user, text critic) in order to reach balanced literacy. The combination of the major components of reading with the four resource models help to form a strong foundation for critical literacy. The connections between the two are as follows: as code breaker (relating to decoding/encoding competence); meaning maker (focusing on reader response); text user (pragmatic competence) and text critic (critical response)” (Larson & Marsh 2003, p. 42). Each resource model is what helps children to become more involved within their classrooms and the environment that surrounds them. These resources help the general and special educators to design a classroom that is developed around critical literacy. Through this theory co-teachers are able to help students to understand that literacy is a critically social practice that also holds potential for change.
As a general educator within a co-teaching setting I am always fostering a community that is full of young learners. Children’s language needs to be seen as being active and meaningful to literacy practices as a form of resources for the curriculum. The use of inquiry needs to be based around learning; and the teaching of all the dimensions of literacy needs to be taught explicitly and directly within the co-teaching partnership so that literacy as a whole can be balanced within the classroom setting. Children need to become active participants within their own learning experiences. Literature that mirrors the lives of children is going to make for a dynamic and multidimensional learning environment. To reach this point, literacy should continue to be developmental so that individuals are able to become more culturally involved in order to grow with their social identities. As time passes we are able to better knowledge ourselves with the idea behind literacy and what literacy truly means when being taught in a co-teaching setting.

Literacy as a whole entity is brought into the classroom environment on an array of different levels of understanding and meaning. In order for literacy to be touched upon within an integrated classroom setting there needs to be a commonality among the delivery of instruction within a co-teaching situation. Paratore and Indrisano (1994) have not only touched upon a commonality between collaborative educators’ delivery of instruction of literacy, but have found that “the most important educational outcome of the physical changes in the classrooms are the resulting changes in the ways literacy is taught” (p. 57). A co-teaching partnership is intertwined with one general educator and one special educator working together in order to shape a classroom atmosphere that is built around a familiar understanding between the two individuals. Gately (2005) has supported the idea of co-teaching as involving the “deployment of a general education
teacher and special education teacher assuming the full responsibility for the education of all students in the classroom, including planning, presentation, classroom management, and evaluation” (p. 36). Researchers (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002) have examined that throughout this unique partnership, roles and individual perspectives are touched upon in order to help devise the philosophical points of view that co-teachers embrace throughout their own individual teaching experiences.

In order for a co-teaching relationship to be effective there are special models that are designed to reach success within the classroom. Studies have examined and identified five different models that co-teachers follow in order to create an effective learning environment (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997; Austin, 2001; Tobin, 2005). One teach-one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching are five various ways that two teachers are able to come together to deliver instruction. Among these partnerships, teaching responsibilities vary depending on the modeled co-teaching display that gets selected. These five representations help to define each teacher’s role within a classroom.

**One teach, one assist**

Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997) describes one teach-one assist as requiring “both teachers to be present with one teacher taking the lead in delivering instruction; the other teacher monitors or assists students individually” (p. 5). Similarly, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) have a common agreeable belief with the idea behind one teach-one assist being that “the general educator assumes teaching responsibilities, and the special education teacher provides individual support as needed”
(p. 392). Within this partnership each teacher understands his or her role within the classroom in order to work with one another as a collaborative team.

**Station teaching**

Within the second method of co-teaching, Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997) affirm that “station teaching” is when “each teacher takes responsibility for teaching part of the content to small groups of students who move among stations” (p.5). In a meaningful way, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffier (2007) base their explanation around the same idea that links this model to different teacher designed stations throughout the classroom in order to build on each student’s individual learning experiences and capabilities. Throughout this process, students are able to grow with their understanding in order to build upon prior knowledge as they receive instruction within a small group setting.

**Parallel teaching**

This type of model is designed around the idea that each teacher will deliver instruction together but will split the class into two small groups in order to receive the instruction (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Through this model of collaborative teaching the representation of using a mirror-like teaching method will help to create a “dynamic relationship between key constituents and their evaluation of the efficacy of co-teaching” (Austin, 2001, p. 246).

**Alternative teaching**

This explicit technique of co-teaching is one that involves taking teaching to a different level when delivering instruction in the most meaningful way. Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997) illustrate “alternative teaching” as being when “one
teacher works with a smaller group of students to reteach, preteach, or supplement the instruction received by the larger group” (p. 5). In order to accomplish this type of situation there needs to be a common understanding between the general and special education teachers so that they are able to distribute instruction in a concise yet in-depth way.

