CASE BY CASE: AN EXPLORATION OF UPPER ELEMENTARY CO-TEACHING EXPERIENCES IN GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING SPACES

A doctoral thesis presented

by

Glen S. McKay

to

College of Professional Studies-Graduate School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education (Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership)

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March, 2018

Committee Members:
M. Billye Sankofa Waters, Ph.D.
Kristal Moore Clemons, Ph.D.
Jaclyn Mansfield, Psy. D.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a deeper understanding of experiences of teachers working within a co-teaching model with upper aged elementary special education student populations. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) provided the theoretical lens that revealed the key aspects associated with experiences of general and special education teachers working within a co-teaching model. A qualitative study approach was used to ascertain the experiences of general and special education teachers working within a co-teaching model with upper aged elementary students (grades 3 through 5) in a public education setting in the northern suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. This research addressed a literature gap not previously scrutinized regarding the implementation of this change in practice from a traditional pull out model for students with special education needs. An analysis of teacher interviews, identified four major themes that impact the implementation of co-teaching and the outcomes of such a practice: School culture with a focus on collaboration, a desire for professional growth, a genuine respect for least restrictive environment expectations set forth in IDEA, success or outcomes. The results of this case study indicate that the overall co-teaching experience is professionally rewarding and has a positive impact academically as well as socially for special education student populations. The findings from this study are presented to inform educators, administrators, and parents of the practices of successful implementation as well as potential positive outcomes for students and professionals working and learning in co-teaching environments.

Keywords: Co-teaching, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Regular Education Classroom, Inclusion, Special Education Teacher, Student with Disabilities
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters. Your support, persistence, and advice provided me with the support that I needed to bring this process to fruition. I would also like to thank Dr. Kristal Moore Clemons for her feedback and insight. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Jaclyn S. Mansfield for giving your time and support as my third committee member. I appreciate you all so much.

I am fortunate to have so many amazing people in my life and I would like to express my gratitude to all of you; my family, my friends and my colleagues. I appreciate your unwavering support and encouragement. Without each of you, I would have never been able to accomplish this task.

Next, I would like to thank my wife Danielle for her support. I could not have begun, continued, and completed this project without the support, guidance, and tremendous patience of my closest friend, the love of my life. Additionally, I would like to thank my three sons, Maxwell, Mitchell, and Myles who have watched me model life-long learning! Without your individual support, I would have never accomplished this goal. Let’s be honest, you provided comic relief throughout this journey and it was enjoyed and much appreciated.

Mr. Jon Bernard, you have been my mentor and guide through my journey in the world of education. From freshman high school English class to now, personally and professionally, for the past 19 years, your encouragement and support throughout my career has not gone unrecognized. I could not have done this without you.
Finally, I would like to thank the participants in this research and the other members of my school community. This work would not have been possible without your willingness to support and participate in this research. To my research participants, I enjoyed our time together debriefing your experiences and gaining the insights necessary to complete this research from each of you. Lastly, I will be forever grateful to the members of my school community. The families, the students and the staff, thank you for always challenging me to be the best leader that I can be.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .........................................................................................................................2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................................3

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................................4

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................7
  Problem Statement ..........................................................................................................9
  Purpose of the Study .......................................................................................................10
  Justification ....................................................................................................................10
  Significance and Context ...............................................................................................12
  Positionality ....................................................................................................................16
  Research Question ........................................................................................................18
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................19
  Synthesis of Theoretical Framework ..........................................................................20
  Definitions of Terms .......................................................................................................21
  Methods ..........................................................................................................................22
  Relating The Discussion To Audiences .......................................................................23
  Organization of the Thesis ............................................................................................23

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................................................................................25
  Historical and Legal Context .......................................................................................25
  Equal Access .................................................................................................................27
  The Evolution of the Inclusive Classroom ....................................................................30
  Structures and Strategies .............................................................................................33
  School Leadership .........................................................................................................33
  Collaborative Learning .................................................................................................35
  Professional Development .............................................................................................36
  The Effects of Co-Teaching ..........................................................................................37

III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN .................................................................40
  Research Methodology ................................................................................................40
  Research Design ..........................................................................................................41
  Research Tradition .......................................................................................................41
  Reflexity Journal and Field Notes ..............................................................................42
  Participation ...................................................................................................................43
  Recruitment ...................................................................................................................44
  Data Collection .............................................................................................................45
  Data Coding and Analysis ...........................................................................................45
  Limitations .....................................................................................................................46
  Reciprocity .....................................................................................................................47
  Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification ....................................................................47
  Protection of Human Subjects .......................................................................................48
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Educating special education students and the setting in which their academic as well as social programming occurs has been an area focus for educational research over the past several years. The increased expectations levied on teachers today are vast and sometimes seemingly insurmountable. Not only are teachers required to adhere to the expectations of education standards and grade level standards in terms of academic achievement, but also they are often expected to take on additional roles of educator, special education teacher, parent, guidance counselor, mentor, friend and disciplinarian. One of the areas of increased responsibility for teachers is meeting the needs of all learners. An important area of emphasis has been the impact of classroom level programmatic design for students with disabilities. Obtaining more information on classroom placement is crucial in determining whether or not the design of an inclusive co-teaching model should be established for students with disabilities in the upper elementary grade levels.

This qualitative case study examined the experiences of teachers implementing a co-teaching model. Specifically, focusing on teachers’ experiences regarding co-teaching practices with upper elementary aged special education student populations. This study reports on the experiences of both general education teachers and special education teachers involved in the implementation of co-teaching and the education of special education students. This chapter also provides a brief introduction to the legislative aspects of the education of students with disabilities, an introduction to co-teaching, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, positionality, research questions, theoretical framework, and definition of terms.
The passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later renamed the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandated that schools and districts ensure that all available education services were comparable between students with disabilities and general education students including classrooms, materials, and other academic programs. As a direct result, students with disabilities and general education students were placed in the same setting “to the maximum extent appropriate.” This practice is reported through the literature: inclusion, inclusionary practices, least restrictive environment (LRE) and lastly, mainstreaming. The Act requires that students with disabilities participate with general education students in both academic and nonacademic activities. Under this model, schools are directed to determine the supports necessary to ensure that students with disabilities are educated in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). Co-teaching has been utilized as a vehicle through which this can be achieved. Through the implementation of co-teaching, expectations outlined by legislative mandates can be fulfilled while students with disabilities receive specially designed instruction as well as other supports they are entitled to based on their identifiable handicapping condition.

