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What Is Good For One Is Good For All: Using Co-teaching As A Model To Service Students With Disabilities Within Inclusive General Education Classrooms

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
National College of Education
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Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Co-teaching is one of the most used service delivery models for students with disabilities within general education classrooms. In co-taught classrooms, a general education teacher and a special education teacher work together to provide instruction to both general education students and special education students. This allows students with disabilities to learn alongside their same-age peers, as they can access the general education curriculum while also receiving the supports and services of a special education teacher. The purpose of this study was to examine how co-teachers at Washington Junior High (WJH; a pseudonym) felt about co-teaching and the co-teaching program. Twelve teachers were interviewed and asked a variety of questions pertaining to their co-teaching experiences and their thoughts, reflections, and suggestions. The results were compared to the academic literature and research already published on co-teaching to make suggestions for improvements to the co-teaching program at WJH, as well as policy recommendations. The primary research question related to how to improve co-teaching at WJH to service students with disabilities within inclusive settings and the secondary question related to whether schools should offer co-taught classes in other core content areas, such as science and social studies. The findings of the research with co-teachers at WJH showed co-taught classrooms are beneficial to students with disabilities. Results also yielded additional insights into a need for more common plan time, increased professional development around co-teaching models, and an understanding of roles and expectations among co-teachers. Additionally, there is a need for change in policy to increase the course offerings of co-taught classes to include all core academic subject areas: language arts, math, social studies, and science. Last, there needs to be a general adoption of the philosophy that what is good for one student is good for all students as a way to support all students and normalize the use of learning supports.

PREFACE

As a former co-teacher myself and now as an administrator who is in charge of co-teaching, I have experienced positive co-taught teaching relationships and classrooms, as well as those that needed much improvement. I also have always felt very strongly about the benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities, and the co-taught classroom offers a way for students with disabilities to have access to their same-age peers and the general education curriculum while still receiving the supports and services they require from a special education teacher.

I chose to research co-teaching as a service delivery model for students with disabilities because I wanted to determine how to improve co-teaching at my school. I also hoped that conducting this research would yield support for increasing our co-taught course offerings. It had troubled me that we were supporting students with co-taught language arts and math courses, but then they were left to flounder in science and social studies courses. I also hoped the results would shed some light on the difference between just including students in co-taught classrooms and actually having them be members of the classroom community who can access the curriculum.

Throughout the process of conducting this study, I was impressed with the candor of the teachers. I was able to see and hear as they talked about their experiences and the passion they have for what they do and the students they support. As a leader, conducting the study motivated me to have more conversations and discussions that are guided by questions but really provide an opportunity for teachers to share their thoughts, wisdom, and suggestions for how to improve student learning and culture. As a leader, I also took away from this process that there are so many thought leaders in the world who also want

to do good things for kids and devise ways to improve student experiences in school settings.

My hope for the future is that as an educational community, we will continue to look for ways to meaningfully include students with disabilities across all settings so they can not only access the same curriculum and learn and grow, but also feel as though they truly belong.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people I would like to acknowledge and thank for their support of my doctorate work, myself, and my research. First, I would like to thank my fiancé, Vince Zarlenga. He has encouraged, supported, listened, and cheered me on throughout this entire process. Writing this dissertation and completing my doctoral program has required an extreme amount of time, and he has never complained and only supported me. I am so grateful for him.

I would also like to thank my children, Payton and Brady Robinson, for their belief in me and encouragement. There were times that arose over the last 3 years when my studies conflicted with things they needed me for, and I have appreciated their patience, love, and support throughout this process.

I am thankful to my parents, who have believed in me, encouraged me, and cheered me on through each and every semester and throughout my writing process.

I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without the guidance, wisdom, encouragement, and support of Dr. Beth Minor. Dr. Minor has continually shared her knowledge with me and helped me continue to plug along and just keep going over the course of the last 3 years. I am beyond grateful to her.

I would especially like to thank as well, my committee members, Dr. Jack Denny and Dr. James Fitzpatrick. I would also like to acknowledge all of my professors and cohort colleagues. It has been a pleasure to learn from you and alongside you. I am also very thankful for the 12 teachers who were vulnerable and candid and allowed me to take their time, and who shared their insights and wisdom with me for my research. Without them, this dissertation would not have happened.

Last, to all of the students with disabilities who inspire me on a daily basis with their strength, tenacity, and courage, I hope we continue to do better and better for you each day.

DEDICATION

For my Momma. Thank you for always believing in me and being my cheerleader. For speaking words of affirmation over me from the time I was in my crib and most days since. You listened to every crazy dream, idea, plan, and goal I had, and never once did you tell me I couldn't achieve what I was dreaming of. You never made me feel silly or incapable; actually, the complete opposite. You gave me space to dream big; you gave me space to be the me I needed to be. Thank you, Mom. If I got to choose any mom in the world, I would choose you again and again. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Support for the inclusion of special education students in general education classrooms has greatly increased over the years. King (2003) stated, "Inclusive education means that all students in a school-regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or disabilities in any area-become part of the school community. They are included in the feeling of belonging among other students, teachers, and support staff" (p. 152). According to Moore (2016), "You may be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't believe in inclusion and the values of diversity on some level" (p. 7).

To begin, it is important to define inclusion. Many definitions of inclusion exist in the literature, along with various perspectives on what inclusion looks like in practice. According to Pugach et al. (2020), "We define inclusion as a broad, shared equity agenda designed to assure educational success for every group of marginalized learners" (p. 86). Like others in more recent academic literature, this definition broadly encompasses all classroom learners beyond just students in special education. Moore (2016) wrote, "Inclusion means everyone- but *actually* everyone, even our students who need the most support in our classrooms, schools, and communities" (p. 11). Inclusion indicates that students with and without disabilities are taught the same content in the same classroom setting, with accommodations and modifications made as necessary (Dev & Haynes, 2015). Causton and Tracy-Bronson (2015) wrote:

> Research has consistently shown that the inclusive environment is better educationally and socially for students with disabilities. The challenge is to figure out how to make the general education environment suitable for the student's

needs. This requires problem-solving, collaborating, and designing differentiated supports that seamlessly integrate curriculum with the student's needs. (pp. 28–29)

This level of problem solving and collaboration needs to occur with general and special education teachers, and with the support of the administration.

Cherry Valley School District 300 (a pseudonym) is not unique in its challenges in implementing successful inclusion practices for students with special needs. It is but one school district in the United States and was the focus of this study, specifically the junior high. Cherry Valley School District 300 is a vibrant, caring community enriched with a culturally diverse student body. The district is located in Illinois and spans approximately seven square miles. The population is highly diverse, representing 61 different cultures and languages. Eleven percent of students in the district have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), 4% are considered low income, and 25% are English learners.

Cherry Valley School District 300 comprises four schools (pseudonyms used): Carter Elementary School (K–3), Adams Elementary School (K–3), Smith School & Early Learning Center (Grades 4–5 & Early Childhood), and Washington Junior High (Grades 6–8). The district values continuing education. Of the 200 teachers within the district, 88 have their master's degree, nine are National Board Certified, 61 have their English learner endorsements, and six languages are represented with bilingual education endorsements.

My role within the district is as assistant principal of the junior high, which has almost 900 students. I have been in the district for over 3 years. I oversee special education, English language learners, a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), 504

plans, co-teaching, school safety and drills, all classroom assistants, and many other responsibilities.

According to the Cherry Valley School District 300 website, its vision is "Every day, every student will come to school and be met with learning opportunities at the student's developmental level in all subject areas and will leave school having been challenged, feeling successful, and looking forward to tomorrow." This is the guiding vision for the entire district and is proudly displayed on its website and in the halls of the school buildings. The Board of Education, district leaders, and building-level administration teams believe strongly in this vision. This vision arguably supports inclusion, although it does not explicitly mention inclusion. It is meeting every student where they are and helping them grow, be challenged, and feel successful so they want to return to school the next day to do it all over again.

Purpose of the Program Evaluation

For the 2022–2023 school year, Washington Junior High (WJH) served 62 students in special education. These students are taught the core content for language arts and math, dependent on their identified needs, in a general education classroom, a co-taught classroom (which we identify as special education within general education), or an instructional classroom (strictly special education).

The instructional classrooms are small group classrooms in which teachers teach a modified curriculum and students are without access to their general education peers. Of the 62 special education students at WJH, 11 are in both instructional language arts and math classrooms, and seven are in an instructional class for one subject and a co-taught

class for another. Thus, the total number of students in at least one instructional class is 18.

In the co-taught classrooms, the general education curriculum is taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. At least 70% of the classroom students are general education students without IEPs. Of the 62 special education students at WJH, 37 are taught in co-taught language arts and a co-taught math classroom exclusively, and another seven are in an instructional class for one subject and a co-taught class for another. This brings the total number of students in at least one co-taught class to 44 students versus 18 students in instructional classrooms. Thus, 71% of students with an IEP at WJH are serviced in co-taught classrooms. This high percentage established the purpose of my program evaluation. If we are servicing 71% of students with IEPs in a co-taught classroom, we need to examine what we are doing well and what needs to change to make co-taught classrooms the most effective model for servicing students with disabilities. Additionally, if students require co-teaching in language arts (i.e., reading), would it not stand to reason that they would also require this level of support in other content areas that require reading and comprehension, such as social studies and science, in addition to language arts and math?

As inclusive education continues to be considered the best practice across the country for servicing students with IEPs, school leaders and educators are continuing to strive to find ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment while providing access to general education peers and the general education curriculum. Co-teaching classrooms are how many districts provide inclusive education while still meeting the needs of these unique learners. With co-taught classrooms being

the most prominent service delivery model at WJH for special education students, it is important to study teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of co-taught classrooms and look deeply at how we can improve co-teaching.

I therefore designed my study to examine, from a co-teacher perspective, our co-teaching model at WJH, along with its benefits, challenges, and what needs improvement. After gathering the data, comparing teachers' insights at WJH to the current literature on best practices regarding co-teaching yielded awareness around areas in which we can improve. A second goal was to be able to use this information to advocate for policy change to extend our co-taught class offerings to include all core academic areas. This would mean adding co-taught classes in social studies and science in addition to the established co-taught classes in language arts and math.

Rationale

When I began my career as a special education teacher, I taught in both instructional and co-taught settings. I witnessed firsthand the successes and challenges of both environments. I struggled as I saw students in my instructional classes feel embarrassed when they came to a "different" class than their friends and same-age peers. I heard them call themselves "dumb" for being in a special education class. They often felt left out, embarrassed, and less a part of the school community.

As a special education teacher who was teaching in multiple co-taught classrooms, I was able to witness the different ways in which students engaged with their peers in these environments. I saw them access the same curriculum to which their friends had access. They could discuss the same books and topics their peers could discuss. They could collaborate with peers and be helped by peers when working through

academic problems. I witnessed a few students with behavior issues in my instructional

math class behave much more appropriately in my co-taught language arts class. I

experienced how having two teachers can effectively support students and meet their

needs. I saw typical students without disabilities develop empathy and pride as they often

became leaders in group work and helped their peers who needed more support. My

classroom teaching opportunities in those settings influenced my philosophies and beliefs

on the importance of inclusion.

Even with all of the positives I experienced, I also experienced frustrations in my

partnerships; challenges with finding common time to plan, sometimes feeling as if my

role in the classroom was less important than the general education teacher's role; and an

overall need for more professional development (PD) on co-teaching. When speaking

with other co-teachers at the time, they expressed similar sentiments. Our experiences

also varied widely among general education teachers and subject areas.

As assistant principal at WJH, special education and leading co-teaching fall

under my responsibilities. I have co-teaching teams that work well together, and students

thrive in those environments. I also have co-teaching teams that do not work as well

together. In those classrooms, the differences are evident, as are the levels of student

engagement and likely success. I continually wonder what characteristics make some

teams work well while others do not. I struggle with the reality that we offer this level of

support and service model for language arts and math, but students lack this support in

classes like social studies and science.

I have come to realize the importance of studying how we support inclusion and

how we can improve co-teaching at WJH. Causton and Theoharis (2014) stated,

One central reason that kids are being included in general education settings is
that every child, with or without disabilities, has a right to belong. All human
beings desire friendships, relationships, and academic challenges. Kids with
disabilities are no different. (p. 28)

Special education is my passion, and identifying how we can support students with
disabilities better in co-taught classrooms so they can remain included and with their
same-age peers, all while accessing their learning and being a part of the classroom
community, is pivotal.