**Team teaching**

Within both studies (Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007) this particular approach is built with the same perspective in mind that within this partnership both teachers take on an equal amount of responsibility when leading instructional activities and shaping the curriculum. Austin (2001) feels that the team teaching model is “the most effective in valuing the contribution of both collaborative teachers through equitable tasking and responsibility, and although some models of inclusion utilize the special education teacher as a consultant, a growing body of literature recommends the learning or collaborative model” (p. 246).

These five co-teaching models work to make an integrated classroom a more successful atmosphere for meeting the abilities of all individual learners within this specifically designed setting. It is through this close net situation that two teachers become fulfilled with new insights that lend a hand to play an integral role in who they are as instructors of educating young minds.
Review of Research

The relationship between a general educator and a special educator is one that is designed in order to create an optimal growth of learning within a diverse setting of students with a variety of learning abilities. With this being said, I have decided to create a research project that is based around the philosophies of how teachers’ view themselves as co-teachers of literacy instruction and how their own orientation plays out in their teaching. The reasoning behind this specifically chosen topic is that I am currently a general education teacher who teaches in a co-teaching situation within an Integrated Special Classroom (ISC). This experience has personally given me the initiative to want to research the ideas that other teachers’ have who educate students within the same literacy instruction settings as myself.

Co-teaching is a type of partnership that has begun to increase in regard to the design of a classroom. This unique pairing of individuals has taken a new turn towards creating a classroom environment, which is based around different philosophies that connect with the idea that two is better than one. The question at hand that needs to be answered is how do teachers philosophically view themselves as co-teachers of literacy and how does this orientation play out in their teaching?

What is co-teaching?

The topic of how teachers philosophically view themselves as co-teachers of literacy is not per say a problem but more of a viewpoint of one’s thinking. Various studies seek to define co-teaching (Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Wischnowski, Salmon, & Eaton, 2004; Cook & Friend, 1995; Austin, 2001; Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie,
These researchers who have studied the components that help to shape co-teaching have found that there are specific areas that relate to the makeup of co-teaching as a whole unit. Cook and Friend (1995) have defined the partnership of co-teaching as being, “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space” (p. 2). Similarly, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2004) assert that co-teaching is “sharing the responsibilities within a classroom to include children with and without identified special learning needs” (p. 3).

Within a co-teaching environment a general educator and special educator are joined together to form an enlightening atmosphere that best fits the makeup of the diverse array of students that are within the classroom. Murawski and Swanson (2001) discuss the makeup of co-teaching as being “one service delivery option designed to meet the needs of students with and without special needs” (p. 258). In conjunction with today’s trendy idea of pairing collaborative teams that are designed around one general educator and one special educator, we as a society are finding new ways to create “adaptations and interventions in order to teach students in heterogeneous classrooms” (Austin, 2001, p. 245). Using adaptations and interventions within this explicitly designed atmosphere will lead both teachers to feel a sense of accomplishment. Gerber and Popp (2000) have discussed within their research that collaborative teaching partners work together in a coordinated fashion in order to academically and behaviorally teach new strategies that will help to reach success within the classroom environment. When two teachers teach simultaneously within an integrated setting they are able to maintain responsibility for the different levels of instruction that take place on a daily
basis (p. 229-230). The delivery of skills among this collaborative pairing is premeditated around the important roles that help to shape the foundation of a strong team.

**What roles do co-teachers have?**

In order for a co-teaching partnership to become and continue to be successful there are certain roles that each educator needs to bring to the table. Voltz, Elliott, and Cobb (1994) have revealed that in order for a successful foundation to be developed collaborative roles among the general and special educators need to be put into place. Functions that work towards the realm of communication and collaborative planning between the co-teaching partnership “include exchanging student progress information, sharing diagnostic testing information, sharing responsibility for grading, participating in collaborative long- and short-term educational planning, and meeting with parents” (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994, p. 527). Through focusing on instruction itself as a whole entity, the general and special educators are able to use their collaborative roles in order to problem solve by using “their collective expertise in a collegial, equal-status relationship” (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994, p. 527).

Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have used their individual points of view in conjunction with similar ideas about the roles within co-teaching relationships that have been previously touched upon by Voltz, Elliott, and Cobb (1994). Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have found that providing support, instructional delivery, and teaching different parts of content are all important roles that are split amongst the general and special educators within co-taught classrooms (p. 64). Special educators within the co-taught setting find
their individual roles to be identified around “four variables that affected their roles in co-taught classrooms: scheduling pressures, content understanding, acceptance by general educators, and the skills of the special needs students” (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002, p. 65). It has been touched upon within this teaching partnership that the roles of the general and special educators play have become an essential aspect of the internal and external influences that illustrate the co-teaching model.