Co-teaching has been employed as a means to meet the diverse learning needs of special education student populations. Specifically, students receive specialized instruction as a result of their eligibility from Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In 1994, the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion reported that co-teaching was the most frequently employed special education service delivery model for inclusive classrooms. The National Center for Restructuring and Inclusion (Lipsky, 1995), asserted co-teaching is the most common service delivery model for teaching
students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Co-teaching is an instructional arrangement between two certified professionals (regular education and special education) to ensure that all students have access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) within the least restrictive environment (LRE) in compliance with IDEA and other legislative mandates.

**Problem Statement**

Special education teams design special education service delivery through the individualized education planning team meeting. The teams’ determinations should provide a variety of instructional models to ensure the success of students with disabilities. In some schools throughout the United States, students are assigned to a single teacher and single environment for the duration of the school day; however, it has become necessary for schools to offer comprehensive training to students with special needs to provide a positive transition from the education system into the community (Elliott & Riddle, 1992). The implementation of co-teaching practices affords students with disabilities access to the general education environment with the support of special education teachers.

A review of the literature indicates that inclusive education practices can provide positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Furthermore, there is research to suggest that special education students are indeed being served in general education classroom settings through co-teaching, but often these placements do not utilize a true co-teaching model where both the general education teacher and the special education teacher share responsibility for the education of the students under their guidance. A successful co-teaching model is dependent upon shared responsibilities, abilities, respect, and goals.
between the general education teacher and the special education teacher (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2009). Research indicates that many co-teaching studies purport the general education teachers taking lead roles and the special education teachers taking more subordinate roles (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Lastly, it has been suggested that further qualitative studies should be conducted examining authentic co-teaching models to determine the reasons for success (Bouck, 2007; Scruggs et al., 2007).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to explore teachers’ experiences with co-teaching in the general education classroom setting with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades (Grades 3 through 5).

**Justification**

Over its recent history, education and the legal rulings within the domain of education have been characterized by a push toward the inclusion of and educationally diverse student population within the general education setting. As a result both general education and special education have become more closely aligned. Administrative decision making patterns as well as funding have also evolved to support the trend toward educational integration. Approximately 30 years ago, according to Stainback & Stainback (1984), the philosophical as well as pragmatic merger between general and special education was suggested as the most effective way for the educational system to respond to diverse student needs. This merger developed between general and special education would create a shared responsibility for educational programming for all students, regardless of specific individual student characteristics. This idea is carried forward through the literature today. Cook and Friend (1995) defined co-teaching as: “Two or
more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single space” (p. 2).

This study examined the experiences of both general education as well as special education teachers that have participated in a co-teaching service delivery model. Qualitative research aims at gaining a deep understanding of a specific organization or event, rather than a surface description of a large sample of a population. It aims to provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order, and broad patterns found among a group of participants. Qualitative research generates data about human groups in social settings. This research study utilized qualitative interviews as a means to ascertain teachers’ experiences with implementing a co-teaching model with upper aged elementary student populations. As school leaders and teachers work to improve service delivery to special education student populations, the need to be well informed relative to the perceived benefits of co-teaching (inclusionary) practices as opposed to pullout service delivery is warranted. Meeting the needs of diverse learners with special education needs demands an effective, lawful, and individualized response. The history of how the needs of these young people were met captures a wide spectrum of approaches from exclusion and separateness to support and inclusiveness (Johnson, 2013).

It is important to note that not all researchers are reporting on the effectiveness of co-teaching. In fact, some practitioners and researchers are skeptical about the claims for effectiveness of co-teaching methods. Zigmond (2004), reporting on preliminary results of co-teaching in inclusive science classrooms at six high schools, found little difference in the amount of time students spent working on task, interacting in small groups, or
interacting with the teachers. Rarely have researchers or practitioners analyzed the impact of co-teaching on other variables. This case study research sought to fill that gap in the research.

**Significance and Context**

As a public school entity, it is important to note that from their creation, public schools have reflected the needs and values of society. In the United States, the earliest common schools grew out of the belief in the following democratic principles: (a) each child was equally important to society; (b) the education of each child benefited everyone; (c) all citizens should pay to support education; and (c) all should receive the benefits of education (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). The members of this organization engage in data-driven decision-making and analyze the performance data of the student population on a frequent basis. Student achievement data is a frequent topic when teachers meet to discuss teaching and learning in collaboration meetings and in faculty meetings. In these meetings, teachers frequently engage in dialogue on how to improve the school’s results on state mandated assessment, The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System or MCAS. MCAS is the Commonwealth's of Massachusetts statewide standards-based assessment program developed in 1993 in response to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of the same year. State and federal law mandates that all students who are enrolled in the tested grades and who are educated with Massachusetts public funds participate in MCAS testing. MCAS assessment has been implemented as a result of the standards movement, which is a significant variable in schools. “Researchers assert that the significance of the standards campaign will be huge. Undoubtedly, historians will identify the last decade of this century as the time
when a concentrated press for national education standards emerged” (Glaser & Linn, 1993, p. xiii). In January 2002, former President G. W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) into law. This law represented his education reform plan and contained considerable changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the previous educational mandate. The NCLB legislation has altered education in elementary schools across the country. The change in directives as a result of NCLB (2001) mandates have shifted the focus of both public school teachers and administrators in schools toward a focus on the standards-based accountability provisions of the NCLB.

NCLB contained four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. Ultimately, the conversation concerning accountability has led to a discussion on how to improve the lowest scores that are impacting the accountability rating. The lowest scores are those of the “high needs” subgroup, which is predominantly comprised of students requiring specialized instruction under IDEA.

The LRE mandate contained within IDEA provides a clear preference for educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms, although separate class services are allowed when such a placement is deemed effective or better meets a student’s needs (Crockett, 1999). Research on the effects of classroom placement on an individual student is becoming more and more prevalent. Although there has been a plethora of research on the effects of classroom placement, past studies have refrained from delving into how the implementation of these practices improves the learning environment as a means to benefits both students and teachers. Determining which
educational environment is most effective for students with disabilities has been an ongoing educational discussion for decades. Professionals continue to advocate for placement options along the least restrictive environment continuum. These placement discussions range from full inclusionary practices through placement options at specialized schools designed to meet the needs of special education students with severe needs.

Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas (2002) conducted a study in two suburban schools to compare the efficacy of inclusion versus pullout methods and focused this research on determining which methodology worked most effectively for student population involved. As more and more students with disabilities are included in general education classroom settings, it is important to scrutinize the relationship between models of special education service delivery, specifically pullout or inclusion in general education, and academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Rea et al., 2002). The study included 8th grade classrooms in two suburban schools where the instruction delivery methods varied. Enterprise utilized a pull-in or inclusion method whereas Voyager students received special education through pull-out. This study clearly demonstrated that students with disabilities included in general education classrooms achieved better outcomes on some measures than did their peers in pullout programs and comparable outcomes on others (Rea et al., 2002). Some individuals argue in support of full-inclusion classrooms and purport that additional monies and/or resources are often attached to children receiving special education services so including these children into regular classrooms could bring additional resources into the classroom. In addition, many educators advocate that inclusive classrooms allow children already labeled
“different” to feel one in the same in these classrooms. In these cases, people often feel that it is less likely that individual students will feel stigmatized because of their learning needs, interests, and preferences.

The counterargument to the implementation of inclusive practices asserts that the inclusion model often places too much emphasis on where an education occurs, and not enough emphasis on educational outcomes and the quality of instruction provided to students with learning disabilities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007). Furthermore, some research has indicated that regular education classroom teachers are not convinced of the effectiveness of inclusionary practices on special education student populations (Cook, 2001). The counterargument cites the perceived lack of teaching expertise, limited allocated planning time, and lack of appropriate resources (Cook, 2001). There are further arguments against the inclusion model contained within the literature suggesting that students with severe emotional and developmental disabilities can be more disruptive of the learning time of the regular education students. As a result of this discourse embedded throughout the literature, there presents a need to study what components of co-teaching were identified as essential by a cohort of teachers implementing a co-teaching model to meet the needs of special education students in a co-taught classroom. This case study begins to fill that gap.

The results of this study will be beneficial to a wide array of stakeholders within the organization under study as well as outside of said organization. All individuals involved with the implementation of a co-teaching model in classrooms in their schools will be able to utilize the findings to improve the implementation of this service delivery model.
Positionality

As a practitioner, I have been employed for 10 years as the Principal or the Instructional Leader of an elementary school north of Boston, Massachusetts. In this role within the organization, I am responsible to ensure equity and equal access to each of the students that matriculate within the organization. My career has focused on meeting the needs of diverse learners. As a trained special education teacher, I have had the opportunity to work with diverse learning populations in both general education and special education in a wide range of settings. One of the hallmarks of the now replaced NCLB (2001) was the requirement that states develop annual assessments to measure school and student progress and that educators use data to help improve the learning of all students. As a result, administrators and teachers are confronted with complex and diverse sources of data from which they must make informed instructional decisions. As a result of this legislation and as an implementation of what is considered best practices to improve student learning, the school has implemented the use of a data-driven decision-making model (DDDM). DDDM practices utilizing student achievement testing data to make informed decisions to improve student learning. DDDM practices are currently a major focus of many school and district reform efforts, in part because of federal and state test-based accountability policies. Marsh, Pane, and Hamilton (2006) stated, “DDDM in education refers to teachers, principals, and administrators systematically collecting and analyzing various types of data, including input, process, outcome and satisfaction data, to guide a range of decisions to help improve the success of students and schools” (p. 1). DDDM has become an emerging field of practice for school leadership (Streifer, 2002). As a result of the DDDM practices and my utilization
of this practice, the data analysis that the school conducted has resulted in the implementation of this model. The DDDM practices revealed that this school has an identified area in need of improvement. This school was previously identified as a Level 2 school based on the performance of its “high needs” subgroup on state mandated assessments. Based on this data an area of “high priority concern” for students is the academic achievement level of this “high needs” subgroup. The “high needs” subgroup is an unduplicated count of all students in a school or district belonging to at least one of the following individual subgroups: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL) and former ELL students, or economically disadvantaged students. The identified problem of practice focuses on the “special education” subgroup, it was important to share the idea of othering as well as my efforts to create a disability blind school where the professional staff focus on the needs of individual students.

In her work, hooks (1994) concentrated on the needs of children first and most of her work centered on pedagogy. As a researcher, I would concur that the focus of the school program is to put children first and many of the planning meetings and interviews focused on this idea. Omi and Winant (2005) suggested that race should be discussed as a social construct while considering place, time, and power. The same could be inferred for disability status as a social construct. As the title of this work suggests, this research reflected on previous pedagogical practices and push toward the establishment of a disability blind school where students receive what they need in the general education setting regardless of disability status.
Research Question

The practice of co-teaching in schools is not a novel one. In fact, from the 1950s to present day, there have been a number of legal directives focusing on meeting the needs of special education students. These directives placed an emphasis on access to the general education curriculum and general education student population for students identified with special education needs. During “the 1950s and 1960s individuals began to experience some assistance for students with disabilities with the help of some family associations and the federal government” (Duncan, Posny, & Musgove, 2011, p. 11). In fact, the seminal work on the topic of co-teaching indicates that this practice predates the adoption of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). In the seminal work on this topic, Trump (1966) suggested four modifications to the delivery of instruction in the United States and England: (a) the nature of teacher presentation, (b) the character of independent study, (c) the type of student discussion, and (d) change of the evaluation process. The suggestion was that these could occur in any type of school setting, particularly team-taught classrooms. According to this work, for many years, practitioners and researchers had suggested co-teaching as a way to restructure schools in the United States. Co-teaching became the most widespread practice with two fully certified teachers in a classroom working with special needs students in an inclusionary setting, or with two teachers of different subject areas working together to teach cross-curricular classes.

Students who receive specialized instruction under IDEA should be given the same opportunity of inclusion, which involves learning in a general education classroom, as their general education peers. As such, inclusionary practices are becoming a priority
focus for schools. This case study examined teachers’ experiences with implementing a co-teaching model with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades. The following question served as the primary research question for this study:

1. What are teachers’ experiences with implementing co-teaching practices with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades?