Goal

My goal was to understand, from teachers' perspectives and experiences, their
thoughts on co-teaching, its benefits to teachers and students, its challenges, and what
co-teaching currently looks like at WJH. By gaining a deeper understanding of teachers'
perspectives, I hoped to formulate recommendations for improving co-teaching at WJH.
In doing this, the perceived outcome would be increased student learning and teacher
satisfaction with co-teaching. Additionally, I aimed to recommend policy changes to the
current model of co-teaching only being offered in language arts and math.

Research Questions

With co-teaching being our most used service delivery model for 71% of students
in special education, carefully examining how co-teachers at WJH feel about co-teaching
and its effectiveness, benefits, impact on student learning, and challenges is crucial.
Understanding all these areas from a front-line teacher's perspective allowed me to
compare those perspectives with the current literature and research on co-teaching to
make suggestions for improvements and advocate for policy changes. My primary

research question was: How can we improve co-teaching at WJH to service students with disabilities within inclusive settings? Secondarily, should we offer co-taught classes in other core content areas, such as social studies and science?

For my research, I interviewed 12 different co-teachers at WJH to gather their thoughts and experiences with co-teaching. To answer my research questions, I examined the academic literature surrounding the components of effective co-teaching models and the challenges. From there, I compared the results of my academic research to the answers I obtained from interviewing teachers to compile suggestions for improvement.

Conclusion

Reviewing the literature on co-teaching was important as I looked to gain a better understanding of what makes a successful co-taught classroom and co-teachers. This provided a point of comparison between the literature and my study at WJH so I could identify what we are doing well and where we can grow.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The importance of servicing students in inclusive settings with access to the

general education curriculum and highly qualified teachers was mandated by the

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Prior to this legislation, school district leaders around the country were already shifting

their focus to providing students with disabilities with more inclusive educational

environments. Austin (2001) stated:

Since 1975, public schools have moved from a position recognizing that students

with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education with adequate

support services to one in which the placement of such students supersedes the

concerns about the quality and type of service provided. Inclusion continues to

gain momentum in schools and garner popular support from important

constituents. (p. 246)

This positive shift from allowing students access to education to focusing on including

students in all educational settings is a driving force behind the push for inclusion.

Co-teaching is one way in which students with disabilities can be included in

general education settings while still having the specialized support of a special education

teacher. Tremblay (2013) stated:

The role of the special educator in the inclusive classroom has gradually evolved

towards a greater collaboration with the general education teacher. Formally

provided outside of school or the regular classroom, special education services are

now taking place within the general classroom in a co-teaching approach with the

general educator. For example, in 1995, the National Center on Education Restructuring and Inclusion reported that this co-teaching collaboration involving general and special education teachers was the most used service organization model in the inclusion setting. (p. 251)

This likely remains true today and has been true at any school at which I have worked. The co-taught classroom provides students with disabilities the opportunity to be taught in the general education classroom alongside their peers with and without disabilities, with the same curriculum and qualified content area teachers, while still receiving the support of a special education teacher (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

At its most basic explanation, co-teaching is a general education teacher and special education teacher collaborating and teaching together in one classroom. However, how this model looks can vary greatly among classrooms and co-teachers. Scruggs et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 32 different qualitative studies on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. Throughout Scruggs et al.'s research, they identified several co-teaching models. They found the most common models (also see Friend & Cook, 2003) to be the following:

- One teach-one assist/drift: This model is the most commonly used, with the general education teacher serving in the dominant role as the main teacher providing instruction. In contrast, the special education teacher supports and assists students and drifts around the classroom.

- Station teaching: In this model, the general and special education teachers develop differentiated learning stations, and students can choose which station at which to work. The teachers support students individually at the stations.

- Parallel teaching: In this model, the teachers group the students into two different groups and teach them the same or similar content geared toward their perceived level in different areas of the classroom or different classrooms.

- Alternative teaching: In this model, the general and special education teachers take turns teaching content. At the same time, the other pulls a small group of students into a different classroom for a limited time to provide specialized instruction.

- Team teaching: In this interactive model, both teachers share equal responsibility in all instruction and teaching responsibilities.

Through Scruggs et al.'s (2007) research, they found that

the predominant co-teaching model reported in these investigations is one teach, one assist with the special education teacher often playing a subordinate role determined, in part, by content knowledge, teacher "turf", and the greater numbers of general education students in the co-taught classroom. (p. 411)

I would argue that this model is the predominant model not because teachers necessarily believe it to be the best model but because it is the most commonly defaulted to model. It allows the general education teacher to do what they feel most confident doing, which is teaching the academic content area. It also allows the special education teacher to support specific students with IEPs and ensure their identified areas of needs and accommodations are met within the general education classroom. It is also the model that is easiest because true co-teaching, collaboration, and shared responsibility in the

classroom is difficult and requires PD, the learning of other skill areas by both teachers, and a true time commitment to do things differently.

Throughout the research, clear themes emerge around co-teaching. Co-teaching is arguably the most used service delivery model for students with disabilities in inclusive settings, yet according to Tremblay (2013), "despite the enormous popularity of co-teaching, there is surprisingly little literature on the effectiveness of this approach" (p. 251). Other researchers shared similar findings. However, despite the lack of efficacy data, a great deal of literature exists surrounding co-teaching as a positive solution to providing inclusion for students with disabilities. Literature also exists supporting the benefits of co-taught classrooms for students, the challenges co-teaching can present for teachers, and the important factors and components that must be present for co-teaching to be effective and successful. These areas emerged as themes throughout the literature review and are discussed in greater detail below.

Co-Teaching as a Positive Solution to Inclusion

Much of the literature surrounding the topic of co-teaching is based on teacher and student perspectives, and little research exists on the effectiveness and outcomes of co-teaching on student learning. Throughout Scruggs et al.'s (2007) research of 32 qualitative studies, they concluded that "previous reviews and other relevant literature have generally concluded that efficacy research is limited" (p. 394). They went on to share that despite the efficacy and outcome data being limited, teacher perceptions of co-teaching remain positive overall and point to the perspective that co-teaching is effective and impactful for student learning (Scruggs et al., 2007). Welsh et al. (1999) came to a similar conclusion that although teachers typically have positive feelings

around co-teaching, there is still limited information on student outcomes and supporting

evidence around the efficacy of co-teaching.

Weiss and Brigham (2000), who reviewed 23 quantitative and qualitative studies,

also concluded that efficacy research was not sufficient. Additionally, in 2004, Weiss

updated the research over the past several years and concluded that most outcome studies

were not specific and were subjective, yielding limited data regarding the efficacy of

co-teaching. Hang and Rabren (2009) conducted their own study with over 45

co-teachers in seven different schools, all within the same school district. They used

surveys, classroom observations, and students' SAT scores to gather the perspectives of

teachers and students with disabilities and assess the effectiveness of co-teaching. When

comparing the SAT scores of students with disabilities from the year before they

participated in a co-taught class to the year after, no significant difference was found in

academic achievement. Although the data did not show a difference in SAT scores, when

surveyed, teachers reported that from their perspectives, students' academic performance

in the classroom improved. This study is unique in that it actually did have some efficacy

data, which did not show co-teaching to increase academic student gains on test scores,

but the teachers said they believed students were making academic gains in the

classroom.

Despite the overall lack of outcome data, Tremblay (2013) conducted a study

comparing the inclusive co-teaching model to the solo-taught special education model for

students specifically with learning disabilities. Tremblay stated:

> Although our results revealed no significant difference between the two models in
>
> terms of the target population, objectives, and assigned resources, significant

differences were observed in the effects on student outcomes in reading/writing

and on attendance, as the inclusion model was shown to be more effective

compared with the special education setting. (p. 251)

Tremblay did not explain why they felt the co-teaching model led to greater gains in

reading/writing and attendance. Perhaps having more than one teacher and access to

general education peers both for the purposes of academic gains and greater social

opportunities could be a possibility. Although research has not shown significant

increases in achievement outcomes resulting from co-teaching, there are other ways in

which co-teaching benefits students.

Benefits to Students of the Co-Teaching Model

In theory, co-teaching classrooms should benefit all students because there are

two teachers to instruct and focus on student needs instead of one. But, it is more a matter

of what the two co-teachers do and how they do it that determines how effective

co-teaching is for students with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). For any

student in any classroom, the quality of the instruction ultimately determines their

academic gains and growth.

Hang and Rabren (2009), in their study of 45 co-teachers' perspectives, cited

perceived benefits to students of being in a co-taught classroom:

Throughout this study, student and teacher participants reported positive

perspectives of co-teaching. All participant groups, for example, showed

agreement with statements that students with disabilities increased their

self-confidence, learned more, had sufficient support, and exhibited better

behaviors in co-taught classrooms. (p. 266)

Additionally, Hang and Rabren went on to state that "teachers perceived that students improved their academic performance during their co-taught year" (p. 266). In a similar study, Austin (2001) conducted research with 139 participants that focused on teachers' beliefs about co-teaching. Austin stated the teachers felt the co-taught classroom was beneficial to all students due to

> a reduced student-teacher ratio, the benefit of another teacher's expertise and viewpoint, the value of remedial strategies and review for all students, and the opportunity for the students without disabilities to gain some understanding of the learning difficulties experienced by many students with disabilities. Similarly, the teachers stated that they believed inclusive education was socially beneficial for students with and without disabilities because it promoted a tolerance for differences and a general sense of acceptance, and it provided general education peer models for students with disabilities. (p. 251)

All of these cited benefits would be impactful to students with and without disabilities. It can also be argued that this type of classroom is more reflective of what the world looks like—different people with different backgrounds, strengths, and challenges, learning and living side by side. Most neighborhoods and places of employment do not have all the same types of people with common strengths and areas of challenge. The world is a melting pot, and the co-taught classroom embodies that ideal.

Austin's (2001) study also provided insight into what teachers perceive as the benefits of being a co-teacher:

> Co-teachers indicated that they generally considered co-teaching to have contributed positively to their professional development: Special education

co-teachers cited an increase in content knowledge, and general education

co-teachers noted the benefits to their skill in classroom management and

curriculum adaptation. (p. 250)

These perspectives provide a good example of perceived growth in skills for both general

education and special education teachers that they can then take and use in their

non-co-taught classrooms to benefit other students as well.

In a study of student perspectives of co-teaching, Dieker (2001) found students

did not always understand why they had two teachers within a classroom, but they

reported receiving more academic assistance and feeling like they had fewer behavior

problems in these classrooms. This perception that students in co-taught classes had more

appropriate behavior than in previous years in a non-co-taught class has been found in

similar studies as well (Eaton et al., 2004). This perspective is supported by the idea that

positive peer models within a co-taught classroom will influence other students to behave

more appropriately than if those positive peer models were not present and students with

behavior challenges were in smaller settings with other students who had similar behavior

struggles.

In sum, the co-teaching research points to benefits for students with and without

disabilities, both academically and behaviorally. The research also indicates there are

benefits for teachers as well. Although co-teaching has many perceived benefits, there

remain some challenges with the co-teaching model.

Challenges of the Co-Teaching Model

Murawski and Dieker (2013) compared co-teaching to a "dance," and in an earlier

article, Murawski (2009) even likened co-teaching to a "marriage." When co-teaching,

teachers have to spend a lot of time collaborating and learning with and from another teacher who likely has a different educational background, experiences, teaching style, and personality. Additionally, managing the various responsibilities of being a classroom teacher while also collaborating and partnering with another teacher can be challenging. One of the challenges often cited in the literature surrounding co-teaching is a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. When roles and responsibilities are not discussed and established, the general education/content area teacher is more likely to become the more dominant teacher. In contrast, the special education teacher becomes more likely to assist and monitor students (Dieker, 2001). This provides another example of how teachers sometimes fall into the one teach-one assist co-teaching model, as previously mentioned.