**What challenges and barriers impact co-teaching?**

As a co-teaching relationship begins to become stronger as time passes on, there are many challenges that can get in the way of maintaining a successful outlook on instruction. Scholars today (Walther-Thomas, 1997; Gerber and Popp, 2000; Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989) deliberate on the topic of whether or not co-teaching as a whole can be brought into action without challenges or barriers getting in the way of preserving a successful work environment that is based around the collaborative pairing of one general and one special education teacher. Walther-Thomas (1997) has used tactics in order to identify a “number of challenges and barriers that impact the success of collaborative teaching in schools, including planning time, scheduling, caseloads, administrative support, and staff development” (p. 402). To reach this level of understanding that supports this type of working pair there needs to be defining characteristics that set the tone for achievement within an instructional team companionship such as co-teaching. As Walther-Thomas (1997) has discussed, planning time is a key element to the co-teaching partnership. However, it becomes clearer over time that if there is not enough time given towards planning the curriculum of the co-
taught classroom then “differences in philosophy” (p. 402) will begin to break apart a closely connected team.

When taking a look into the lens of scheduling it becomes apparent that barriers begin to form when all parties are not on the same page as one another. Similarly, Gerber and Popp (2000) agree with the underlining factor that “scheduling is crucial to the success of the collaborative teaching model. Putting the student first should drive the decision-making process during schedule development to protect the integrity of the program” (p. 232). If students are not put first within the collaborative partnership then problems will begin to arise when profiles and needs are not securely met by each teacher within the classroom. Within Walther-Thomas’s (1997) research of co-teaching relationships and the barriers that get in the way it became more apparent that within different co-teaching situations “horror stories” began to take place when it came to planning and scheduling a successful classroom atmosphere based around a diverse array of student needs (p. 403). Walther-Thomas (1997) uses a scenario that links planning and scheduling time to be the creating cause of building a barrier that is “due to lack of planning and/or faulty administrative logic, some classrooms ended up heavily weighted with students who had learning and/ or behavior problems. Unfortunately, these ill-fated classrooms set teachers and students up for failure and frustration” (p. 403). With poor scheduling and planning time getting in the way of success for the teaching partnership along with students the bad situations begin to outweigh the good which in return gives co-taught classrooms a negative demeanor (p. 403).
Over the course of Walther-Thomas’s (1997) investigation, “participants consistently reported that more specialists were needed in their schools to ensure adequate classroom support for students and teachers” (p. 404). If adequate support is not provided then how is a successful co-teaching relationship able to meet the needs of all individuals that need to learn? The challenge of overloading caseloads for special education teachers is an ongoing problem that only impedes on the growth of a collaboratively arranged classroom. Walther-Thomas (1997) found that “many caseloads were so large that it was difficult for many special educators to meet general education teacher requests for co-teaching and/or consultation” (p. 404). If caseloads continue to grow in size then how are co-teachers able to create an effective learning environment that expands upon the needs of all students within the inclusive setting?

Administrative support is one of the underlining factors that become a challenge for teachers that work within a collaborative pairing. Correspondingly to Walther-Thomas (1997), Gerber and Popp (2000) have discussed how important administrative support is required for a successful turnout within a co-taught partnership. Administrative support becomes a very vital aspect for triumphant outcomes within the execution of efforts being made (p. 234). “Administrative support, at both the building and the district level, helps ensure that new initiatives receive the support, school, and community validation, and resources needed to sustain efforts” (Walther-Thomas, 1997, p. 404). If this support is not being given then teachers in return will not feel the validation they need in order to maintain an effective co-teaching environment.
How do co-teachers perceive themselves?

Perceptions of general and special educators within a co-teaching setting are going to vary depending on their ideas of teaching. Within Austin’s (2001) case study it was apparent that “both general and special educators indicated that they believed the general education co-teacher did the most in the inclusive classroom. In addition, there was a consensus among special education and general education co-teachers, that generally, they worked well together, solicited each other’s feedback, and benefited from working together” (p. 248). Even though these results have been found, these particular perceptions do not stand in the way of other outlooks that co-teachers exhibit on a daily basis.