**Theoretical Framework**

The experiences of special education and general education teachers can be beneficial to the existing literature, specifically looking at this problem of practice as a means to reveal the key aspects associated with experiences of general and special education teachers working within a co-teaching model. For this purpose, the utilization of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was a means to identify outcomes necessary for successful implementation by the teachers that have transitioned into this service delivery model.

The use of CHAT can be traced back to the work of Vygotsky. It was to a large extent developed by two of his students, Luria and Leont’ev. Cultural historical activity theory makes hierarchical distinctions between activity, actions, and operations. Leont’ev stated, “Activities, oriented towards motives or objects, are carried out by the community; actions, oriented towards goals, are carried out by individuals or groups; and operations, oriented towards conditions, are carried out routinely and automatically” (1978). The focus of CHAT is two-fold: examine the environment in which the teacher exists and discover the ways teachers view the experience. CHAT comprises of components that identify issues that may prevent teachers from adopting a proposed change in teaching practices.
According to Roth and Lee (2007), the separation of intellect and affect as subjects of study [was] a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it [made] the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of “thoughts thinking themselves” segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal need and interests, the inclinations and impulses of the thinker (p. 3). With this concept, Vygotsky maintained that learning happens initially between people either externally or socially. The determining factor is that learning has a basis in social interactions between individuals or groups of individuals. Roth, Tobin, and Zimmermann’s (2002) study used CHAT to develop a method of analyzing co-teaching with the purpose of accounting for the influences of human actions with the various points of view offered by the participating co-teachers. Therefore, CHAT “accounts for the fact that human beings participate in the shaping of their (learning) environment rather than merely reacting to given conditions” (Roth et al., 2002. p. 3). This use of CHAT suggests “in the course of individual and collective development, activities can become actions and actions can turn into operations” (Roth et al. 2002, p. 5). Therefore, CHAT “accounts for the fact that human beings participate in the shaping of their (learning) environment rather than merely reacting to given conditions” (Roth et al., 2002. p. 3).

Synthesis of Theoretical Framework

As this qualitative research based case study will generate data about human groups (teachers) in social settings (the classroom), a theoretical lens must be utilized as a means to clarify the experiences of the individuals involved in this study. In an effort to analyze the experiences of general education and special education co-teachers CHAT provides the theoretical lens that revealed the key aspects associated with experiences of
general education and special education teachers working within a co-teaching model. I utilized CHAT as a means to identify outcomes that were identified as necessary for successful implementation by the teachers that have transitioned into this service delivery model.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following terms are essential to clearly understanding this study:

*Co-teaching:* Defined as “two or more professionals jointly delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995).

*Inclusion:* An educational philosophy aimed at normalizing special services for which students qualify. Inclusion involves an attempt to provide more of these special services by providing additional aids and support inside the regular education classroom, rather than by pulling students out for isolated instruction (Special Education Guide, 2015).

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP):* A written plan developed at a meeting with input from parents, special education and regular education teachers and includes present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, measurable goals and objectives, individually designed instructional activities, and related services necessary to support the students in meeting IEP goals and objectives. It is a plan for learning that is developed for a student with a disability. The plan sets goals for learning and guides instructional strategy assessments (Special Education Guide, 2015).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act:* United States federal law that governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and
related services to children with disabilities.

*Regular Education Classroom:* A classroom setting where students without disabilities are educated using a grade-level-appropriate curriculum delivered by a general education teacher (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997).

*Regular Education Student:* Student without a disability.

*Regular Education Teacher:* A classroom teacher who is certified by the State Department of Education to teach a general or regular education class.

*Special Education Teacher:* A teacher certified by the State Department of Education to teach students with disabilities and ensure the implementation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

*Student with Disabilities:* Students who have a diagnosed disability that meets the criteria to receive special-education services according to the State Department of Education. Identification has been made using formal and informal testing/observations including, but not limited to, reference and intelligence testing (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997).

**Method**

Qualitative research methods provided an avenue to explore the implementation of a co-teaching model. This case study looked at the rich data collected through the designated school site from interviews. Questions were designed as open response in order to provide the interviewee with the framework to explain particular, specific experiences, and perceptions. The responses from multiple interviews created data, which can be studied and themes can be identified. This study examined the experiences of teachers that have participated in a co-teaching service delivery model. Qualitative research is aimed at gaining a deep understanding of a specific organization or event.
The goal of this qualitative research was to provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order, and broad patterns found among a group of participants. In this case, the co-teaching model and the first-hand experiences of the teachers. Qualitative research generates data about human groups in social settings. In this research study, qualitative interviews were conducted with teachers. Several open-ended, descriptive and explanatory questions serve to delve into the teachers’ perceptions surrounding their co-teaching experience.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

Analyzing the implementation of co-teaching practices and examining teachers’ experiences within a co-teaching model represents an important evolution in meeting the needs of special education student populations within the least restrictive environment. With new research that explores teachers’ experiences, other professionals as well as those currently within the model will have the ability to reflect on experiences that have successfully and unsuccessfully contributed to the utilization of co-teaching in upper elementary grades. Understanding and incorporating co-teaching requires schools to design effective teacher programmatic structures as a means to enhance student success.

**Organization of the Thesis**

In addition to the introduction and background of this study, the remainder of this report addresses the theoretical framework, review of literature, research design, research findings and summary, discussion, and implications for future research. In this chapter, I articulated the theoretical framework to present the theories that frame the problem of practice and research design. Next, the literature review connects the problem of practice and research proposal to existing literature and research. Following the review of
literature, the research design is presented including the research questions, methodology and trustworthiness of this particular study. I follow up this section with a brief discussion of how I protected the participants in this study. The following chapters detail the data collection and analysis. Finally, the conclusion, references and appendices follow.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine and highlight existing research related to co-teaching. Among the literature, researchers agree that the implementation of an effective co-teaching model requires structures and systems to be in place in order for the practice to be successful. This literature review will explore the necessary practices to guide readers through the three main structures needed for the successful implementation of a co-teaching model. Moreover, while there is extensive research focusing on educating special education students outside of the general education setting, this literature review will demonstrate how co-teaching, through the implementation of successful inclusionary practices, is a viable option to deliver instruction to special education students within the general education classroom.