Additionally, when roles and responsibilities are not clearly established, classroom instruction can be compromised. In 2018, Wexler et al. studied 16 pairs of teachers who delivered over 2,000 minutes of co-taught instruction to middle school students within English language arts classrooms. In their study, Wexler et al. stated:

> The idea of having a CAT [content area teacher] and SET [special education teacher] co-teach instruction to better address the needs of a diverse set of learners holds promise for enabling many SWD [students with disabilities] to access general education content. However, findings from this study indicate that co-teaching, as implemented in middle school classrooms, frequently falls short of the ideal. Although we observed a great deal of instruction that was led by both teachers in the room, it was rare that the additional teacher was used to differentiate or individualize instruction for SWDs. Teachers clearly need

additional explicit guidance on how to share teaching responsibilities to ensure

that the needs of SWDs are met. (p. 399)

This supports the earlier argument that for successful co-teaching to occur, PD and

practice must be present.

A lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities can also lead to an imbalance

or a perception of an imbalance in workloads. Austin's (2001) previously mentioned

study also revealed the following:

Perhaps the most compelling outcome of this study is that the special education

and general education co-teachers agreed that general education co-teachers do

more than their special education partners in the inclusive classroom. This may be

due to the fact that the special education co-teacher is typically the visitor in the

classroom and is often viewed as the expert on curriculum adaptation and

remediation, whereas the general education co-teacher is often regarded as being

more expert in the content area. (p. 252)

Johnson et al. (2022) found similar perspectives when they surveyed 127 high school

co-teachers to gain an understanding of their views on their personality compatibility

with their co-teacher, as well as their perceived self-efficacy and active involvement in

instruction. Their results showed "that while no difference existed between the general

and special educators reported TSE [teacher self efficacy] and PC [personality

compatibility], general educators reported significantly greater AII [active instruction

involvement] than special educators" (p. 102). This discrepancy can be the result of many

factors. Johnson et al. stated,

When co-taught classes are led by general educators, the active involvement of

special educators may be determined more by the willingness of the general

educator to include special educators in instruction than the beliefs and

capabilities of the special educators. (p. 103)

This provides one explanation of the perceived imbalance of workloads, but teachers not

having enough PD around how to effectively collaborate, share responsibilities, and

effectively co-teach can also influence these perceptions.

Vaughn et al. (1997) shared that in their research with teachers, the issues they

identified with co-teaching included space, plan time, communication, classroom

management styles, and "ownership" of students. Dieker and Murawski (2003) identified

co-teaching challenges as not having adequate plan time, large class sizes, content

mastery of special education teachers, teacher preparation, and high-stakes testing. The

insights from the research shed light on the various challenges associated with

co-teaching, which educators and administrators should be aware of when implementing

this collaborative teaching approach. Additionally, ensuring key components are included

in the co-teaching model is important.

Important Components for Effective Co-Teaching

Scruggs et al. (2007) stated, "Teachers have identified a number of conditions

needed for co-teaching to succeed, including sufficient planning time, compatibility of

co-teachers, training, and appropriate student skill level. Many of these concerns were

linked to the more general issue of administrative support" (p. 411). Administrative

support plays a pivotal role in fostering a thriving co-teaching environment. It

encompasses various aspects, including resource allocation, PD opportunities, addressing

logistical challenges, facilitating planning time, and promoting a culture of collaboration within the school. Pratt et al. (2017) wrote:

> A successful co-teaching partnership is rooted in the understanding that setting aside time for planning and reflecting is a priority. It is critical that co-teachers have administrative and district-level support of co-planning time to ensure the success of both the co-teaching relationship and the learners within the co-taught classroom. (p. 245)

A critical component of this support involves acknowledging the unique needs of co-teachers and tailoring assistance accordingly. It also involves the thoughtful pairing of co-teachers, taking into account their desire to co-teach and various personality types. Pratt et al. stated:

> Prior to the implementation of a co-taught class, deliberate thought must be given to the instructors tasked with teaching the course. Successful co-teaching partnerships require professionals whose educational philosophies, styles, and strengths complement one another. When co-teachers begin a partnership, the initial period of working together should involve explicit conversations about philosophies related to differentiation, accommodations and modifications for students, as well as grading practices. All of these factors will influence the unity with which a co-teaching team can plan for a cohesive delivery of instruction and assessment. (p. 244)

This level of unity and alignment in philosophies and styles, paired with administrative support, is an important foundational components for successful co-teaching.

A key focus of Austin's (2001) study was to determine the important factors that influence co-teaching and need to be present for co-teaching to be effective. Austin stated, "offering feedback to one's partner, sharing classroom management, providing daily mutual planning time, and using cooperative learning techniques, are perceived to be important co-teaching practices" (p. 254). The importance of having common planning time continually arose in the literature. The amount of time differs depending on the literature, from daily to multiple times a week, to comprehensive weekly planning periods. Teachers surveyed by Hang and Rabren (2009) "believed that they needed a common weekly planning period and a comprehensive planning period" (p. 265). A comprehensive planning period includes not only content planning but also evaluations and discussion of other classroom issues, such as behavior management (Hang & Rabren, 2009).

Conclusion

In essence, the power of co-teaching lies in its potential to provide a more inclusive and tailored learning experience for all students. Achieving this potential requires that both co-teachers engage in deliberate and collaborative efforts to create a classroom environment in which each student's unique needs are met. The effectiveness of co-teaching ultimately hinges on the commitment and skill of the co-teachers involved. In the next chapter, we look to gain a greater understanding of co-teaching at WJH. We can then compare their perspectives and insights with the literature to determine how to improve co-teaching at WJH as a service delivery model for students with disabilities within inclusive settings.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

According to Patton (2011), "to evaluate something means determining its merit, worth, value, or significance" (p. 2). To understand how the co-teaching model functions at WJH, I needed to delve into the model and its implementation to understand and help make suggestions for improvements. The utilization-focused evaluation method aligned perfectly with my intention to collect data and use the results as a vehicle for change. Patton stated,

> the focus in utilization-focused evaluation is on the intended use by intended
>
> users. Since no evaluation can be value-free, utilization-focused evaluation
>
> answers the question of whose values will frame the evaluation by working with
>
> clearly identified, primary intended users who have responsibility to apply
>
> evaluation findings and implement recommendations. (p. 4)

Additionally, Patton stated, "In the simplest terms, evaluations answer three questions: What? So What? Now What?" (p. 3). My goal in conducting this research was very similar to Patton's three questions. I wanted to understand what the current WJH model for co-teaching looked like (the what), gather current research recommendations from a comprehensive literature review, and analyze the data to determine where improvements can be made and why it would be important to make them (the so what), and then develop a plan to initiate the changes necessary for improvement (the now what).

I conducted qualitative research using semi-structured interviews. This method of data collection allowed me to ask co-teachers open-ended questions, and provided the

opportunity for them to elaborate and share in depth answers to help increase my

understanding. According to Saldaña (2011), author of *Understanding Qualitative*

Research, "Some qualitative research studies may employ only one data collection

method, such as interviewing participants because the personal histories and worldviews

of individuals will best answer the researcher's questions" (p. 31). My interview

questions focused specifically on teachers' co-teaching experiences, perspectives, and

opinions to garner greater understanding and insight. Using the interview method as a

research tool in this methodology, teachers opened up and shared their experiences and

thoughts beyond just simply answering the questions. As a researcher, this methodology

of collecting data through interviews allowed me to make inferences, empathize, and

form evaluative conclusions based on the feedback provided. Saldaña additionally shared

in his book that:

> It is the researcher him or herself who is generally regarded as the primary data
>
> collection instrument in qualitative research. Methods are not just seemingly
>
> mechanical techniques such as observing, writing, counting, and transcribing;
>
> methods also include your cognitive and affective processes such as inferring,
>
> intuiting, empathizing, and evaluating. (p. 32)

This ability to go beyond just asking questions allowed for a deeper conversation

between myself and the co-teachers and provided space for the co-teachers to expand on

their reflections and experiences.

Participants

I interviewed two current co-teaching teams at each grade level at WJH for a total

of six teams: two in sixth grade, two in seventh grade, and two in eighth grade, totaling

12 different teachers. I also selected these 12 teachers because they are a mix of general and special education teachers and have all co-taught previously in other co-teaching teams. All 12 teachers teach language arts or math as general or special education teachers. I only chose these content areas, as language arts and math are currently the only subjects taught using co-taught classes at the junior high. All of the participants have taught individually and co-taught previously. The special education teachers have also taught self-contained instructional/pull-out classes before, so they brought their prior experience and perspectives of teaching in an environment that was not inclusive to the study. Within these six different co-teaching pairs, some had been co-teaching together for years, whereas others were a brand new team. This diversity helped my data, as I had various perspectives from veteran and newly-formed pairs.

I had access to potential participants through workplace contact. To recruit the selected participants, I sent them an email describing my research and inviting them to participate (Appendix A). I also listed my cell phone number (and email) for them to ask any additional questions regarding participation.

After I received confirmation of a potential participant's willingness to participate in my research, I sent them an email (Appendix B) and attached the Informed Consent: Interview (Appendix C). This email acknowledged their commitment to participate, provided the consent form, and informed them of the process for filling out the form.

Participants were fully informed of what their participation would entail and that it was completely voluntary through the recruitment letter (Appendix A), as well as the Informed Consent email (Appendix B) and Informed Consent: Interview (Appendix C). Both documents reiterated that participation was voluntary and teachers could

discontinue their participation at any time. No coercion was used, and the language of both emails and the consent form reiterated that participation was voluntary and not evaluative. To ensure no conflict of interest arose related to my role as assistant principal and supervisor, I reiterated in the recruitment letter (Appendix A) that I would not be evaluating the teachers during the interview or during the school year while the study occurred.

The study did not include minors as participants or adults who could not give consent due to cognitive or other impairments. I proceeded with approval from my superintendent, school district, and National Louis University. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms given to teachers, the grade they currently teach, as well as years of experience teaching and co-teaching.

Table 1

Pseudonyms, Grades, and Years Teaching

Pseudonym	Grade currently teaching	Years of teaching experience	Years of co-teaching experience
Ms. Brown	6	9	4
Ms. Red	6	22	7
Ms. Yellow	6	9	9
Ms. Gray	6	15	3
Ms. Orange	7	12	5
Ms. Purple	7	17	6
Ms. Black	7	33	15
Ms. Blue	7	17	7
Ms. Green	8	18	6
Ms. Maroon	8	13	5
Ms. Teal	8	19	4
Ms. White	8	9	7

Data Gathering Techniques

After potential participants agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled a semi-structured face-to-face interview with each participant individually for no more than 1 hour. The interview occurred in their classroom or my office and included approximately 20 questions (Appendix D). I asked any follow-up questions for clarification and allowed the teachers an opportunity to expound or provide additional information. I used the Otter.ai mobile app on my phone to record the interviews. I uploaded the recording to Otter.ai and used their services to transcribe the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

All interviews were voluntary, and participants were provided with informed consent. In my role, I conduct teaching evaluations. However, I did not evaluate any of the teachers during the study. The superintendent also approved the study and the inclusion of the participants. For anonymity, teachers' names were changed to a color (e.g., Ms. Blue).

Data Analysis Techniques

To analyze the interview data, I created a Google Sheet that included each teacher interviewed along the top and each interview question listed along the side. Each answer had a box. The first time I read through the transcript, I used paper flags and a highlighter and made notes in the margin to identify quotes I thought I might want to use. I also looked for emerging common themes and flagged those using paper Post-it flags. Upon my second read through of each transcript, I made notes of teachers' responses in the accompanying box and then highlighted the box in a certain color if I thought it might be a quote I wanted to use. I also pulled quotes of similar topics that were cohesive and copied them into a separate section under a coded heading. I did this with each transcript until I completed my Google spreadsheet. I also made notes of interesting comments or thoughts along the bottom of the Google Sheet and by using flags and notes on my paper transcript copy. As I only had 12 interviews to analyze, I was able to thoroughly submerge myself in each interview and digest and analyze the information without using a formal coding software system. As Dr. Leslie Curry of the Yale School of Public Health discussed in her video series, "Fundamentals of Qualitative Research Methods" (Curry,

2015), by organizing my information into "chunks" that were similar, I was able to do some level of coding of the information.

Once my Google Sheet was complete, I read each answer and looked for themes and similar responses. I then used a different color to highlight similar responses and made notes of themes in the last column for coding purposes. Once I had analyzed and reviewed my data, I began to report my findings within the results section and form claims as I interpreted the data. I then compared my findings with those from my literature review to formulate policy change recommendations.