When looking at the other side of the spectrum, Thousand, Villa, and Nevin’s (2000) study illustrates that co-teachers have perceived themselves as being a collaborative team within their daily lesson planning and teaching so that the learning environment is able to blossom into a fine tuned atmosphere for learning. Even though there have been positive perceptions on the topic of co-teaching other studies suggest differently (Kohler-Evans 2006). “Co-teaching teams have been forced into the general education classroom where veteran teachers feel insulted to have a special education teacher placed in the room with the expectation that they both teach content area critical concepts” (Kohler-Evans, 2006, p. 260). Through the study conducted by Kohler-Evens (2006) the idea of starting small in order to progress helped to shape the way in which teachers perceived themselves as individuals within a co-teaching classroom. By teachers having fun they are “offered many wonderful opportunities for collaboration and exploration of the practice of teaching. All teachers experience those wonderfully funny,
rich, teachable moments where one’s fondest desire is to have someone else see it too” (Kohler-Evans, 2006, p. 262).

With all of this being stated, co-teaching is a combination of two minds that come together in order to better the learning experience of all children within a collaborative classroom setting. Co-teaching roles along with perceptions play a very important part in the make up of how each single teacher philosophically views his or herself as an individual who delivers instruction as a team instead of being on their own.

**What does it take to make co-teaching literacy instruction work?**

Studies have sought to find an underlining method on how to teach literacy instruction within a co-teaching environment (Paratore & Indrisano, 1994; Birmingham, Garnick, Mauro, Maresco & Quinn, 1994). Within Paratore and Indrisano’s (1994) investigation they were able to link professional development meetings to the success of teaching literacy instruction within a co-teaching situation that emphasized three themes, “classroom context, instructional strategies, and classroom assessments” (p. 54).

**Classroom contexts**

Paratore and Indrisano (1994) were able to find that classroom organization influences “students’ access to and opportunities for reading and writing. Teachers explore ways to organize classrooms so that children are explicitly invited to read and write during both instructional and independent learning periods of the day” (p. 54). It is the general and special educators job to create an optimal growth for learning literacy within the classroom so that children are able to have a selection of “high-quality
children’s literature that is diverse and subject matter, in literacy genres and in cultural and ethnic representations” (Paratore & Indrisano, 1994, p. 54). By using reading and writing for independent and instructional use within the classroom, teachers will be able to explore practices that are flexible for change to take place at any given time.

**Instructional strategies**

By using instructional strategies within the co-taught classroom children are able to build upon their growth of learning new ways to explore reading and writing skills on a daily basis. Paratore and Indrisano (1994) have found that there needs to be an “emphasis on creating authentic situations for reading and writing in which the reading and writing tasks assigned to students represent activities that students would realistically encounter both inside and outside of school” (p. 55). Within guided reading groups that each general and special educator conduct on a daily basis, the strategies of using books talks and small group discussions begin to create a higher level of thinking in order to push each student to a new level of learning (p. 55). During literacy instruction collaborative teams work together in order to explicitly teach literacy skills that will in return require an emphasis on the responsibilities of all individuals that make up the classroom atmosphere.

**Classroom assessment**

Intertwined in Paratore and Indrisano’s (1994) study they have revealed that there are key elements that need to be emphasized for a collaborative partnership to look upon when assessing literacy instruction. “(1) Routine instructional settings provide the more
authentic, and therefore most valid, opportunities for assessment. (2) Multiple sources of data should be used to judge students’ literacy knowledge. (3) Literacy assessments should include systematic and routine opportunities for students to reflect on their own work and assess their performances. (4) Assessment tasks should provide varying amounts of teacher intervention (i.e., demonstration, guided practice and independent practice), enabling teachers to make judgments about the instructional conditions under which students are most successful” (Paratore & Indrisano, 1994, p. 56). By conducting these types of assessments over the course of the school year, the co-teaching team will be able to generate a learning environment that is surrounded by effective tools for success within literacy instruction.

Methodology

The research paradigm that I am best positioned with is that of the interpretivist theoretical outlook. “Interpretivists attempt to understand situations from the point of view of those experiencing the situations, and are concerned with what will assist them in doing so—what is heuristically powerful” (Sipes & Constable, 1996, p. 158). By attempting to understand the situations that co-teachers of literacy philosophically experience has assisted me in order to understand each individual teacher’s point of view. As I use the interpretivist research paradigm, discovering many truths behind teachers’ philosophical views of being co-teachers of literacy will help me to make connections between those who know and what has already been known. Through this prolific experience I was able to build upon my own research process in order to find the best
possible outcomes when it came to the many truths that fall behind the points of view that were addressed. In order for my research to remain true each teacher’s beliefs in combination with his or her many truths must coincide with the environment that is built around a co-teaching partnership of literacy.