Historical and Legal Context

Students with disabilities or special education students represent a subset population within all public schools. In fact, 13% of the U.S. school-aged population has an identified disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to Douvanis and Hulsey (2002), “In 1972, there were eight million children with disabilities in the United States, and fully one-half were receiving no educational services. Students were being evaluated for suspected disabilities without notice to parents or due process; parents were able to exclude their children from compulsory attendance regulations; and many children with disabilities who were in schools were being excluded from any meaningful educational services” (p. 2).

The concept of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom began as a civil rights argument. In fact, advocates working with families of
disabled students as well as civil rights lawyers utilized the Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education as a means to argue for the inclusion of students with disabilities within their local public schools. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its ruling in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) unanimously declared segregated schools unconstitutional, overturning the then half-century-old "separate but equal" doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Full inclusionists often cite Brown to justify their call for an end to special education. The Brown v. The Board of Education decision asserted that separate educational systems for black children were inherently wrong. It was determined the court held that schools may not be segregated by race. The aforementioned parties utilized the premise determined in Brown v the Board of Education to argue the enrollment practices surrounding students with disabilities. They specifically argued that schools may not segregate or otherwise discriminate by ability or disability. Furthermore, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, as amended, protects the civil rights of people with disabilities, and has helped remove or reduce many barriers for people with disabilities. The legislation required the elimination of discrimination against people with disabilities.

Beginning with adoption of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (also known as Public Law 94-142) the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This was the first federal law mandating free, appropriate public education for students with disabilities. ADA (1990) was also enacted around the same time as IDEA. The adoption of these two pieces of legislation increased protections of a previously marginalized population of students.
Equal Access

Since these landmark pieces of legislation and legal decisions, the progression of the inclusive classroom has continued. Inclusionary practices have included a variety of methodologies used to increase academic success for all students. These include the practice of co-teaching between a special education teacher and a general education teacher within the general education classroom. General education classrooms are defined as the classroom settings where students without disabilities are educated using a grade level appropriate curriculum delivered by a general education teacher (Lipsky & Gardner, 1997). Instruction follows grade level expectations contain general education and special education students where inclusion and co-teaching is concerned. The passage of Public Law 94-142 shifted from an emphasis on what and how to teach to an emphasis on where to teach students (Baker, 1995).

The foundation of this argument was that all children, disabled and non-disabled, should have access to the same academic and social opportunities within the school (Sailor, 2002). All students should be afforded the same opportunity to have equal access to as well as the option to participate equally in the general education classroom where they are educated utilizing the same curriculum as their typical peers. The means to do this is through the implementation of practices that are in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, which mandates equity, accountability, and excellence in education for children with disabilities.

The principle of least restrictive environment (LRE) was formalized by IDEA. Over the years, many terms have been applied to describe the LRE principle. These include mainstreaming as well as inclusion. Inclusion is described as an educational
philosophy aimed at normalizing special services for which students qualify. Inclusion involves an attempt to provide more of these special services by providing additional aids and support inside the regular education classroom, rather than by pulling students out for isolated instruction (Special Education Guide, 2015).

IDEA creates a presumption in favor of educating special education students alongside their general education peers. Education in the least restrictive environment is a key component of IDEA. Through the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress determined that the preferred educational placement for students with disabilities is within a general education classroom that incorporates the same curriculum and assessment standards for all students IDEA 2004 is the driving legislation supporting the rights of all students including special education students to learn. This legislation pushed teachers to continue to provide a Free and Appropriate Education to all students while requesting rigor in teaching to improve state scores in the LRE (CSIE, 2008). LRE is defined by IDEA as the most beneficial educational setting for students with special needs. Educating all students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment” is one of the law’s six principles (IDEA, 2004). The law defines access to the general curriculum, also known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), as being a placement in which:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in
regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 2004, §5A)

Furthermore, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, “Removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA, 2004, chap. 33, sec 1412 a5A). The United States Department of Education considers 80% or more of the school day spent in the general education classroom as meeting this high standard (Aud et al., 2013). Categories on the continuum of educational placements for students with disabilities as defined by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education are as follows: The “regular class” includes students who spend 80% or more of their school day in a general education classroom. The “resource room” includes students who receive special education and related services outside the general education classroom between 21% and 60% of the school day. A “separate class” includes students who receive special education services outside the general education classroom for more than 60% of the school day (Hehir, Schifter, Grindal, Ng, Eidelman, & Mitchell, 2014). There are more restrictive placements on the least restrictive environment continuum; however, for the purposes of this research they are inconsequential as the placements are outside of the placement options within a public school setting. It is important to note that the placement determination or the determination of the degree to which the student matriculates within the general education classroom is made by the student’s Individualized Educational Planning team, which includes consideration of many elements such as behavior, ability
levels, and educational and social-emotional needs. When planning teams are making the placement determinations based on the information that they have available, they must remain cognizant of the federal mandates under IDEA as well as the nonparticipation justification component of the student’s individualized education plan.

**The Evolution of The Inclusive Classroom**

As Public Law 94-142 and IDEA shifted educational programmatic directives from what and how to teach to where students are educated, shifts in society’s perceptions of individuals with disabilities has resulted in a movement toward ensuring social justice for students through inclusive education mandating appropriate education for all (Osgood, 2008). The federal mandates set forth in various legislative initiatives outlining the requirements for the education of students with disabilities in the classroom that he or she would otherwise attend if they were not disabled. One-way schools address this is through the implementation of inclusion. The practice of inclusion creates educational opportunities for students with disabilities to be educated in the general education classroom. When schools follow the full inclusion model, general education teachers require the support of special education teachers specifically trained in strategies to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. This often manifests in the application of collaborative teaching, or “co-teaching,” one model available to provide all students with a rigorous course of study resulting in high achievement (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). Co-teaching is defined as “two or more professionals jointly delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995).
hooks (2003) described traditional classrooms as environments where
"Conventional pedagogy often creates a context where the student is present in the
classroom to serve the will of the professor, meeting his or her needs, whether it be the
need for an audience, the need to hear fresh ideas to stimulate work, or the need to assert
dominance over subordinated students" (p. 91). This environment is in stark opposition
to the educational environment that is created when co-teaching is implemented. A co-
taught learning environment is designed to meet the individual needs of the entire class of
students in which top down dictatorial practices are challenged and replaced with sound
instructional practices. As hooks (2003) noted, "This is the tradition of abuse the caring
teacher seeks to challenge and change" (p. 91). In various educational settings, students
receive specialized instruction outside of the general education setting through the
implementation of “pull out” services. Pull out practices do not meet the requirements of
law, but more importantly, their continued existence denies all students the better
instruction that can be provided in an inclusion model with its benefits of teaming,
smaller student-to-teacher ratios, and the higher capacity that teams and teachers can
develop to better differentiate instruction and assessment. The one-teacher setting has
been considered the most efficacious for students with special needs. However, scholars
have criticized self-contained classrooms, especially the teacher’s role (Boe, Shin, &
Cook, 2007). These types of classroom and professional settings are very specific: a one-
teacher environment within a closed system (i.e., same classroom for all grades). This
specific system causes special education students to be outside of the general education
environment. Students with special needs should be given the same opportunity of
inclusion, which involves learning in a general education classroom under IDEA. As such, inclusion should be a priority focus of schools for students with special needs.