Conclusion

The methods used in this study allowed me to gain a better understanding of co-teaching at WJH. These learnings then enabled me to suggest improvements to the current model and address whether co-teaching should be offered in other content areas, such as social studies and science.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

I conducted one-on-one interviews with 12 different WJH teachers; six were general education teachers and six were special education teachers, representing six different co-teaching teams. Between the 12 teachers were 193 years of combined teaching experience and 78 years collectively spent co-teaching. The number of co-teachers and co-taught classes at WJH varies by the year and is dependent on student needs as denoted in IEP minutes for co-taught classes. The administration paired together the current co-teaching teams based on their history of co-teaching together, a consideration of personalities, a discussion of who would work well together, whose schedule the class fit into, and who had availability to co-teach for certain periods within the day.

I asked the teachers the same questions during individual interviews to gain an understanding of their perspectives and experiences with co-teaching at WJH. Again, for the purposes of anonymity, each teacher was referred to as a different color.

The results provide the details of a necessary framework for the effective implementation of co-teaching. This framework includes the structure, the people, and the outcomes. The results show co-teaching is beneficial for students and certain factors need to be considered for co-teaching to be effective.

Findings

Structure of Co-Teaching

As described in the literature review, several different models can be used when co-teaching. At WJH, the model used is left up to the co-teaching team. According to the

results, the most commonly used models are the one teach-one assist and team-teaching

models. The one teach-one assist model is used more than the team-teaching model. Ms.

Red shared that she and her co-teacher use the one teach-one assist model. She explained

that her co-teacher, as the general education teacher, is more of a content specialist,

whereas she is a specialist in students with special needs. She said they meet and plan,

but feels felt her co-teacher already has a plan, so she might add to it or suggest

modifications to some parts. Ms. Green had a similar experience and stated:

> She [her co-teacher] started out as the expert; I mean, she still is. I think her
>
> strength is being able to see the needs of the masses, how everything fits together,
>
> and she's the expect of the curriculum and how it fits within the spectrum of all
>
> the courses that we teach. And then my role has been to implement the IEP and
>
> incorporate it within the needs of the other kids in the classroom.

Ms. Teal commented, "My co-teacher takes the lead and does the instruction . . . I then

circulate and touch base with everyone, and not necessarily just the kids who are in

special education." Ms. White stated, "[My co-teacher] really just sort of supported the

class. She instructs, but she basically supported the curriculum and the kids in the class

that needed it; actually, all the kids, not just the special ed kids." Ms. Maroon shared, "I

feel like the lead teacher, and then [my co-teacher] is kind of the one who's

supplementing, and then we do switch off on some days where she's the lead teacher, and

I'm supplementing as well." When asked to explain further about supplementing, Ms.

Maroon went on to say, "If I'm teaching the main lesson, [my co-teacher] is going

around, checking in with the kids. She's also seeing things as well, and she might explain

it in a different way. We feed off of each other."

Though many of the teams described their model as one teach-one assist, other teams said they use a team teaching model. Ms. Orange stated:

We do a lot of team teaching, I would say, and then conferencing in small groups with students. It's a lot like I might do the warm-up with them, and then she might do the lesson, and then I will work with small groups. And it's a lot of teaming, I would say, going back and forth because we have compatible teaching styles, so it works well.

Another teacher, Ms. Yellow, shared, "My partner and I, we do everything together. We plan together, we grade together, we modify together, we look at IEP goals together, we even talk about our posts to Schoology together; we are truly like one person."

The teachers seemed open to learning about and trying other models. Some teachers shared that more PD around the different models of co-teaching would be helpful. Ms. Maroon stated:

You know, right now, we just have kind of have a lead teacher and then a supplement. But, I know you could do things where there's like parallel teaching or like small group. I would like more PD around that because I just feel like I don't know.

Additionally, the importance of plan time emerged. Ms. Blue shared that she wished she had more time to collaborate with her co-teacher outside their classroom time. Ms. Orange shared, "I like that I have a common plan time with my co-teacher because I think it's really hard when you don't have common plan time." Ms. Maroon commented, "I wish we had more common plan time . . . I would like for her [other co-teacher] to be

more involved in the planning aspect of our day-to-day lessons, where I'm doing that more so with the math team."

The co-teaching structure at WJH seems to be dependent on teachers' knowledge and understanding of various models as well as having the time to truly plan together. There is evident potential for growth, along with a demonstrated interest in exploring alternative co-teaching approaches. This presents an opening for additional PD in co-teaching methodologies and the possibility of carving out time for mutual classroom observations, which can offer valuable perspectives on how other co-teachers navigate this practice. This, in turn, shifts the spotlight toward the individuals who shape the co-teaching landscape at WJH, with their personal experiences in co-teaching serving as a rich source of insights.

People

The co-teachers interviewed at WJH reported liking many things about co-teaching, such as being in a partnership, camaraderie, the ability to share ideas and get feedback, the distribution of work, being able to work with different types of students with whom they might ordinarily not work, as well as hearing a different perspective from their co-teacher. One proponent of co-teaching, Ms. Brown, shared,

> I don't like it; I love it. You have someone to throw ideas back and forth, and you're constantly making improvements. You're finding more resources as two minds against one, where I might see something one way, my co-teacher will see it in a different way, and we can talk about it, or we can come up with a better decision. So, you can't lose. You have two people.

Ms. Blue shared,

It [co-teaching] does take some of the burden off during the school day of feeling

like you have to do it all, and she [co-teacher] is somebody that you can lean on in

order to, I don't know, be the best that we can be and be the most effective in the

building.

Ms. Yellow shared,

I love it because I love the camaraderie and the partnership that I get with my

co-teacher. I also love selfishly being a part of the gen ed community. So, getting

to know more students. I love seeing the relationships being built between all

different types of peers and all different learners.

Ms. Orange shared that she liked co-teaching because

it's a culture where all students, it's not different to them to have two teachers.

There's not that stigma. I like that. It makes everyone feel included, and the gen

ed students look at me as a teacher, not a special ed teacher where when it was a

push-in model, I was looked at as like nobody wanted to ask me for help . . . but

[now] they look at me like a teacher.

This feeling of being included in the larger school community and interacting with both

general education and special education students was shared by other co-teachers as well.

When asked what they disliked about co-teaching, the teachers provided less

feedback than when sharing what they liked about co-teaching, but many felt there was

often not enough planning time, it was a lot of work, and sometimes there was not equity

within the roles. Ms. Blue shared, "I think it can be hard to build that relationship at first

because we have so little time at the beginning of the school year." Ms. Green stated, "I

think co-teaching takes a lot of time and effort, so I think it's always more efficient in a

way to do it by myself . . . just get it done. There's a lot of time consumption." Not

having enough time to plan was also cited as a challenge by many of the co-teachers.

Several general education teachers cited that special education teachers are often pulled

in and out of the classroom to attend IEP meetings or because their case management

responsibilities were pulling them in many directions. Ms. Purple shared:

> I think some of the expectations of some of the special ed teachers feel like they
>
> have to do everything; they have to be a [co-taught] language arts teacher, they
>
> have to a pullout language arts teacher, they have to be a pullout math teacher,
>
> they have to write goals, update IEPs, like, it's a lot. So I feel like that's not good.

Special education teachers at WJH technically have the same classroom responsibilities

as the general education teachers, but they have the added responsibility of case

managing 10 to 12 students at the same time. Those case management responsibilities

sometimes can require them to miss class to attend meetings or needing to support a

student having difficulty in the moment in another area of the building, but they are still

feeling the pull and the responsibility of contributing to and being present in their

co-taught classrooms.

In looking closely at the data, there is evidence, based on the feedback gathered,

that there are important factors around co-teaching that need to be considered and could

be improved upon to make it a more effective model for servicing students with

disabilities within these inclusive settings. Many factors were cited as important in a

co-teaching partnership, such as mutual respect, flexibility, a desire to be a co-teacher,

and establishing a common set of expectations from the beginning. Ms. Blue stated:

I think really laying out, especially for any new teachers or new partnerships,

laying out what the expectations of co-teaching are within the building and what

should it look like here, like here's the exemplary, this is what it should look like.

Just kind of like in Danielson how you have that exemplary. I mean, very rarely, is

everybody going to be in that highest category, but here's what it might/should

look like because it gives you an idea of where you want to work towards. I also

think having consistency with who you're working with. It's helpful to build that

relationship over time instead of kind of jumping in and out every year.

Ms. Orange shared,

I think you have to have compatible personalities and open-mindedness. Because

if you get paired with a teacher who doesn't have an open mind or wants too

much control of their classroom, that makes it difficult. So I think you have to be

compatible, open-minded, and flexible.

Ms. Yellow shared that she believes the most important factor in a co-teaching

partnership is the desire to be a co-teacher. She stated:

I think that as a staff as a whole, we need to know who is actually wanting to do

co-teaching and not just saying who wants to co-teach, but saying this is what

co-teaching is. So many people think co-teaching is less work. Actually, if you're

signing up for co-teaching, it is more work. It is more time, it is more planning. It

is more energy that I've ever put into anything because I can't do it on my own

time . . . You have to have people who have that philosophy because if they're not

understanding that, it's never going to work.

Additionally, many teachers discussed how challenging it could be if they were paired with a co-teacher who did not match their personality or who did not want to co-teach. Ms. Purple commented:

> If you have a co-teacher who is open and flexible about like actually wanting to do it [co-teach] and wanting to be a part of the classroom, it makes it fun . . . I also like the fact that I can learn from the special ed teacher, and they have different tools that I would never have gravitated towards.

All of the combined teacher experiences and feedback around co-teaching are helpful in leading to outcomes and recommendations for improvement to co-teaching at WJH. These outcomes then lead the way to recommendations for improvements and changes that will hopefully lead to further student gains, increased teacher satisfaction with co-teaching, and a more inclusive experience for both students and staff.

Outcomes

The overall results of the research findings indicate the co-taught classrooms at WJH are beneficial to students with disabilities. When discussing their thoughts on whether co-taught classrooms are beneficial to students with disabilities, all 12 co-teachers unanimously felt positively that the co-taught classroom was beneficial. Ms. Blue commented:

> I think it's the best place for students to be with disabilities. I think that students with disabilities get to hear and listen to ideas from students with higher abilities, and it also makes them feel included within the classroom. I think that helps benefit them in the world and the rest of the school to feel that they're a part of the whole instead of feeling like they're on the outside.

Ms. Red discussed that it was beneficial for students to be in a co-taught classroom because there were two options of who to go to for help, based on preference and the teacher with whom the student had a relationship. Additionally, she shared that it reduced the time students spent waiting to receive help. Ms. Red went on to state:

I can make modifications and adjustments to what they are being asked. I can reframe things for them, where they have immediate access to that, where if they just had one teacher, that one teacher isn't going to think about that usually until the end of the day or the next day as to how they could have done it differently. And then that learning opportunity for the kids could be lost. And so I think it gives them direct access to sustaining more interest in what they're doing.

Ms. Orange cited the student-to-teacher ratio as a positive for students with disabilities within a co-taught classroom. She also shared similar thoughts regarding differentiation in the moment as Ms. Red: "It allows us to meet with more students and give them more attention, and then they can get things differentiated in the moment when there are two teachers there." Additionally, Ms. Orange shared:

I've seen lots of students whose behavior is such a challenge in a small group, like full pull out, and then you put them in a co-taught class, and because they have those positive peer role models, it totally turns it around, and then they can access their education. So, then they are making academic gains because they're there in that setting where they have positive peer models. So then that behavior piece is less, and then they can access their education better.

Ms. Green shared that she feels there are many different benefits. She stated:

I think it sets up students for a higher standard in the sense that they feel like I'm part of the mass and there is a sense of belonging that comes from being part of a bigger community, and then feeling pride and having access to the same kind of material in the same way as the other kids . . . and we want kids to be collaborators. So, I think it sets up modeling for the kids.

Ms. Maroon made a similar connection and shared that it is beneficial for students to see adults working together. She also echoed other sentiments expressed by other teachers that students: "Have two people that they could turn to. Another benefit is there are two teachers now that could connect with students."

Several teachers commented that having access to grade-level content and curriculum is beneficial for students with disabilities, for the exposure as well as the challenge. Ms. Purple stated:

Part of the benefit is them seeing what the gen ed [general education] class is discussing and hearing higher level analytical thinking in which they probably, I'm assuming, wouldn't get in a pullout setting . . . If there are only four kids in a class, and they are all at your same level, how rich can the dialogue be? [In the co-taught class], they are hearing good vocabulary, rich discussions, and then creating new friendships.