In order to conduct research there were different methods that I had to use that helped me set the tone for this research project. All of my research took place within an urban setting at one single school. I decided to create a questionnaire that would be based around underlining factors that help to define co-teaching relationships within literacy instruction. I sent my questionnaire out to fourteen different individuals who work within co-teaching partnerships ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. By the time I had collected all of my questionnaires I received an ending total of eight. From these eight different questionnaires I decided to interview a select few from different grade levels and titles; general and special education teachers. The teacher questionnaire helped me to build upon data so that I was able to begin to link my findings to my review of literature. While looking through each questionnaire I was able to get a feeling of equal and unequal levels of teaching between different general and special education partnerships. All of the ideas that began to emerge helped me to decide who I would interview on an individual basis.

During the course of the interview process I was able to learn about each teacher’s philosophical views of being co-teachers of literacy through the dialogue that was conducted between the two of us within the chosen teachers’ classrooms. Conducting each individual interview has helped me to see if each teacher’s practice is truly associated with the philosophical views that will be discussed and built upon throughout
the research process. Each component that helped to shape my research has given me the chance to create a final product that is assembled around various philosophical viewpoints of co-teaching within the academic area of literacy.

Findings and Discussion

Equal level of teaching among co-teachers

A group of teachers that work within a co-teaching relationship from the grade ranges of Kindergarten-sixth grade were given a questionnaire to fill out in a confidential manner. The questionnaire was based around how co-teachers philosophically view themselves as co-teachers of literacy instruction. Within my findings the data began to illustrate that many teachers viewed their co-teaching relationships as being linked to an equal level of teaching among each educator within the classroom. This particular theme has been supported by an array of teachers who felt this discovery to be true. Gwen has stated that “team teaching means working closely together and sharing responsibilities. We allocate tasks and instruction based on strengths and interest level. We plan together, support each other, and continually reflect to improve our teaching and classroom”. Similarly, Patricia who teaches within a different co-taught grade leveled partnership has said that “all content areas are team taught by general and special education teachers. Both teachers share responsibility of assessments, parent communication, and discipline as well”. Teachers began to show commonalities among partnerships when it came to the theme of equally leveled roles within the co-teaching environment. As questionnaires
where studied closely it became more apparent that the roles of the general and special education teachers were on the same level of intensity. One teacher was not looked upon as having the upper hand; instead both teachers were viewed as having an equal cohesion between one another. There are different co-teaching models (one teach-one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching) that have an effect on the makeup of a partnership such as the pairing between a general and special educator.

When taking a close look at equally leveled teaching relationships it became more evident that many teachers felt that using a team teaching model would be the most effective method to build a partnership around in order to teach students within an integrated setting. Amanda elaborated on the idea that team teaching is “co-planning and taking turns teaching the subject areas so that as a team we are able to fulfill all students’ needs and strengths in order to build upon individual knowledge”. By using this teaching model it becomes noticeable that the relationship between a general and special educator is one that will continue to grow as the relationship continues to equally branch out so that all parties involved will learn and grow. Scott felt that in order to work in a co-teaching setting in a manner that is equally balanced among both the general and special educator the pairing has to “work hand and hand to make all children within my classroom succeed”.

In conjunction with Scott’s statement Leslie felt that “being a co-teacher means working closely together and sharing the responsibility for the success of our students”. There was one part of Leslie’s statement that stuck out the most, “responsibility for the success of our students”. The word “responsibility” is one that is dually shared among
each teacher who works within a co-teaching partnership. It is each teachers responsibility as co-teachers to work together in order to form an effective classroom environment that is both well managed and has a strong curriculum that tailors to the needs of all individuals within the classroom. For responsibility to be valuable among the general and special educator, each individual has to have an equally leveled understanding of what it takes to make the marriage between both educators work. It is not “I” in this collaborative partnership, but the “we” or even “our” that makes this team work together as a whole unit. Meghan illustrates this idea by explaining that within a co-teaching setting two individuals “share responsibilities, ideas, plans, knowledge, and use this combined set of assets to meet the needs of all learners within the classroom”. Sharing the responsibilities between two individuals will in return make for a more positive atmosphere that is designed around different interests that help to form the classroom surroundings.

Jenna goes onto to point out that communication is the key to success when creating an environment that is based around making the work equally distributed for both individuals who share the co-taught classroom. To coincide with the idea of communication, Jenna felt that “you always have to be aware of what the other is doing and if something unexpected happens, who will deal with it. The most important part is knowing what each others roles are and having identical sets of expectations for student success and behavior”. When two teachers work in a closely developed co-taught situation it becomes very important that “identical sets of expectations” are put into place so that each teacher along with their students are able to grow as individuals within the learning environment. For co-teaching to be equally leveled among both participants
being the general and special educator, each person within the collaborative setting has to be able to give and take in order to make this teaching relationship work.