The implementation of co-teaching is a philosophical shift when compared to the practice of educating students with special education services via a pull out model. Even though more schools are implementing inclusive settings, many students continue to be pulled out of the classroom for services or are permanently placed in self-contained classrooms. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, more and more students with disabilities are being served in general education classes than ever before (Wilson, Kim, & Michaels, 2013). The implementation of inclusive practices is a long debated point, and it is essential to be mindful that the application of specialized instruction (special education instruction) is an educational team’s decision and should be based on the individual student’s needs. Inclusion is considered to be the standard practice within classrooms today, but a subset of students continue to be provided their specialized instruction in a separate setting as a result of determinations during individual teams’ decision-making process. Specifically, through the decision when the team is creating the student’s service delivery and discussing the nonparticipation justification. In fact, the Individualized Education Planning (IEP) team must provide a written justification regarding their decision to place a student in any setting outside the regular classroom. Removal from the regular educational classroom shall occur only when the nature or severity of the child's needs is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. Inclusion pushes for children to be in the classroom, yet there are students who may continue to need services such as one-on-one time with the special education teacher, counseling,
speech therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy. Friend (2007) noted that a truly inclusive co-teaching model accepts all students, no matter what their strengths or weaknesses may be, and the faculty is committed to working with all students to ensure their success. However, Friend cautioned that the co-teaching model is not the best model for all students with disabilities as some students need a more intense structure and require small group instruction in order for them to increase their achievement level (2007). Therefore, as long as intense structure and small group instruction is not required, students with disabilities receive a lasting benefit from co-teaching.

Structures and Strategies

The implementation of an effective co-teaching model requires structures and systems to be in place in order for the practice to be successful. As this model is a novel experience for many teachers, three main structures need to be in place for the successful implementation of a co-teaching model. Successful implementation of inclusive practices such as co-teaching throughout a school requires the active support of school leadership, a collaborative learning environment, and professional development.

School Leadership

School leadership is vital in the successful implementation and execution of a co-teaching model. Spillane (2006) asserted, “Educational leaders are charged to design modes that challenge normative structures and provide opportunities for teachers to take collective approaches to teach students, but also for them to learn from each other through social evolution practices.” Educational leaders are obligated to provide equal access to all learners and there is a perception that non-inclusionary practices segregate individuals not on the basis of race, but on the basis of ability. As a result, reforms to
special education have shifted from the individual student to the educational system. School leadership plays an essential role in the implementation of this model as well as establishing the accepting culture for this model. Cook et al. (1999) conducted research with principals and special education teachers focusing on their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with mild disabilities. The researchers examined the attitudes of principals and special education teachers in order to provide “a unique comparison of those who determine school policy and school-level resource allocation (i.e., principals) and those with the most training and experience regarding the instruction and management of students with mild disabilities (i.e., special education teachers)” (p. 200). They also note that schools need the support and leadership of principals for successful school change, successful inclusion, and effective schools. By modeling collaborative traits, principals can foster these characteristics in others. Cook and Friend (1995) summarized the collaborative traits that school leaders can employ as a means to model their practice for others:

Among the strategies that administrators have used successfully to support co-teaching are (a) to help the co-teachers to plan and schedule their programs, (b) to provide incentives and resources that allow co-teachers to design and reflect about desirable changes in the way they provide services, and (c) to assist teachers in setting priorities that will protect their limited time. Committing resources to enhancing the preparation of co-teaching partners, participating with them in training activities, and scheduling additional planning time for co-teachers also are valued signs of administrative support. (p. 8)
The implementation of a co-teaching model requires school leadership to design and support a model that challenges a traditional structure (one teacher teaching in a classroom alone) and provides teachers with opportunities to augment their practice with information on best practices while working and learning together to meet the diverse needs of a student group.

**Collaborative Learning**

The implementation of IDEA has placed an increased level of focus on the collaborative practices between general and special education teachers. Hang and Rabren (2009) reported co-teaching as one potential way general educators could meet the needs of more children and youth with disabilities through developing collaborative relationships with special educators. As co-teaching is a model based on a partnership, it is essential to establish the importance of a collaborative relationship that is required to successfully engage in co-teaching.

The collaborative relationship between the co-teaching staff is instrumental in its success. Co-teaching has been referred to as a professional marriage (Kohler-Evans, 2006) because of the importance, as in strong personal partnerships, of building a strong and parity-based relationship. Kohler-Evans (2006) surveyed teachers in 15 school districts regarding their co-teaching experiences. The issue they most frequently named as affecting their relationship with their co-teaching partner was common planning time, which is the foundation of a collaborative working relationship. Finegan (2004) found that teachers who had positive attitudes about inclusion had access to a variety of resources and had adequate planning and collaboration time. Planning time between
professionals includes collaboration time between general and special education teachers and among teachers and other service providers.