Ms. Yellow shared:

I am a huge advocate for co-taught classes, and not just for students with disabilities. I think it benefits every single student that's in that class, from the highest of the high to your lowest of the low, because as a teacher, you can only do so much scaffolding as one person. But your children with disabilities need

different tiers of scaffolding. Same with your students who are really high and

they need different levels of scaffolding. So, we have maybe a range of six

different levels of scaffolding for these kids, but nobody knows that something is

different for them. So, the kids with the disability, it boosts their self-esteem, and

they feel confident. They're still learning the concept; whether it's not as in-depth

as the other kids, that's fine. They're still getting the main idea and are part of a

larger community, and they feel that experience. You just can't replicate that in a

pull-out class. I love seeing the achievement in the kid with a disability, knowing

that some of those things probably wouldn't happen in a pull-out class, and

engaging in those conversations that they can't have in a pull-out group of four.

Ms. Maroon shared, "I just think from my previous experience . . . when we're looking at

the data, our co-taught classes made higher gains than our non-co-taught classes." Ms.

Blue shared a similar opinion: "I think that students who again see other students struggle

will feel more confident in knowing that they're not the only one struggling and

everybody struggles, so they're more willing to take risks and try hard."

Throughout the interviews, a common theme that emerged within the responses of

many co-teachers was that what is good for one student is good for all students. To

elaborate, the tools and resources available to special education students are also

available to general education students within the co-taught class. Allowing these

universal tools to be made available to all students appeared to normalize that each

student is using what they need to be successful, as well as alleviated some of the stress

of making sure specific students have the tools they need by just making the tools

available to all students. Ms. Yellow shared that in the past, she did not believe in this

philosophy and felt she should not make all the tools available to all students because she felt only the students who needed them should have them, and all other students needed to be challenged. She shared:

> I've evolved as a teacher, and I do use that [good for one, is good for all philosophy] and I really truly do see kids who need it, use it. Kids who don't need it don't use it. It's just there for them. And they don't refer back to it but 100% what's good for one for one, is good for all. But that's not for every single thing. So, like if you're modifying an assignment, I can't give everybody the modified assignment. I'm talking about cheat sheets like references, transition words, graphic organizers, and things like that we give to all of them.

Ms. Blue uses this philosophy in her room as well. She shared:

> I think it also benefits all students because anytime you're making something like a graphic organizer that helps maybe a student with a disability, it's available to all students. And so, some of the students who might struggle with a concept understand that sometimes a student who isn't and who doesn't have a labeled disability can utilize some of those same strategies. And again, all students are seeing that whoever needs help is getting that help. So it keeps students from feeling like they're outside or less than.

Ms. Purple shared:

> When we co-plan together, they [co-teacher] are asking if they need to create graphic organizers, to which I say well, I have one; do you want to look at it? They look at it and either make modifications based on the student's needs, and then we use it for the whole class. So they're never just making these graphic

organizers for one or two or five that are in the class. It's literally the whole class . . . everybody gets it.

With so many benefits to students cited within the research, it was no surprise that all 12 co-teachers felt co-taught classes should be offered in other subjects, such as social studies and science. Ms. Teal agreed that co-taught science and co-taught social studies classes should be offered, but she also felt it could not look the same way the non-co-taught class looked: "The teacher would have to be open to trying different things in that co-taught class as opposed to the things that they're teaching the same way throughout the day." Ms. Orange commented about students who are in the co-taught language arts class, but in general education non-co-taught science and social studies:

I feel like the students aren't getting anything out of there by just being included, and they need more support than that. And having two teachers in there to be able to do that would be helpful to help them make academic and social-emotional growth, like collaborating with their peers, because it's hard.

Ms. Yellow shared a similar sentiment:

The way that the continuum is right now, these kids are getting the support they need in LA [language arts] and math . . . then they go [into science and social studies], and they're floundering. They are suffering, their self-esteem, everything that we just did for them in LA to build them up and to modify and make them feel good, gets deflated every single day they go to science and social studies because it's a gen ed course, where the gen ed teachers don't have time or don't know how to modify or to build them up.

Interpretation

The combined results of the 12 interviews with both general education and special education teachers made a valid case for continuing co-taught classes at WJH and adding to them. The perceived benefits to students went beyond just academic gains to helping create an inclusive environment where students feel they belong and one in which the culture of the school is also positively affected.

Overall, teachers at WJH were satisfied with co-teaching, but there appeared to be definite room for improvement. One such area was the importance of having people who have a desire to co-teach be co-teachers. Ms. Black echoed this sentiment when she shared, "I think it would be great to have a say if you want to co-teach and in who you would feel comfortable teaching with." This would require the administration to consider not only schedules but also to have conversations with staff about what is involved in co-teaching and then engage in the thoughtful pairing of the co-teaching partnership, provide the necessary PD, and build adequate time for co-planning into the schedule. Many teachers mentioned the importance of having time to plan together throughout the interviews, as the amount of co-planning time varied between all of the teachers.

Additionally, although many of the teachers did not explicitly agree that they needed more PD around co-teaching, the models used were limited to only two: one teach-one assist and the team-teaching model. Because the research has shown there are many more models and there were teachers who expressed curiosity and interest in learning other models, there is a definite opportunity for increased PD around co-teaching models and implementation.

The results also demonstrated that though co-teaching benefits students, it would be helpful for the administration to be explicit that the co-taught class can look different. Ms. Red spoke to this when she commented, "The co-taught class can and should look different than the non-co-taught class." She went on to share that she felt this needed to be more firmly addressed by the administration. She argued that it was a larger issue of scope and sequence and there was a need to have the administration be explicit with general education teachers that a co-taught class could go at a slower pace and the curriculum could be modified to meet the needs of the students in that particular class.

All co-teachers felt the co-taught class offerings should be extended to include science and social studies. These academic areas are often viewed as "advanced reading," so it would stand to reason that students with reading challenges who require co-taught language arts would also require co-taught social studies and science. Some teachers commented that currently, students who need this support often sit in those classrooms unable to access the curriculum, and it affects their self-esteem. One teacher shared that it would be beneficial to offer co-taught classes in all core academic areas because then IEP goals could be worked on in any of the subject areas, not just language arts and math. Ms. Blue shared:

> I think it would be helpful again to open up people's ideas and understanding that reading and writing happen in every class, and so they [students] may need support in those classes, and the emphasis may need not to be so content heavy but more skills-based, learning how to think critically and find evidence, and I think a co-teacher would be very helpful with that.

What was also resoundingly clear was that the philosophy of making the supports for students with disabilities in a co-taught classroom available to all students was overwhelmingly helpful to both the teachers and the students within that setting. This philosophy of what is good for one student is good for all students provides an inclusive and level playing ground where using supports when learning material can be normalized. The idea that each student in a classroom will use what they need to be successful and that all supports being made available to all students helps with lowering the stigma that can come by singling out students with individual supports while other students are not allowed to use the same supports and resources. It eliminates the divide between students and helps in creating a more inclusive classroom community experience for everyone. Additionally, it lowers the stress level of teachers related to having to remember specifically which supports each student has to have and instead makes all the supports available to all students, thus covering all of their bases and helping all students to take what resources they need to learn best.

Conclusion

Ms. Red summarized it well when she said, "It's [co-taught classrooms are] about creating a community of being able to teach kids to be inclusive." This spirit of inclusivity is what prompts continued improvements to be made to the co-teaching environment at WJH. The results assisted in developing helpful recommendations for how to make co-teaching at WJH a more effective service delivery model for students with disabilities in inclusive settings that are provided in the coming chapter. A framework analysis supported identifying what the current realities are, and what needs to change.

CHAPTER FIVE

Change Plan

Using a systems thinking framework can provide greater insight and analysis into how an organization's system affects a particular area. In the case of my research with teachers at WJH, using Wagner et al.'s 4C model provided a framework to think systematically about the benefits and challenges of co-teaching at WJH as well as assisted in developing a thoughtful proposed change plan for the future. As Wagner et al. (2006) stated, "More ecological than logical, it recognizes that simple, liner cause-and-effect explanations sometimes miss the fact that today's effect may in turn be tomorrow's cause, influencing some other part of the system" (p. 98).

The four components of Wagner et al.'s 4C framework are context, culture, conditions, and competencies. These 4Cs can be used to identify where an organization is currently and the desired future state. In this chapter, I briefly discuss what each of these components means and examine where co-teaching is now (i.e., "As-Is") and where I would like it "To-Be." Figure 1 illustrates the highlighted points. The As-Is articulates the current co-teaching environment at WJH through the lens of the co-teachers' data collected through my research that shines a light on the strengths and the challenges of co-teaching. Comparing the As-Is to the academic literature on co-teaching, as well as considering the teachers' feedback, provided an opportunity to develop a To-Be. This To-Be encapsulates suggestions for improvements and positive change for co-teaching at WJH. It provided an opportunity to state how I would like co-teaching to change and evolve to help benefit students with disabilities and improve their access to inclusive learning environments.

Figure 1

As-Is and To-Be

Context As-Is	Context To-Be
● Co-taught classes are not able to be offered in all subjects due to financial constraints related to hiring more teachers ● Not all teachers throughout the building have the same beliefs regarding inclusion	● Create more co-taught class offerings ● Increase inclusion PD for all teachers
Culture As-Is	**Culture To-Be**
● Collaborative culture is present in many co-teaching partnerships, but not all ● Supportive of inclusion, but not all curriculum or supports are accessible to all students	● Provide PD on various co-teaching models, expectations in roles, goals, and visions ● Adopt a good-for-one, good-for-all culture
Conditions As-Is	**Conditions To-Be**
● Not enough common plan time ● Lack of clarity around expectations in roles	● Increase co-teacher plan time ● Create an understanding of expectations and role clarity
Competencies As-Is	**Competencies To-Be**
● Lack of knowledge about the various co-teaching models and benefits of each. Teachers tend to resort then to the one teach-one assist model ● There is a need for more PD in different co-teaching models ● Lack of standards around what good co-teaching looks like	● Provide PD on various co-teaching models, expectations in roles, goals, and visions ● Establish exemplaries around co-teaching and create opportunities for co-teachers to observe each other

As-Is

Context

According to Wagner et al. (2006), "Context refers to the larger organizational systems within which we work and their demands and expectations, formal and informal" (p. 104). Context can be the outside factors that may be out of our control, but influence educational settings. When looking at the context around co-teaching at WJH, there are not enough co-taught classes offered in core academic subjects to support making the curriculum accessible and supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities. The reasons for this are varied, but like many things in education, it often can come down to financial constraints or a lack of making something a financial priority. Increasing co-taught offerings could potentially require hiring more teachers, increasing the district's expenditures.

Another lens with which to examine the context at WJH is to question whether the beliefs of all teachers support inclusion. These viewpoints are influenced by a person's previous experiences and personal beliefs. They are outside factors that could influence the success of inclusion and are beyond the control of school and district leaders. At WJH, inclusion is an accepted practice that is talked about in a positive light. However, there remain situations where teachers will protest a student being included in their setting or question whether a particular student with special needs belongs in their class.

Culture

Wagner et al. (2006) defined culture as follows:

The shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the

quality of relationships within and beyond the school. Culture refers to the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system. (p. 102)

When looking at the current culture around co-teaching at WJH, there exists a collaborative culture of working together for the common good of the classroom and students in many co-teaching partnerships. Ms. Brown's partnership is considered one of the strongest relationships among co-teachers. She shared:

Our co-teaching has really evolved. It started with me working to know her caseload and her really starting to learn about what a general education teacher was responsible for. And then it quickly became not *her* job or *my* job, but we agreed that everything was *our* job.

This collaborative approach is present in many co-teaching partnerships, but not all. Where this culture is not present, it could be argued that the co-teaching model the co-teacher uses is more of a lead teacher and an assisting teacher, or the one teach-one assist model. This model is the most widely used model at WJH but would not necessarily lend itself to support an equal or balanced collaborative culture.