Through focusing on instruction itself as a whole entity, the general and special educators are able to use their collaborative roles in order to problem solve by using “their collective expertise in a collegial, equal-status relationship” (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994, p. 527). Having an “equal status relationship” between the general and special educator will in return have a positive effect on the teaching environment. The team teaching approach is built around the idea that within this partnership both teachers take on an equal amount of responsibility when leading instructional activities and shaping the curriculum (Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Basing a work ethic that is solely around the idea that two individuals who work hand and hand with one another will divide the amount of work in an equal manner will help to develop an affirmative relationship that is based around the benefits of two educators working as a team. The educators that are involved in this pairing allocate a familiar understanding of what is means to uniformly share the roles within a setting in order for a flourishing partnership to mature into a well-balanced structure. It is this equally balanced structure that will help all participants no matter if they are younger or older to learn on new levels of understanding. Having a common perception of what it means to equally share roles within the classroom environment will make for a more constructive ambiance within this type of teaching situation.
Unequal level of teaching among co-teachers

For my interview process I was able to select a group of teachers who teach within a co-teaching setting as either the general or special educator on a daily basis. During each interview session, questions were presented to each selected teacher based around teachers’ opinions and feelings about co-teaching. Each interview took place in a confidential manner in order to protect each acting participant. As I began to look through my interviews, it became more apparent that some teachers viewed their co-teaching relationships as being unequal when looking at the roles that each educator plays within their co-teaching partnership. This theme in particular has been touched upon over the course of different interviews that took place throughout the research process.

Leslie is a 4th grade general education teacher within an urban school setting who is experiencing co-teaching for the first time in her teaching career. In my interview with Leslie, the idea of unequal roles among the general and special educators became more evident throughout our discussion. For Leslie, co-teaching has been a struggle rather than progressing in a smooth fashion. “When it comes to my partner and I sharing our roles within the classroom in an equal manner it never happens. I am the one who designs all of our lesson plans, completes report cards, AIS plans and follows through with the teaching. Our relationship is definitely an ‘I’ scenario rather than being a ‘we’ situation”. As I continued to discuss the idea of unequal roles among Leslie and her partner I was able to see how the co-teaching model isn’t always the perfect circumstance to be working within. Leslie has a view as to what she felt co-teaching should and would be like before she entered into this situation. Most people have a concrete point of view
as to what they feel co-teaching is designed to look like. Leslie has explained to me that he felt “co-teaching means that you’re in a class where two people in theory are well versed and have a strong foundation that will educationally meet the needs of all students within your classroom”. She went on to tell me that in the beginning of the school year everything began to fall into place and that her situation formed into a sturdy learning environment where her role as the general educator and her partners role as the special educator moved in the same direction. Leslie went on to tell me how amazing it was to feel such a negative change take place within their classroom. As Leslie would continue to open up to me I was able to learn about the negative side to co-teaching when the partnership is not on the same level of understanding. Leslie has said that “towards the end of the school year, I was working solely with lower and higher reading groups and planning each lesson while my partner was supposedly working on coping skills. If I could go back and make a change I would”. In conjunction with Leslie’s scenario, Researcher Walther-Thomas (1997) has discussed, planning time is a key element to the co-teaching partnership. However, it becomes clearer over time that if there is not enough time given towards planning the curriculum of the co-taught classroom then “differences in philosophy” (p. 402) will begin to break apart a closely connected team.

I went on to ask her how co-teaching can be effective if both partners are not on the same page. Leslie said “it’s simple, in order for a co-teaching partnership to have positive outcomes a common understanding and respect for one another needs to automatically be set in place so that each role among each individual gets completed in a timely fashion”. For Leslie, it became a struggle because of the unequal level between herself and her partner that had taken over their whole outlook on a successful co-
teaching experience. Within this urban school there are many co-teaching partnerships taking place. As a matter of fact there are co-teaching teams from kindergarten all the way up to 6th grade. Not only was the problem of unequal roles within the classroom an issue for Leslie, but also for Jenna.

Jenna also works within the same urban setting as Leslie. Jenna has been a teacher for 13 years within the same urban school district. She has spent her years working in self contained settings over the course of her teaching career. Currently, Jenna has been working as a special education teacher within an integrated kindergarten classroom for the first time. In other words, this is Jenna’s first time co-teaching within this kind of setting. Jenna has found her particular experience with her co-teaching partner to have more negativities than positives. Jenna had begun the school year following a team teaching model with her partner. She felt that collaboration was the key to a successful partnership which in return made them work well together. Jenna had said that “not showing power between my teaching partner and me created a positive atmosphere for learning and growing by both teachers and students”. As time passed on an unequal level of individual roles within the classroom began to take place.

