

Enhancing traditional student teaching: Advancing co-teaching models in Pennsylvania elementary schools

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Abstract

Teacher preparation programs aim to improve student teachers' experiences to produce high-quality candidates. A qualitative case study explored how university supervisors and cooperating teachers perceive co-teaching during student teaching, revealing that while organic co-teaching occurs often, planned co-teaching is rare. Key factors for success include collaboration, modeling, and responsiveness to student needs, while barriers include personality conflicts and unequal access to co-teaching opportunities. Through collaboration, co-teaching offers many advantages that often outweigh the challenges of implementing this non-traditional sixteen-week model in PreK-4 settings.

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Introduction

Co-teaching is an instructional model where two or more educators collaboratively plan, instruct, and assess a group of students within the same classroom. In the context of teacher preparation, co-teaching typically involves a cooperating teacher (an experienced classroom teacher) and a student teacher (a pre-service teacher) working together throughout the student teaching experience. Rather than the traditional “sink or swim” approach—where the student teacher gradually takes over the classroom—co-teaching emphasizes shared responsibility for planning, instruction, and assessment from the start. This model allows the student teacher to gain hands-on experience while receiving real-time feedback and modeling from the cooperating teacher.

Literature Review

Co-teaching was established in the mid-1980s as a response to federal mandates for special education students (Friend et al., 2015; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Pugach et al., 2011). In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment (Bennet & Fisch, 2013; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Ricci & Fingon, 2017), prompting a shift from segregated special education pull-out classrooms to increased collaboration between general and special education teachers within general education settings, ultimately leading to the development of co-teaching (Hackett et al., 2021). In the 1980s and 1990s, schools across the U.S. adopted this model to meet legal requirements for access, inclusion, and rigor (Bennet & Fisch, 2013; Brinkmann & Twiford, 2012; Friend & Cook, 2013; Pugach et al., 2011).

In 2010, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) introduced guidelines requiring universities to integrate significant hours of field clinical opportunities into pedagogy coursework (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017; Strieker et al., 2019). As a result, teacher preparation programs began offering hands-on classroom experiences to better prepare future educators before their student teaching. During this reform period, co-teaching strategies were implemented between student teachers and cooperating teachers. These strategies allowed student teachers to learn alongside

experienced educators and apply their coursework in real classroom settings.

This study is significant because, while previous research (Arnt & Lyles, 2010; Kervinen et al., 2002) has explored co-teaching, it has mainly focused on the perceptions of student teachers and cooperating teachers. Limited research has compared the perspectives of university supervisors and cooperating teachers regarding the co-teaching model. The theoretical basis for this study is Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning Theory. According to Lave and Wenger, students learn best by engaging in collaborative, real-world activities. In education, student teaching serves as an apprenticeship, where student teachers apply university-acquired knowledge in real classrooms while gaining insights from experienced educators. Situated Learning Theory suggests that students benefit from active participation within a community of practitioners. This study applies the theory to explore how educational professionals—cooperating teachers and university supervisors—perceive co-teaching during student teaching as a way to enhance the preparation of future educators by making learning more individualized and effective.

Methodology

This qualitative case study examined co-teaching during student teaching, focusing on how the model functions within teacher preparation programs. Given co-teaching’s collaborative nature, qualitative methods enabled exploration of diverse perspectives and authentic classroom experiences (Tracy, 2020). The study aimed to compare university faculty and cooperating teachers’ perceptions of co-teaching, identify factors that support or hinder its effectiveness, and understand why student teachers experience varying access to co-teaching during placements.

Conducted at a mid-sized public university in Pennsylvania with an established long-standing teacher education program, the study leveraged a strong partnership with local school districts to explore co-teaching within a cohesive educational community (Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling identified two participant groups: seven tenured or tenure-track faculty with over three years of student teaching supervision, and six experienced elementary educators who had previously su-

pervised student teachers. Participants were diverse in background and held at least a bachelor's or terminal degree.

Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews with cooperating teachers, conducted via Zoom to maximize convenience and participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method provided rich, contextual insight into daily classroom practices and educator perspectives (Tracy, 2020).

Findings/Recommendations

Through this investigation, there were four key findings that are illuminated throughout the data from the cooperating teachers and university supervisors. First, planned co-teaching during student teaching is not a prevalent practice used between the university partnered cooperating teachers and student teachers, but rather organic and unplanned co-teaching does happen frequently. Second, three effective factors that would enhance student teaching by using the co-teaching model include: collaboration, modeling, and meeting students' needs. Third, power struggle and the attitude/personality of the cooperating teacher and student teacher are the major barriers of an effective co-teaching model of student teaching. Finally, student teachers at the university are gaining differentiated access to co-teaching within their semester placements due to placement availability and the time to participate in this model efficiently.