Additionally, a truly inclusive culture is not one that just includes all students in all classrooms. Moore (2016) wrote,

Inclusion is not about integrating students by housing them into (or out of) forced containers of classrooms and schools. Inclusive education is about providing opportunities *with* supports for *all* students to have access to, and contribute to, an education rich in content and experience with their peers. Period. (p. 17)

The current culture at WJH philosophically aligns with Dr. Moore's views on inclusion and that just including students is not inclusion. District leaders emphasize inclusion as a priority and have done focused, intentional work over the past many years in support of inclusion. However, the work still has far to go. Many students with disabilities still struggle to access the general education content in many classes, even in co-taught classrooms. Additionally, although the concept of what is good for one student is good for all students is visible in many classrooms, it is not embedded in all classrooms. Therefore, some teachers still reserve only certain supports, resources, and materials for special education students, thereby contributing to making them feel less than or different within a general education classroom. Moore (2016) stated, "The students who are the hardest to reach also have so much that we can learn from, too, because if we can get to them, we can get to everyone. We often forget that what helps one helps everyone" (p. 52).

Conditions

Wagner et al. (2006) defined conditions as "the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangement of time, space, and resources" (p. 101). When looking at the current conditions around co-teaching at WJH, the teachers unanimously shared that having a common plan time is very important when co-teaching. Ms. Maroon commented:

> I wish we had more common plan time . . . I would like for her [other co-teacher] to be more involved in the planning aspect of our day-to-day lessons, where I'm doing that more so with the math team.

Ms. Black commented that this is even more of a challenge when teachers are in a position where they co-teach with two different co-teachers and in two different subject areas: "I can't spend all my plan period with one and then spend my other plan period with the other because I have other things I have to do, too."

Additionally, there exists a lack of clarity around expectations in roles between the general education co-teacher and the special education co-teacher. Ms. Gray stated, "I think a common set of expectations is important because if one person thinks it is supposed to be one way and the other doesn't agree, then it's hard." Ms. Blue stated:

> I think really laying out, especially for any new teachers or new partnerships, laying out what the expectations of co-teaching are within the building and what should it look like here, like here's the exemplary, this is what it should look like. Just kind of like in Danielson how you have that exemplary. I mean, very rarely, is everybody going to be in that highest category, but here's what it might/should look like because it gives you an idea of where you want to work towards. I also think having consistency with who you're working with. It's helpful to build that relationship over time instead of kind of jumping in and out every year.

Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) defined competencies as "the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning. Skillful, competent adults are a foundation of this work" (p. 99). Co-teachers' knowledge of co-teaching and collaborative instruction affects student learning and the effectiveness of co-teaching. When looking at the current competencies around co-teaching at WJH, the data from my research point to a lack of knowledge about the various co-teaching models and the benefits of each. As a result, the

teachers tend to default to the one teach-one assist model. Ms. Red shared that she and her co-teacher use the one teach-one assist model. She explained that her co-teacher, as the general education teacher, is more of a content specialist, whereas she is the specialist of students with special needs. She said they meet and plan, but she feels her co-teacher already has a plan, so she might add to it or suggest modifications to some parts. Ms. Green had a similar experience and stated:

> She [her co-teacher] started out as the expert; I mean, she still is. I think her strength is being able to see the needs of the masses, how everything fits together, and she's the expect of the curriculum and how it fits within the spectrum of all the courses that we teach. And then my role has been to implement the IEP and incorporate it within the needs of the other kids in the classroom.

Ms. Gray shared:

> So, I teach the lessons, and while I'm teaching the lessons, she walks around and will make sure the kids are on the right place in their notes, and make sure they are paying attention more . . . then after the lesson she will meet with her special education students and take them out or meet with them in the classroom. And then sometimes, she will help the general education students too, but usually, the focus for her is on answering the special education students' questions or reteaching.

Ms. Gray's experience with co-teaching, as well as her co-teacher, reflects the need for increased competency around co-teaching, education on the different models, and how to co-teach. If we analyze Ms. Gray's quote, she referred to the special education students as "hers," meaning her co-teacher. This is a good example of the need for increased

competencies because, in co-teaching classrooms, all of the students belong to both co-teachers.

The teachers overall seemed open to learning about and trying other models. Some teachers shared that more PD about the different models of co-teaching would be helpful. Ms. Maroon stated:

> You know, right now, we just have kind of have a lead teacher and then a supplement. But, I know you could do things where there's like parallel teaching or like small group. I would like more PD around that because I just feel like I don't know.

There is also a current lack of standards around what good co-teaching looks like. Teachers currently do not observe one another to learn best practices, see different implementations and support strategies, or view different co-teaching styles and ideas for implementation. Ms. Blue shared:

> The most beneficial thing for me would be to be able to observe, like an exemplary co-teaching classroom along with my co-teacher so that we could leave and say, oh my gosh, they were doing this, or maybe we could try this or that . . . just to really see how effective co-teaching looks like, knowing that it's going to be different for people with different personalities.

Envisioning the Success To-Be

Context

Creating co-taught classes in all core academic subjects would enable students with disabilities to have the support of a general education teacher and a special education teacher in not only language arts and math but also science and social studies.

These additional class offerings would not only be beneficial to students but also align with and support the culture of inclusion at WJH. More classes would enable students with disabilities to have access not just to the classroom and their general education peers but also to the curriculum and learning. This would provide an increased opportunity for further inclusion, from just a student being in a classroom to coming closer to being a member of that classroom and belonging.

To continue to help grow the mindset of all teachers of the importance of inclusion, continual PD needs to occur that both inspires and teaches how to make classroom environments more inclusive and offers perspectives on why it is so important and impactful for all students, as well as for the school culture as a whole. Ms. Green shared:

> I think it [inclusion] sets up students for a higher standard in the sense that they feel like I'm part of the mass and there is a sense of belonging that comes from being part of a bigger community, and then feeling pride and having access to the same kind of material in the same way as the other kids.

Culture

Although WJH has many co-teaching partnerships with a collaborative culture, there is room for improvement in many areas. Some of the other identified areas of suggested change, such as increased PD around various co-teaching models, expectations, determined roles and role clarity, and creating a shared vision and goals, will all positively influence the culture of co-teaching, specifically at WJH.

Changing the school culture to support the concept that what is good for one student is good for all students would positively influence the culture. This philosophy of

what is good for one student is good for all students provides an inclusive and level playing ground where using supports when learning material can be normalized. The idea that each student in a classroom will use what they need to be successful and that all supports being made available to all students helps with lowering the stigma that can come by singling out students with individual supports while other students are not allowed to use the same supports and resources. It will eliminate the divide between students and aids in creating a more inclusive classroom community experience for everyone. Moore (2016) wrote:

> When you see students in your class, do not look at them as a category. Look at them as people who may need support. Think about supports in layers that are designed for specific students but that everyone has access to. Students do not need to go down the hall to another class or to another teacher to get supports. They can get what they need right there because there will be another five kids who may also need supports. Look to these students as the guide for others whom we sometimes miss when identifying needs. Think about the power in creating the supports and access for *all* students to be successful. That way, they can all cross the finish line together and meet goals they may not even know are meaningful until 10 years down the road. Leaving no one behind, this is Universal Design for learning. (p. 85)

Conditions

Hang and Rabren (2009) stated, "Co-teachers need a weekly co-planning period to discuss instructional issues, behavior management, teachers' roles and responsibilities,

and students' Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals" (p. 260). Causton and

Theoharis (2014) took it a step further in their suggested meeting time:

> We recommend that teams have, at minimum, common planning time for 40-60
>
> minutes, one to two times per week. Creating a master schedule in which
>
> instructional teams have sacred planning time *must* be a leadership priority. We
>
> know that when teams do not plan together, their ability to collaborate and
>
> co-deliver instruction is significantly impaired, resulting in wasting precious
>
> human resources and providing much less effective services to students. (p. 66)

The need for common plan time was present in the literature review and my research with

teachers at WJH. Ensuring teachers have time to discuss, plan, grade, and assess their

co-taught classroom has to be a priority within the school for co-teaching to succeed. Ms.

Orange shared:

> I know we have common plan time, but I always feel like I could use more of it or
>
> more time to plan ahead or batch plan. Sometimes meetings or things come up, so
>
> if we have more time, it would help.

> Additionally, creating understanding between co-teachers of expectations and

establishing role clarity is an important condition that needs to be present. Ms. Teal

shared:

> There needs to be a way to identify the roles and expectations in the classroom so
>
> you, as a team, know who is doing what. Because I co-teach in two different
>
> classrooms in two different subjects, and my role looks different in each.

In order for both general and special education teachers to be effective, it is crucial that

teachers identify roles and responsibilities (Dieker, 2001).

This theme of creating a set of expectations and clarity around each co-teacher's role was brought up by several co-teachers in the research at WJH as well. This should involve having a meeting that is focused on this topic before the school year begins. At this meeting, it would be helpful to discuss the shared vision and goals, expectations, how communication and planning will occur, how reflection and evaluation will occur, and how each teacher can help support the other for the betterment of the students. This kind of proactive planning would aid in setting up the co-teaching partnership for success.

Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) stated, "Competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed and collaborative" (p. 99). As was uncovered in the current competencies around co-teaching at WJH, there exists a need for more PD around the various co-teaching models and strategies. When teachers were asked about the most impactful PD they had received around co-teaching, several cited a conference they had attended years ago focused on inclusion. Ms. Orange shared:

> One of the most impactful PD was when they sent us both to a conference. One thing that was really enlightening that they said was that co-teaching isn't always going to look like 50/50 shared responsibility because the general education teacher isn't writing half of your IEPs, so you might not be doing half of the grading. I felt a lot of pressure before going to the conference to be more like a general education teacher, and I felt like I was losing my special ed. It also gave us tools to take back to the classroom and activities we could do to differentiate.

The general takeaway I received when hearing other teachers talk about the conference was that it presented inclusion in a positive light and made it feel obtainable through co-teaching. Providing more PD experiences for co-teachers will keep them excited and energized about co-teaching while also giving them more strategies and skills to use in class to make learning for students with disabilities more successful. PD should be continuously embedded into the program, and opportunities should be provided to each co-teacher in some capacity at least once a quarter. This could look like a conference as mentioned above, a webinar, a book study, a meeting with other co-teachers to learn from one another, or some other format.

Another competency that can be improved is that co-teachers need to see exemplary co-teaching models. They need time to go into each other's classrooms to see how they are implementing co-teaching models and differentiating instruction. This change in culture can be an opportunity to continually reflect on the current co-teaching practices and look for various ways to improve. It also can lead to teachers taking more risks and trying new things they might have seen another teacher implementing. Last, through time and all co-teachers being provided many opportunities to observe their co-teaching colleagues, the co-teaching program overall should begin to have some increased consistency within co-taught classrooms and a level of expectation of what best practices look like.

Conclusion

Understanding where co-teaching is and where it could be is important in creating a change plan that will benefit students with disabilities and the teachers who teach them.

Taking that change plan, evaluating what policy changes need to occur to implement the changes, and continuing to improve co-teaching at WJH are the next steps.

CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions, Implications, Policy Recommendations

Through the review of the literature and my research at WJH around co-taught classrooms as an inclusive service delivery model for students with disabilities, it became evident that this type of service delivery model is beneficial to students with disabilities. The current culture, competencies, conditions, and context around co-teaching provided insight into areas of needed growth and changes in policy.

The current culture for co-teaching is overall collaborative and positive. Ms. Orange shared:

> It's a culture where all students, it's not different to them to have two teachers. There's not that stigma. I like that. It makes everyone feel included, and the gen ed students look at me as a teacher, not a special ed teacher where when it was a push-in model, I was looked at as like nobody wanted to ask me for help . . . but [now] they look at me like a teacher.

However, culturally, there is still work to be done. Ms. White shared that co-teaching can be frustrating because "I feel like the classroom teacher [general education teacher] gets the bulk of the grading and the bulk of the creating of lessons." Ms. Maroon stated, "Putting people with co-teachers that they don't want to co-teach with and making teachers co-teach who don't want to co-teach can be challenging."

The analysis of the teachers' current competencies at WJH shed light on the need for further PD around the various models of co-teaching. The current conditions of co-teaching brought about an awareness of the need for more clarity in roles and an increase in plan time.