After the honeymoon period came to an end true colors began to seep through the surface that illustrated another side to the teaching partner that Jenna couldn’t even imagine. Jenna has said that “it all began when she started talking over me in front of the kids and then she would play us against one another. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Was this actually really happening to me?” Jenna told me that as each day went by she would try to talk to her but her partner would not acknowledge her. “She began to take the instruction in ten thousands different directions and I would have to assist. I just wanted
things to go back to how they used to be… successful”. Co-teaching is a very hard job to take on when you are forced into the situation, but when you get the chance to choose your partner then you are given the chance to experience a once in a lifetime opportunity.

**Literacy instruction within a co-teaching partnership**

Taking a closer look at the literacy model between co-teaching partnerships was a defining factor that helped to shape my findings. Within my research process I was able to investigate how literacy takes place within co-teaching classrooms by sitting down to interview different general and special educators who work within this specific pairing on a daily basis. There were two co-teaching pairings in particular who portrayed a strong foundation of what literacy instruction is led to look like. The theme of literacy instruction within a co-teaching partnership has been ongoing within the two pairings of individuals who work within two different classrooms in an urban setting.

Patricia and Meghan have been second grade teachers for three consecutive years. They both feel that they have built a strong foundation for literacy within their classroom environment. They have learned over the years to give and take with one another in order to allow for a positive relationship. Creating an engaging and active learning atmosphere that is based around pushing children towards success within daily routines and learning has made for thriving experiences for all students. Patricia feels that “in order for our collaborative partnership to work within literacy instruction we have to share responsibilities that are equal among both of us”. Sharing responsibilities within a collaborative team makes for a well-balanced literacy instructed program. Meghan has
shared within our interview that “by using a team teaching model we are able to share everything; monitoring progress, small group instruction, and alternating subject areas between the two of us”. Both Patricia and Meghan have discussed the topic of students knowing who the general and special educators within the classroom are. “We feel that by students not knowing who is who we are able to create learning experiences that are more meaningful within our guided reading groups” (Patricia, 2008).

Reader’s and writer’s workshop is the makeup of the literacy framework that takes place from day to day within Patricia and Meghan’s second grade classroom. Each teacher within this team works in guided readings groups in order to develop an atmosphere where two is better than one in co-teaching situations. Meghan has said “each of us teach guided reading groups. I never have just the lower kids and Patricia the higher ones. All of the groups are on a rotation so that they get to work with both of us. As co-teachers we create and develop groups together”. When both women sit down to take a closer look at literacy instruction as a whole it becomes clearer that the physical changes that they make on a day to day basis are beneficial to the acquired knowledge that students are learning within this type of environment. According to Paratore and Indrisano (1994), “the most important educational outcome of the physical changes in the classrooms are the resulting changes in the ways literacy is taught” (p. 57). By Patricia and Meghan working as a team they are able to make changes accordingly to the outcomes that take place during reading and writing instruction. An example of constant change would be when both teachers have to create new guided reading groups. Patricia has said that “all guided reading groups are based around individual Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) levels so that each reading group is working towards similar
goals. As co-teachers, Patricia and Meghan have set the same expectations for writer’s workshop.

Within their writer’s workshop they are able to tailor to the individual needs of all students within their integrated classroom. Meghan went on to say that “writer’s workshop is a time for our students to be creative with their thoughts and feelings as they make their writing pieces come alive through their words and pictures”. It is the daily rituals within writer’s workshop that help this collaborative become a success match. “We balance each other out. I will be teaching a mini lesson on writer’s craft and Meghan will interject in areas. We give and take with everything that we teach. Then once our students have been instructed we each conference with students on an individual basis” (Patricia, 2008). This type of process has been a successful implementation for Patricia and Meghan for three years. They both have told me that they only hope to become more knowledgeable in the area of literacy instruction so that they are able to continue to see successful in an individual manor from all students within their classroom. It is not just Patricia and Meghan that have a strong foundation between a co-teaching pairing when literacy instruction comes into play. Amanda and Gwen are another triumphant team who work hard to create a classroom environment where a co-teaching partnership strives for a successful outcome in the area of literacy instruction.