Co-Teaching in Practice: Organic Collaboration vs. Planned Approaches in Student Teaching

Student teaching during the final semester of a teacher preparation program is a critical phase in developing future educators through real-world classroom experiences (Bastian et al., 2022; Olmstead et al., 2020; Rabin, 2020; Strieker et al., 2016). While much of the research has focused on the student teacher's relationship with their cooperating teacher, there is limited exploration of the collaborative dynamic between cooperating teachers and university supervisors (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2017; Simons et al., 2020; Stobaugh & Everson, 2019). Despite some studies addressing co-teaching, significant gaps remain in understanding its frequency, planning, and effectiveness in teacher preparation programs (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; Stobaugh & Gichuru, 2016; Thousand et al., 2007). In

this study, both cooperating teachers and university supervisors acknowledged that planned co-teaching is rarely implemented or emphasized.

Key elements of co-teaching—co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing—are linked to improved student outcomes (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015; Rabin, 2020). However, participants reported that co-teaching, when it occurs, tends to be unplanned and incidental, emerging from general mentoring practices rather than intentional collaboration. Strategies such as “one teach, one observe” or “one teach, one assist” were most commonly used (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2017; Simons et al., 2020; Stobaugh & Everson, 2019), though many participants felt these did not reflect true co-teaching but rather aligned with the traditional gradual release model (Rabin, 2020).

The study further revealed a disconnect between cooperating teachers and university supervisors. Cooperating teachers often looked to university supervisors for direction but felt co-teaching was not clearly promoted or supported by the university. Conversely, university faculty viewed the use of co-teaching as the cooperating teacher's decision. This misalignment points to a need for clearer expectations, shared understanding, and collaborative planning between these two key stakeholders.

To strengthen co-teaching in student teaching placements, improved communication and collaboration between university supervisors and cooperating teachers is essential. Clear messaging at the start of the semester, along with targeted professional development for all parties—including faculty, cooperating teachers, and student teachers—can help establish a consistent co-teaching framework (Olmstead et al., 2020). Through better alignment and shared responsibility, universities can more effectively embed co-teaching practices into the student teaching experience.

Building Stronger Classrooms: The Benefits of Co-Teaching in Student Teacher Development

Research highlights the significant benefits of co-teaching during student teaching, particularly when supported through strong collaboration between cooperating teachers and university supervisors (Bacharach et al., 2010; Rabin, 2020; Wassell & LaVan, 2009). Semi-structured interviews with both groups revealed three key

themes: collaboration, modeling, and addressing students' needs.

Cooperating teachers and university supervisors agreed that intentional co-teaching fosters more meaningful partnerships in student teaching. By co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing, both parties help ensure the student teacher is not working in isolation but is instead part of a shared instructional team (Soslau et al., 2019; Weinberg et al., 2020). This collaborative approach allows supervisors and cooperating teachers to offer consistent, aligned guidance to student teachers and reinforce key practices through unified messaging and feedback.

Modeling effective classroom practices was identified as another strength of co-teaching. Cooperating teachers play a central role in modeling real-time instructional strategies, classroom management, and decision-making, while university supervisors provide critical reflection and connect theory to practice (Alsudairy, 2024; Damiani & Drelick, 2024). This dual mentorship provides student teachers with a well-rounded and supportive learning environment (Bacharach et al., 2010; Weinberg et al., 2020).

A third key benefit noted by both groups was co-teaching's ability to better address student needs. The presence of two instructional leaders in the classroom—supported by the planning and feedback of university supervisors—allows for more individualized instruction and higher levels of student engagement (Bacharach et al., 2010; Olmstead et al., 2020). However, both cooperating teachers and supervisors acknowledged that effective co-teaching requires strong relationships built on trust, open communication, and shared responsibility. When these elements are missing, anxiety about evaluations or unclear roles can hinder collaboration and ultimately reduce the impact of co-teaching (Bacharach et al., 2010; Rabin, 2020).

To support these partnerships, teacher preparation programs should promote collaborative practices across both university coursework and field placements (Alsudairy, 2024). University faculty can model co-teaching strategies within methods courses, creating consistency between what is taught on campus and what is expected in the field (Damiani & Drelick, 2024; Ginsberg et al., 2021; Yoo et al., 2019;). By en-

couraging joint training and reflective opportunities for both cooperating teachers and supervisors, programs can strengthen co-teaching partnerships and create a more cohesive support system for student teachers.