One clear takeaway, however, was in the context of co-teaching itself. Within the context of co-taught classrooms, it was determined that there are not enough. With co-taught classrooms only currently being offered in language arts and math, this leaves many subjects without an inclusive opportunity for students with disabilities to access the curriculum. The current policy of only offering co-taught language arts and math classes is not specific to WJH. Other area junior high schools also are limiting their co-taught models to just these two subject areas. In doing this, it leaves social studies, science, and other elective classes with students with disabilities either not being able to properly access the curriculum or oftentimes struggling to be successful in these environments. Social studies, in particular, is considered by many to be similar to an advanced reading class. Yet, many students are identified as needing the additional support of a special education teacher within language arts, oftentimes due to reading challenges and learning disabilities. Students' reading support needs are not being met by not offering a co-taught option in social studies. Science provides similar challenges. Science is a very hands-on class. It also has a higher-level reading component; much of the learning is done through experiments, collaboration, group work, and analysis. Many students with identified disabilities need additional support around these areas to access the curriculum. Resoundingly, all co-taught teachers at WJH felt more co-taught classes for students with disabilities should be offered. Ms. Yellow shared:

> The way that the continuum is right now, these kids are getting the support they
> need in LA and math . . . then they go [into science and social studies], and
> they're floundering. They are suffering; their self-esteem, everything that we just
> did for them in LA to build them up and to modify and make them feel good, gets

deflated every single day they go to science and social studies because it's a gen ed course, where the gen ed teachers don't have time or don't know how to modify or to build them up.

The current policy of only offering co-taught language arts and math classes needs to be changed to meet students' needs within inclusive settings in the least restrictive environments. Therefore, I recommend that the district-level policy change include co-taught classes offered in all core academic areas, to encompass language arts, math, science, and social studies.

Strategies and Actions

Creating co-taught classrooms in all core academic subjects can be a valuable strategy for supporting students with diverse needs and promoting inclusive education across the school setting. To make this organizational change, specific strategies and actions must be identified to develop the next steps and implementation. Table 2 represents the strategies and accompanying actions that need to occur to add co-taught classes to all core academic areas, not just language arts and math. The paragraphs below further explain each strategy and action in more detail and depth.

Table 2

Strategies and Actions

Strategy	Actions
Expand co-teaching offerings	Offer co-taught social studies and co-taught science in Grades 6–8.
	Communicate class changes for the following school year with staff and the why behind the change.
	Identify which general education social studies and science teachers in Grades 6–8 are interested in co-teaching.
	Survey all current social studies, science, and special education teachers for their interest level in co-teaching to identify general and special education teachers to co-teach.
Cost-value-neutral expansion of co-teaching options	Change grade-specific instructional language arts, math, and resource classes to multi-grade level classes, freeing up one special education staff member at each grade level to co-teach a social studies and science class.
Reimagine the current schedule and class offerings	Review IEP minutes and support needs to determine a specific number of co-taught classes, but ensure there is at least one in each core academic subject area.
	Ensure the schedule includes a common plan time for all co-teaching teams.
Provide necessary PD	Create PD that aligns with and encompasses the currently identified needs for more learning around the various models of co-teaching and support around establishing roles and expectations.
Evaluation	Hold co-teaching meetings, surveys, and one-on-one feedback sessions to continue to evaluate the co-teaching program, make any needed adjustments, and provide proper administrative support.

Expand Co-Teaching Offerings

Each grade level (i.e., Grade 6–8) would begin to offer a co-taught class option in each of the core academic areas: language arts, math, social studies, and science. Because

this change will affect both students and staff, it is important to have a conversation with staff to thoroughly explain the upcoming changes and the why behind them. This communication would best be accomplished in person, ideally at a staff meeting, to allow for conversation, feedback, and the answering of questions and concerns.

Once staff is aware of the upcoming changes, the next step would be to begin to identify which general education social studies and science teachers at each grade level are interested in co-teaching. Additionally, identifying which special education teachers are interested in co-teaching social studies and science will be needed. As the literature review as well as the research from WJH showed, giving staff a say in whether they co-teach and what subject, as much as possible, is always helpful. Thus, conducting a survey prior to assigning a class to a teacher's schedule is important.

Cost-Value-Neutral Expansion of Co-Teaching Options

Creating additional programming can remain a cost-value-neutral expansion by changing how the current staffing resources are allocated. WJH has grade-level specific instructional language arts, math, and resource classes with only two to three students. Not only is this not a good use of staff allocation, it does not enable the development of a rich collaborative learning environment because the class size is so small. Creating a new schedule encompassing multi-grade level classrooms would allow for the addition of co-taught classrooms without needing to hire additional teaching staff. It would also free up the paraprofessionals who are in the science and social studies classes to help students with disabilities because if a special education teacher is in that classroom, the paraprofessional would not be needed, and then that resource could be eliminated or used elsewhere in the school.

Reimagine the Current Schedule and Class Offerings

Reimagining the current schedule by creating multi-grade level instructional and resource classrooms would free up at least one special education staff member at each grade level to be able to co-teach a social studies and science class. The administration would need to review all IEP students' minutes and support needs to determine a specific number of co-taught classes and ensure at least one is offered in each core academic area across all three grade levels.

Additionally, the need for common plan time was very clear throughout the literature review and the WJH research. Teachers who are expected to co-teach must have common plan time together to plan lessons, collaborate, grade, and discuss students. Ensuring the schedule includes a common plan time is important. Causton and Theoharis (2014) stated:

> We recommend that teams have a minimum, common planning time for 40-60 minutes, one to two times per week. Creating a master schedule in which instructional teams have sacred common planning time must be a leadership priority. We know that when teams do not plan together, their ability to collaborate and co-deliver instruction is significantly impaired, resulting in wasting precious human resources and providing much less effective services to students. (p. 66)

Thus, the newly reimagined schedule should be created to provide each co-teaching team with at least one daily plan period aligned for them to co-plan each day and not at the same time as other team meetings or expected responsibilities.

Provide Necessary Professional Development

Once a schedule is created, PD needs to occur. The PD needs to align with and encompass the currently identified needs for more learning around the various models of co-teaching and support around establishing roles and expectations. All co-teachers need to participate in this PD, with specific emphasis and additional support for new co-teachers. Additionally, PD in the core content area for special education teachers co-teaching social studies or science for the first time would be beneficial.

The learning can be provided in a variety of ways, such as the administration presenting PD around co-teaching or current established co-teaching partners providing education around co-teaching for new co-teachers. The research with WJH co-teachers indicated many current co-teachers would like additional PD around the various co-teaching models and support in roles and expectation setting. This PD would need to be provided by outside support, such as leading thought leaders in co-teaching and inclusion specialists. There are also inclusion webinars, conferences, and online seminars that provide such training and learning opportunities for teachers focused on co-teaching. Causton and Theoharis (2014) shared:

> We know that the greatest challenges to inclusive schools and classrooms are the adults. One of the challenges comes from the fact that teachers often do not know- and have not had professional development- how to work effectively with other teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff. We know that professional learning around collaboration can produce significant results in creating effective instructional teams. As with all professional development, this must be ongoing and built into

the culture of the school so that as new teams are created, this professional

learning is part of the ethos of the school. (p. 66)

Evaluation

Last, ongoing evaluation and opportunities for both student and teacher feedback

throughout the year around the co-teaching program as a whole and specific co-taught

classrooms would allow for reflection and adjustments to be made if necessary. This

feedback can come in the form of surveys, one-on-one meetings, co-taught team

meetings, and administration observations. In whatever form is chosen, or a combination

of all forms, the continued reflection, celebrating successes, and course correction for

things not going well will provide a culture of continual improvement and growth. This

will also enable the administration to identify which teachers or teams need additional

administrative support and resources.

Policy Statement

The district-level policy recommendation moving forward is that co-taught

classes at all three grade levels be offered in all core academic subjects: language arts,

math, social studies, and science. This policy recommendation supports the inclusion of

students with disabilities to be able to access the curriculum in the least restrictive

environment. It is not enough to just place students with disabilities in general education

classrooms—we must make these classrooms, the curriculum, and the learning that

occurs accessible to all learners. General education teachers often struggle to do this

alone. This work often requires the expertise and support that a special education teacher

can provide. Two teachers, both bringing their expertise and knowledge, collaborating

together to make the learning accessible for all students within their classroom—this is

co-teaching. If students with disabilities require a co-taught language arts class for reading support, then it would stand to reason that they would also need a co-taught social studies class, as the reading is even more complex. Ms. Orange shared an interesting observation regarding having more co-taught classes aiding in more student growth:

> It goes back to science and social studies, social studies especially because it is so much reading. If we had co-taught social studies, teaching some reading skills, that could help them make growth all around if you're targeting those language skills through vocabulary in social studies. Or even just comprehension of informational texts.

This idea of pulling through the concepts and skills that students are working on in their co-taught language arts classes would support greater progress and more continuity between subjects. When reflecting on the current policy of not offering co-taught science and social studies and students with disabilities just being in the general education classes, she stated:

> I feel like the students aren't getting anything out of there by just being included, and they need more support than that. And having two teachers in there to be able to do that would be helpful to help them make academic and social-emotional growth, like collaborating with their peers, because it's hard.

This opinion was shared by many co-teachers and provides support for changing the current policy to one that offers co-taught classes in all core academic areas.

Considerations for Decision Makers

When considering changing the district policy to include offering co-taught classes in all core academic areas, it is important to thoughtfully analyze the economic, political, legal, moral, and ethical viewpoints before considering implementation.

Economic Analysis

When looking at this policy change through an economic lens, reimagining the current schedule and making the changes mentioned above will enable this change to be a cost-value-neutral change for the school district by changing how the current staffing resources are allocated. This type of creative reimagining of current resources is an example of what Odden (2012) referred to as strategic budgeting: "Strategic budgeting is generally the process of aligning whatever resources exist to programs and strategies that lead to improved student performance, specifically increases in student academic achievement in core subject areas" (p. 146). When looking at the core subject areas at WJH, this would apply to language arts, math, science, and social studies.

Currently, WJH has grade-level specific instructional language arts, math, and resource classes with only two to three students. Not only is this not a good use of staff allocation, it does not enable a rich collaborative learning environment because the class size is so small. Creating a new schedule encompassing multi-grade level classrooms would allow for the addition of co-taught classrooms without needing to hire additional teaching staff. Additionally, as previously mentioned, it would allow paraprofessionals who are currently in science and social studies classes to be used as a resource elsewhere or the position to be eliminated, thus providing a cost savings to the district.

Political Analysis

Adding co-taught classes in science and social studies, thus making co-taught classes available in all core academic subjects, will enable students with disabilities to be taught in the least restrictive environment. This move to provide specialized support from a special education teacher and a general education teacher within a general education classroom while learning side by side with same-age peers speaks to the heart of inclusion. However, the concept of inclusion extends well beyond just the physical placement in a classroom with students without disabilities (Kirby, 2016). It also encompasses making the environment accessible and providing the same learning opportunities and opportunities to access the curriculum as their non-disabled peers. Kirby (2016) stated, "A truly inclusive education would not only include students with disabilities but would also offer those students the same opportunities as their peers" (p. 184).

Historically, parents at WJH have been supportive of co-taught classrooms. Throughout my time as an administrator in the district, I have only been questioned a few times regarding the rigor of the classroom. By and large, by the time students arrive at junior high, their parents are very familiar with co-taught classrooms, as they exist within the lower elementary and middle school grades as well. However, some kind of political pushback could occur when adding additional co-taught classrooms, so it is something that should be considered.

Political decisions made within a school district, along with the district's vision, mission, and philosophical view of inclusion, will affect the support and resources offered to students. They will inform the way in which inclusion is defined and

implemented within a school district and within each of its schools. However, even if a district puts forth positive and inclusive practices, the teachers within each classroom must carry out the inclusive vision, and this can be challenging if their views on inclusion are not in alignment with the district's views. In one study, de Boer et al. (2011) reviewed research on classroom teachers' various views of inclusion and found many teachers had a negative or undecided view of inclusion. This research is more than a decade old, but as an administrator within a school building, I encounter various views of inclusion when speaking with teachers. Throughout my career prior to administration, teachers were colleagues and spoke more openly with me regarding their hesitation about including all students within their educational settings, especially if the student's disability area involved an emotional disability that resulted in behaviors that affected the learning environment.