**Professional Development**

Professional development for teachers can be completed in a multitude of manners. Teachers can undertake a range of professional learning activities including reading professional journals, trying out new practices in the classroom, and joining professional organizations. More traditional professional development occur in attendance at one day or multi-day workshops or trainings. Many professionals participate in additional coursework through traditional university studies while others engage in practices through accessing content online. According the NCLB, under Title IX, Part A, Sections 9101, the term professional development includes:

Activities that improve and increase teachers' knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach, and enable teachers to become highly qualified; are an integral part of broad school wide and district wide educational improvement plans; give teachers, principals, and administrators the knowledge and skills to provide students with the opportunity to meet challenging state academic content standards and student academic achievement standards; improve classroom management skills; are high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher's performance in the classroom; and are not one day or short-term workshops or conferences.

In fact, school personnel are required to participate in activities that support ongoing learning. Walsh (2012) noted, the “most significant issue was a systemic and continuous
professional development program that provided support for co-teaching teams” (p. 30).

Furthermore, Borko (2004) stated policy makers and scholars suggested that professional development opportunities for teachers must “enhance their knowledge and develop new instructional practices” (p. 3) in order to meet the needs of their students and educational mandates.

**The Effects of Co-Teaching**

As a result of a thorough examination of the available literature, many findings were revealed but no single source has yielded the same results, which indicates that further study is needed to assess the effectiveness of this model. An inclusive setting is a classroom where students with disabilities are educated alongside their general education peers. In theory, by including special education pupils in an inclusive learning environment in the regular education classroom, there are multiple benefits for students such as improvement in self-confidence, academic performance, social skills, and peer relationships (Walther-Thomas, 1997). There are findings that purport that inclusion promotes academic gains for special education students. There are additional studies that cite the social gains achieved by these students. Walther-Thomas (1997) studied the lasting benefits for special and general education students based on co-taught classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with co-teachers, and school documents in 23 schools with sample population of 143 individuals. Participants included teachers and administrators. For both special and general education students, her study revealed improved academic performance and improved social skills.

Academically, special education students have demonstrated the capacity to achieve academic success in co-taught settings. Research conducted by Walsh and
Snyder (1993) studied 343 students in 15 co-taught classrooms and 362 students in 15 general education 9th grade Science, Social Studies, Math and English classrooms. Their research was conducted in classrooms located within six comparatively diverse high schools in the same school district. Walsh and Snyder (1993) found significantly higher passage rates on statewide minimum competency tests by students in co-taught high school classes compared to students in similar general education classes. In two middle schools, Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas (2002) studied the relationship between placement in inclusive and pullout special education programs and academic and behavior outcomes for students with learning disabilities. One school implemented the co-teaching model and the other school implemented the pullout program. The researchers found that students in co-taught classrooms achieved higher course grades in core subjects and higher scores on the reading and math Iowa Test of Basic Skills compared to students in pullout programs. Students in co-taught classes had comparable scores to those in pullout programs on reading, writing, and math state tests.

Socially, special education students have also demonstrated the capacity to achieve greater success. The perceptions of the learning environments of co-taught classrooms by teachers is important. In fact, according to Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, (1997), teachers across inclusionary settings reported that co-teaching classrooms were “rich learning environments” (p. 136). The authors described this as a benefit for students with disabilities. Within the co-taught environment, the acquisition of social skills and opportunities to learn appropriate behaviors were cited as benefits across full, partial, and non-inclusive settings. This research demonstrated that co-teaching not only benefits the disabled students but also the students without disabilities.
Furthermore, Walther-Thomas’s (1997) 3-year study reported that teachers and administrators identified many benefits from the co-teaching model. Benefits for students with disabilities included more positive feelings of their abilities as learners, improved academic performance, better peer relationships, and heightened social skills. Longitudinally, it is important to cite a qualitative investigation over time of adult outcomes for two individuals with significant disabilities who received services across educational settings. According to Downing, Eichinger, and Williams (2010) stated the findings of their longitudinal study indicated that the student who received special education services a majority of the time within the general education setting appeared to have achieved better adult outcomes in the community as compared to the student who received services in a self-contained special education setting. The following chapter will provide in greater detail the selected methodology for this research project.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research aims to provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order, and broad patterns found among a group of participants, while simultaneously generating data about human groups in social settings. After a thorough review of literature and the careful and thoughtful posing of research questions, I designed a qualitative single-case study. The targeted outcome of this particular study was to analyze the experiences of both regular education and special education teachers who have been involved in co-teaching practices with upper elementary aged student populations. This study will provide an avenue to explore the implementation of a co-teaching model, while gaining a deeper understanding of its effectiveness.

Research Methodology

This qualitative single-case study was designed to ascertain teachers’ experiences of implementing co-teaching practices with upper elementary aged student populations. A case study permits the deep exploration of this “program, event, activity, process of one or more individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The research paradigm used as the framework for this qualitative study is social constructivism. Creswell (2009) indicated that the social constructivism lens is a way for the researcher to comprehend the environment or understand the world in which they live and work through the identification and examination of the viewpoints of the subjects participating in the study. Due to the complicated nature of the social interactions of an inclusion classroom and the time that interventions require to process, a case study has the ability to analyze this process. Yin (2009) cited Schramm (1971) indicating that case studies “try to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and
with what result” (p. 17).

**Research Design**

The model of inquiry used for this research was a single case study methodology. A single case study was selected because it was important to understand the common or shared experiences of teachers who instruct diverse learners in a co-teaching model in a particular school. The experiences of these teachers include both their subjective and objective experiences. It is important to understand these common experiences to enhance the practice or develop policies around the co-teaching model.

Qualitative research appears to be the most effective approach for exploring the implementation of co-teaching practices, as it generates data about human groups in social settings. Creswell (2009) asserted it is appropriate to conduct qualitative research when a problem or issue needs to be explored to develop a detailed understanding of the issue. More specifically, in this particular study, the experiences of teachers co-teaching within the general education setting by conducting this research on the implementation for both students and teachers in an upper elementary aged co-taught classroom.

**Research Tradition**

As reported by Yin (2009) a case study is typically the model chosen for research looking to explore how and why people are doing what they do. A case-study approach has also been used as the research tradition because case studies look at complex issues by exploring people’s knowledge of individual group organizational, social, political, and related phenomena in a real-life context (Yin, 2009). A case study is preferred when a how or why question is posed and the study involves a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context (Yin, 2009).
This work explored the experiences of co-teaching through the eyes of the teachers working within the model. It was important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of co-teaching as well as to develop a more in-depth understanding of a case or a comparison of several cases (Creswell, 2013). This case study focused on a number of key issues to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the co-teaching model. According to Stake (1978), case studies may be the preferred method of research because they are epistemologically aligned with an individual’s experience. The most effective means of adding to understanding is through the natural experience acquired in ordinary, personal involvement (Stake, 1978).