Amanda and Gwen have been teaching within their co-teaching partnership for two years. These two co-teachers educate students within a first grade classroom. This is Amanda’s third year as a general education teacher and Gwen’s thirteenth year as a special education teacher. They have described their relationship as being a bit of a roller coaster at the beginning, but now they admit that they have found a strong foundation for
working with one another. They both feel that literacy instruction is a huge factor in why they want to educate children. Gwen has said that “our open mindedness towards teaching is what makes our planning work. We put our heads together in order to create equally balanced learning outcomes for all students within our classroom”. As co-teachers Amanda and Gwen use a variety of co-teaching models in order to make for effective instruction. They both feel that literacy is a very valuable characteristic that shapes their curriculum as a whole. “We pull literacy into everything that we do on a daily basis. There is no getting around it” (Amanda, 2008). Whether or not educators realize it, literacy is everything that surrounds us as human beings.

In order to literacy instruction to best fit Amanda and Gwen they have said that flexibility and making sure that their students do not know who is who is what makes their classroom environment have an equal leveled status. Readers and writers workshop is based around a ten minute mini-lesson followed by a forty minute work period and ends with ten minutes of authors’ chair. This process is preformed daily with Amanda and Gwen switching off on teaching mini-lessons for each subject area. Just like Patricia and Meghan, Amanda and Gwen rotate between guided reading groups and writing conferences. Each educator within this unique pairing enjoys working one-on-one and with small and large group instruction. “Being that we have so many different needs within our integrated setting it really works out that there is two of us working together with the same goals in mind for literacy instruction” (Amanda, 2008). Reading and writing go hand and hand with all aspects of classroom instruction. It is literacy that helps to shape the classroom environment. Literacy instruction that takes place within this co-teaching relationship inspires these two educators to have an intensity that will
keep growing in order for success to blossom between a partnership that is built on understanding, trust, development, and acquired knowledge.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The topic of how co-teachers philosophically view themselves and co-teachers of literacy and how this orientation plays out in their teaching is an ongoing question that will continue to be touched upon as time moves on. Models and methods continue to change face on a daily basis leaving what we know best to become a mystery. What we have once practiced has now moved on to bigger and better things. As each minute within a day passes, education changes in one way or another. Co-teaching is on an up rise. Whether you are following the one-teach-one assist, team teaching, alternative teaching, station teaching, or parallel teaching model we as educators are always learning new ways to educate ourselves as well as our students.

Through the words of Larson and Marsh (2005) “Literacy is grounded in social, cultural, historical, and political practices” (p. 1). No matter where you look, literacy is everywhere and within everything. As co-teachers my research shows that we need to share our philosophies with one another and negotiate how we can demonstrate our ideas and beliefs into our shared classrooms. It is literacy that helps to shape our discourses that ground our beliefs of what it takes to make a “two is better than one” relationship work. Because of this, I pose two important questions for future research. Will two teachers be able to make a lasting impression for a step towards receiving a better education that is surrounded by literacy instruction? Will this “two is better than one”
relationship continue to make positive strides towards a successful learning environment? We can only continue to research in order to discover what the outcome might be. As co-teachers it is our job to make the learning environment effective for all individuals who make up this particular classroom atmosphere. Therefore, it is the job of each teacher within the co-teaching partnership to make their classroom the most effective atmosphere for all learning to take place.
References


Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire Questions

By handing in this questionnaire I am consenting to participate in the research study. I understand that all information will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of a Capstone research project. I will not include my name, or the names of other individuals.

What grade do you teach?

_____K-2  _____3-4  _____5-6

What kind of teacher are you within your co-teaching situation?

_____ General Education Teacher  _____ Special Education Teacher

What model do you follow as a co-teacher?

_____ One teach-one assist  _____ Station teaching  _____ Parallel teaching

_____ Alternative teaching  _____ Team teaching

How do you incorporate this model into your own daily teaching style?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Do you and your co-teacher share the teaching roles within your classroom? Please explain your reasoning.

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________
What is your relationship like with your co-teaching partner?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What do you think it means to be a co-teacher?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

How do you and your co-teaching partner teach literacy instruction?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Additional questions may be asked based on the participants’ answers to the questions above.
Appendix B

Individual Interview Questions

Additional questions may be asked based on answers given to the listed questions.

What grade do you teach?

What kind of teacher are you within your co-teaching situation?
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What model do you follow as a co-teacher?
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

How do you incorporate this model into your own daily teaching style?
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

Do you and your co-teacher share the teaching roles within your classroom? Please explain your reasoning.
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
What is your relationship like with your co-teaching partner?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What do you think it means to be a co-teacher?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

How do you and your co-teaching partner teach literacy instruction?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

How many years have you co-taught for?

Have you always wanted to be a co-teacher of literacy?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________