As an educational leader, the ability to create an open dialogue around inclusion while also continuing to support the district's vision of inclusion requires political finesse. Horsford et al. (2019) wrote, "To be sure, a transformative and open leadership style can lead to more democratic and empowering schools but requires great political skill and a strong commitment to democracy and advocacy for children and education" (p. 103). This quote defines for me the type of leadership style I strive to embody. It encourages using political listening skills and creating space for unpopular or discerning opinions while also moving the district's agenda and advocacy for children forward. It speaks to creating democratic spaces where teachers can feel comfortable bringing their problems and truthful opinions around inclusion to the forefront. A transformative leader who embodies political finesse can then problem solve, educate, and support teachers so

hopefully they can begin to change any opposition to inclusion. Ultimately, the goal would be that when the teachers return to the classroom, they can continue to make a more positive inclusive experience for their students.

Legal Analysis

Solis et al. (2012) shared,

Over the past 20 years, a convergence of legislative pressures has challenged educators to find efficient ways to provide high-quality instruction for students with disabilities. In 1994, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) made explicit the expectation that students with disabilities would receive their education (to the maximum extent possible) with nondisabled peers, in the general education classroom, and with appropriate supplemental aids and services, otherwise known as the least restrictive environment mandate. Under this mandate, school personnel must determine what supports are necessary to ensure that students are educated in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible. (p. 498)

This legislature ensures students with disabilities are educated with their same-age peers within the least restrictive environment, with their needed support and services. Through this legal lens, offering co-taught classes in all core subject areas will ensure the district complies with legal mandates and follows the IDEA. This recommended policy change goes beyond just providing students access to the general education classroom environment; it specifically ensures they have access to the specialized supports that only a special education teacher can provide, and the extra insurance that their supplemental aids, accommodations, and services will be implemented.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

Horsford et al. (2019) stated:

The growing problem of racial and social inequalities in the U.S. has taken center

stage in the policy arena, providing an important opportunity for researchers,

policymakers, and advocates to remind the public about the important roles that

public institutions play. (p. 1)

Public schools are part of these public institutions. They are part of every community and

provide every student with the right to attend school and to a free public education. The

inclusion of students with disabilities is not only a legal requirement in our country but

also carries significant moral and ethical implications. When considering equal

opportunities and human rights, the moral perspective is that every individual has the

right to an equal opportunity and equal access to education, regardless of their abilities.

The ethical perspective is that ethical principles, such as providing the equal

opportunities and rights that inclusion ensures, promote fairness and justice. Inclusion

aligns with the ethical principles of treating all individuals with dignity and respect and

promoting a society that values diversity and inclusion.

From a social justice and equity lens, morally, inclusion fosters a more just and

equitable society by providing all students with equal chances to succeed. It challenges

discrimination and promotes a sense of belonging for everyone. Ethical considerations

often involve addressing various systematic inequalities. Inclusion addresses these issues

by promoting fairness and challenging discriminatory practices. Moore (2016) stated:

The educational shift toward inclusion has attempted to counter this attack by

embracing diversity and creating classrooms that are not just geared toward the

status quo. *This* is what we all should be fighting for- a shift in education to embrace all, not just some. (p. 44)

From a diversity lens, it can be argued that, morally, inclusion enriches the learning environment by exposing all students to diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and abilities. It also contributes to the development of empathy, compassion, and understanding. From an ethical perspective, an inclusive environment provides diversity that can be seen as a strength that can benefit the entire classroom community and provide opportunities for students to see the world from a more diverse, global perspective and practice empathy and compassion for students who are different. Obiakor et al. (2012) stated:

> We understand that the practicality of full inclusion is debatable; however, we also understand that inclusion buttresses social justice, human valuing, and teamwork . . . our premise is that educating students with disabilities within the general education classroom signifies that these students are not only members within the classroom and school community but also are valued members within that community. (p. 487)

The moral and ethical reasons for the inclusion of students with disabilities are rooted in principles of equality, justice, diversity, empathy, and compassion. Creating inclusive educational environments, such as co-taught classrooms, not only benefits students with disabilities, it contributes to developing a more equitable and compassionate society where everyone belongs and is included.

Conclusion

I began my research hoping to gain a better understanding of how to make co-teaching at WJH a more effective model to service students with disabilities within inclusive settings. With co-teaching being our largest service delivery model for 71% of students in special education, I wanted to ensure our program was benefitting the students we serve as well as the teachers. I set out to interview and gain insight into our program with the intention of comparing the results to the research and literature on co-teaching to look for opportunities to improve our co-teaching program. Additionally, I hoped to be able to provide a solid foundation from which to advocate for co-taught classes in all core academic subjects at WJH, which would entail adding co-taught classes to social studies and science at all three grade levels.

When researching the literature on co-teaching, many important factors identified and common struggles emerged with which I could identify. It was reassuring to learn that many of the known challenges with co-teaching existed in other schools, other school districts, and other states. Our challenges are not so unique, and many researchers wrote of similar issues with co-teaching relationships, lack of efficacy outcome data, and the need for established roles and expectations, along with the importance of common plan time and PD.

When interviewing the teachers, I was humbled by their passion for their students, respect for colleagues' opinions and perspectives, and openness and candor with me. They all shared characteristics of co-teaching that they liked, areas in which they struggled, and thoughts for improvement.

Through the process of examining the research and interviewing the co-teachers at WJH, I was able to formulate proposed changes to improve co-teaching at WJH. My hope is that in implementing these changes, student outcomes will improve, teachers will experience greater satisfaction with co-teaching, and all students will benefit from the inclusive environments and supports that are available.

The concept of what is good for one student is good for all students was a clear takeaway from my research. This philosophy provides an inclusive and level playing ground where using supports when learning material can be normalized. The idea that each student in a classroom will use what they need to be successful and that all supports are made available to all students will help with lowering the stigma that can come by singling out students with individual supports while other students are not allowed to use the same supports and resources. It will eliminate the divide between students and aid in creating a more inclusive classroom community experience for everyone.

Another clear takeaway from my research that informed my district-level policy recommendation was that we need to offer co-taught classes in all core academic subjects. At WJH, the teachers were in agreement that we should increase our co-taught offerings to include science and social studies. This would enable our students with disabilities to be able to access the curriculum within the general education setting and would align with our district's philosophy of supporting inclusion.

Moore (2016) argued, "why is inclusion important? It is important because we need diversity. We need each other. We need communities of varying ability, culture, knowledge and language" (p. 52). The world is a diverse place. The more students can

interact and learn from their peers who are different from them, the more they will grow and become better, more resilient, more kind, more compassionate global citizens.

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Appendix A

Initial Email to Potential Participants for Recruitment

Dear [Participant Name],

As you may already know, I am a doctoral student at National Louis University in Lisle. I am working on my dissertation, "Utilizing Co-teaching as a Model to Service Students With Disabilities Within Inclusive General Education Classrooms." This study aims to examine, from a co-teacher's perspective, how effective our co-teaching model is and what needs to improve. After gathering this data through interviews with current co-teachers, I will compare the teacher's insights at our school to the current literature on best practices regarding co-teaching. My goal is that this will yield awareness around areas we can improve to make co-teaching more effective. Secondly, I hope to use this information to advocate for policy change in our course offerings and to extend co-taught class offerings in social studies and science.

My email is to ask for your voluntary participation in my research. Your participation in a semi-structured interview would take no longer than one hour. I would be asking you questions about your experience, thoughts, perspective, and opinions around co-teaching and co-teaching specifically at our school. The research would begin sometime in October. The interview would be voice recorded, and as a participant, you could have final approval on the interview transcripts content by request.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and could be discontinued at any time without any bias or penalty. Furthermore, if you are in the evaluation cycle, I will not be the Administrator performing your evaluation this school year.

Your identity would only be known to me as the interviewer throughout the study. I will use pseudonyms in my data collection and dissertation writing to ensure anonymity. All data collected will be in a password-protected computer, and any written notes will be kept in a locked location, only accessible by me.

I truly value your thoughts on co-teaching and the insight you can provide. Thank you for considering participating. Please let me know if you have any additional questions I can answer. If you could reply to this email and let me know if you would be willing to participate, I would appreciate it. If you choose to participate, I will follow up with a consent form, and we can schedule a time convenient for you to interview.

Thank you for your consideration and support!

Michelle Robinson
XXX-XX-XXXX

Appendix B

Email to Potential Participants with Informed Consent

Dear [Participant Name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research on co-teaching. I appreciate and value your time and perspectives greatly! Please see attached Informed Consent: Interview form below. This form will provide all of the information and require a signature. Please print the attachment, sign it, and place it in my mailbox in the folder titled "Study Signatures." Once I receive your signed consent, I will sign and make a copy and place it in your mailbox. Then, I will reach out over email to schedule our interview.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions, comments, or concerns. I look forward to meeting with you!

Warm regards,
Michelle

Appendix C

Informed Consent for Interview

My name is Michelle Robinson, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in my research, "Utilizing Co-teaching as a Model to Service Students With Disabilities Within Inclusive General Education Classrooms" study. The study will commence on October 1, 2022, and conclude by December 1, 2022.

This form describes your involvement and rights as a participant and outlines the purpose and specifics of the study.

This study aims to examine, from a co-teacher's perspective, how effective our co-teaching model is and what needs to improve. After gathering this data through interviews, I will compare the teacher's insights to the current literature on best practices regarding co-teaching. My goal is that this will yield awareness around areas we can improve to make co-teaching more effective.

Through a semi-structured interview, your participation in this study will take no longer than 1 hour. The interview will be voice-recorded, and participants may view and have final approval on the content of the interview transcripts upon request

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued without penalty or bias. Your identity will only be known to me as the interviewer throughout this study. I will use pseudonyms in all data collection and dissertation writing to ensure your anonymity. The research results may be published and used to inform policy in the future. All data collected will be in a password-protected computer, and any written notes will be kept in a locked location, only accessible by me.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits no greater than that encountered in daily life. Potential risks include loss of time during the interview process and the potential stress of discussing challenges to co-teaching. Please understand the purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the co-teaching model at our school and not to evaluate your role in any way. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to the practice of co-teaching at our school, and in other school districts.

Your experience as a co-teacher makes you an excellent fit for this study to help inform co-teaching practices at our school moving forward. You can receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications upon request.

If you have any questions, wish to request results from the study, or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Michelle Robinson, XXXXXXXXX@XXXX.org, XXX-XX-XXXX. If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that the researcher has not addressed, you may contact the dissertation chair, Dr. Elizabeth Minor, eminor1@nl.edu; the co-chairs of NLU's

Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth, Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu, phone: (312) 261-3526; or Dr. Carla L. Sparks, CSparks3@@nl.edu, (813) 928-6889. Co-chairs are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I appreciate and value your time and look forward to learning from you.

By signing below, you consent to participate in research by Michelle Robinson, a doctoral student at National Louis University, Lisle.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I agree to participate in the study "Utilizing Co-teaching as a Model to Service Students With Disabilities Within Inclusive General Education Classrooms." My participation will consist of one semi-structured interview that will take no longer than one hour.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature   Date

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. I have about 20 questions to ask you and may include some follow-up questions for further clarification or understanding. This will take no more than one hour. Thank you for answering the questions honestly. As a friendly reminder, your participation in my research will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used throughout the data collection and dissertation writing process. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What is your current role at this school? Are you a general education teacher or a special education teacher?
2. How many years have you been teaching?
3. Within your years of teaching, how many years of experience do you have as a co-taught teacher at the junior high level? Do you have experience co-teaching at a different level?
4. How long have you been partnered with your current co-teacher?
5. Could you describe what co-teaching looks like for you and our partner?
6. What do you feel benefits students with disabilities from being in a co-taught class?
7. Do you believe your students with disabilities make more academic gains in a co-taught class versus a non-co-taught class? Why or Why not?
8. What do you like about co-teaching at your school?
9. What do you dislike about co-teaching at your school?
10. What do you think are the most important factors in a co-teaching partnership?
11. What do you think are the challenges to co-teaching at your school?
12. What changes do you think need to be made to the current co-teaching model at your school for students to be able to make more growth?
13. What changes do you think need to be made to the current co-teaching model at your school to make it more enjoyable for teachers?

14. Have you received any professional development around co-teaching? If so, what professional development was the most impactful? If not, how did you learn how to co-teach?

15. What professional development do you think you still need?

16. Do you believe we need to offer co-taught classes in other core content subjects, such as social studies and science? Why/why not?

17. Is there anything else you would like to share?