Ultimately, when cooperating teachers and university supervisors are aligned in purpose and practice, co-teaching becomes a powerful tool for preparing future educators—one that promotes collaboration, reflective practice, and a shared commitment to student learning.

Barriers to Co-Teaching: Overcoming Power Struggles and Personality Differences

This study reveals several barriers to effective co-teaching, with particular attention to the role of cooperating teachers and their interaction with university supervisors. A significant barrier identified was the power dynamic within the student teaching triad, where some cooperating teachers maintained dominant control over the classroom and were hesitant to share instructional responsibilities. University supervisors noted that without their active involvement and clear communication, these patterns often went unchallenged, limiting the collaborative nature of co-teaching (Kervinen et al., 2022). When supervisors are not engaged in guiding expectations early on, co-teaching risks being reduced to a traditional “assistive” model rather than a fully collaborative partnership.

Another challenge stems from the attitudes and readiness of cooperating teachers to embrace co-teaching. University supervisors observed that prior experience with the traditional gradual release model influenced many cooperating teachers' reluctance to adopt co-teaching practices (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020). Personality clashes and mismatched teaching philosophies between cooperating teachers and student teachers further complicated collaboration, highlighting the need for proactive supervisory support in addressing compatibility and fostering rapport (Keely et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2009).

Although time and training were initially expected to be the primary obstacles, both cooperating teachers and university supervisors emphasized that the success of co-teaching largely hinges on the quality of professional relationships. Supervisors play a crucial role in setting expectations, providing feedback, and me-

diating challenges within the partnership. When the supervisor–cooperating teacher relationship is strong, it enhances alignment in mentoring approaches and reinforces a consistent vision for co-teaching.

To improve co-teaching outcomes, teacher preparation programs should provide structured opportunities for cooperating teachers and university supervisors to collaborate before and during placements. Tools such as interest surveys, planning checklists, and pre-placement discussions can help align expectations and identify potential strengths or concerns in the co-teaching partnership. By emphasizing mutual trust, shared decision-making, and consistent communication between supervisors and cooperating teachers, programs can better support student teachers and maximize the impact of the co-teaching model (Ackerman & McKenzie, 2023).

Bridging the Gap: Overcoming Placement and Time Barriers to Co-Teaching

Faculty members and cooperating teachers identified two key factors affecting student teachers' access to co-teaching placements: placement availability and time. Teacher preparation programs must build strong partnerships with local schools to ensure student teachers receive high-quality placements (Bacharach et al., 2010; Ginsberg et al., 2021). However, finding such placements is increasingly challenging due to the additional responsibilities educators face (Bacharach et al., 2010). Many cooperating teachers see co-teaching as a luxury, rather than a necessity, and the university often faces difficulty mandating its implementation. It is up to the student teacher to adapt to varying expectations at different school placements, leading to inconsistency in their experience.

Time is another major barrier to effective co-teaching, as identified by both respondents and research (Baeten & Simon, 2016; Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015). Coordinating time for co-planning lessons and resources proves difficult, as fluctuating schedules and lack of common planning periods hinder collaborative preparation (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015). In some cases, the traditional gradual release model is favored, as it allows student teachers to work independently, without requiring concurrent planning time with the cooperating teacher.

The study found that while more messaging about co-teaching could be helpful, the primary barriers lie within each district's resources and available time. Many educators prefer giving the student teacher responsibility and offering feedback, instead of dedicating time outside of school to co-plan effectively. Respondents emphasized the need for additional professional development on co-teaching. Workshops and specific guidelines could help promote better co-teaching experiences (Bacharach et al., 2010). Universities could enhance co-teaching opportunities by fostering stronger partnerships with districts and providing professional development for cooperating teachers.

Conclusion

This investigation highlights that positive relationships built on trust and expectations form between faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers during student teaching. Although co-teaching is not commonly planned, it occurs organically when the student teacher needs additional support. Planned co-teaching could enhance the student teaching experience by fostering collaboration, modeling, and addressing students' needs. However, barriers such as power struggles and personality differences between the cooperating teacher and student teacher hinder effective co-teaching. Differentiated access to co-teaching also occurs due to variations in placement availability and time constraints. As a result, co-teaching is not implemented consistently across placements. To improve student teaching, universities and school districts can collaborate and implement research-based practices like co-teaching. As Ian Somerhalder said, "Collaboration – the ultimate intertwining of skills, passions, and knowledge – is what concocts the most shatterproof forms of changemaking."

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