**Reflexivity Journal and Field Notes**

I collected field notes throughout the individual interviews and at the conclusion of each interview conducted. As a means to control for bias, I practiced reflexivity in order to better understand what kind of influence bearing the field notes can have on my research. Reflexivity is such that humans attempt to make sense of their own individual social existence and assert their beliefs into identified circumstances.

Reflexivity and reflection are the first defense in guarding against biases (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015). Making sense of our experience as researchers through every day conversation keeps questions of power in the forefront of one’s mind. Being transparent during the research process brings forth the opportunity to engage in the process with an understanding of how the researcher will be shaped by the participants with whom he or she comes into contact and the experience of both the participant and the researcher. Due to the fact that these processes allow for increased awareness of the nuances of one’s biases and the significance of those nuances on the study, consistent conversation and
reflection on the study is foundational to the authenticity, importance, and relevance of research data.

**Participation**

This study was conducted in an elementary school in a suburban school district located in a middle class area north of Boston, Massachusetts. The current enrollment of the school is 348 students. The physical plant houses three grade one classes, three grade two classes, three grade three classes, three grade four classrooms as well as three classes of grade five and one language-based classroom. The school hosts two full day kindergarten classes. Additionally, the school has three specialized classrooms for students with communication needs, as well as three classrooms from a local collaborative.

There is an average class size of 20 students across all grade levels (K-5) in the school. This average is spread differently across grade levels with regard to this study. The average class size for grade three was 21, while the co-taught class enrollment was 18. Similarly, the average class size for grade four was 21, while the co-taught enrollment was 20. Lastly, the average class size for grade five was 21, while the co-taught enrollment was 19. (See Appendix I).

As previously indicated, the school has implemented the use of a data driven decision-making model (DDDM). DDDM practices revealed that this school was presented with a specific area in need of improvement. This school was identified as a Level 2 school based on the performance of its “high needs” subgroup on state mandated assessments. A large percentage of that identified cohort was identified as special education students.
Co-teaching was introduced to this school district in 2009. There are three elementary schools within the district that practice co-teaching, but the implementation of co-teaching practices has not been calibrated across all school settings. A pilot of co-teaching was conducted in fifth grade during the 2008-2009 school year. One of the interviewees explained it best: “We shared our experiences with other teachers in the pilot year, our enthusiasm was so great for what we had achieved that first year that I think other teachers began to feel, that it wasn’t being forced on them. I think everybody became a little more open-minded.” As a result of the momentum generated from the pilot and the shared experiences of the colleagues, over the summer of 2009 identified staff from the school participated in a professional development opportunity on co-teaching. This model of teaching has remained in place since that time.

The participants for this study were selected based on their participation in the co-teaching model at the designated site. Their participation was voluntary and both special education and general education teachers who are currently teaching or who have previously taught in co-taught classroom in grades three, four and five represented the pool of potential candidates. There were eight teachers in the participant pool. Of the eight teachers, four were general educators and four were special educators.

**Recruitment**

The study was approved by the IRB at Northeastern University in September 2017 (see IRB approval in Appendix D). The research site was accessed with the approval of the Superintendent of Schools in the designated school district. Once permission from the Superintendent was given to conduct the research (Appendix E), I emailed the recruitment letter to the possible participants who were identified as meeting...
the requirements for the study (Appendix B). Once the email was sent to the list of potential participants, I waited for responses. Responses were received from 100% of the proposed candidate pool. Upon receipt of the confirmation of their willingness to participate in the study, participants were emailed directly with the recruitment letter attached. As the potential participants confirmed that they would be in the study, they were emailed a copy of the participant consent form (Appendix C), asked to review it and whether or not they had any questions or concerns about their participation in the study. The participants signed the consent form prior to the first interview session. Once all participants were confirmed, the collection of data began. The individual interviews were conducted away from the school site, in the local library, and in two different local coffee shops.

**Data Collection**

In this qualitative single case study, I used data collection methods that allowed participants to share their experiences educating special education students within the general education classroom. Specifically, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each of the study participants. The interview questions (Appendix A) allowed me to be free to explore beyond the questions and to guide the conversation spontaneously with the focus on a particular predetermined subject with the goal of being able “to see the world from another person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002). The data collected during the interview were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

As part of the data coding and analysis process, information transcribed from interviews was coded and redacted to protect the confidentiality of each participant.
Furthermore, I utilized memoing. Memoing comprises writing down ideas or key concepts that occur to the researcher as he reads (Creswell, 2013, p. 183). Memoing is an important part of the data analysis stage as it can provide interesting insight regarding the researcher’s identity and may become an integral part of the report. After the data review process I grouped significant “statements together into larger units of information called meaning units or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193). Upon the conclusion of each interview, I reviewed the notes and edited as they were manually transcribed.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this research revolved around the perception of participants, size of study, and location of study, along with the researcher's personal biases. The sample size was eight elementary school teachers. This sample was also only taken from an elementary school in suburban school district located in a middle class area north of Boston, Massachusetts. I also did not ask for the perception of anyone else involved in the inclusion instructional setting known as co-teaching. The participants described their own experiences based on their knowledge, experiences and biases. As a result, the applicability of the individuals perceptions is restricted to each individual and offer limited generalizations.

Secondly, another limitation of this study is the fact that I held the position of the educational leader in the building in which this research was conducted. I had a bias toward the setting of the study because it has been my place of employment for the past 10 years. It could be expected that I held a bias during the collection and analysis of data. Additionally, it could be possible that the participants were cautious about reporting their opinion because of my position.
Reciprocity

There was reciprocity between the participants and the researcher, given their working relationship at the research site. Through the act of member checking, findings were shared with participants. This provided the interviewees with the opportunity to provide feedback and consequently establish respondent validation. Any misinformation or any misinterpretations were examined and corrected at this point in the research process. As a result of this process, the voices of the participants were honored as they were given the opportunity to reflect, to question, and to freely share their experiences and the meanings they have made of them.

Participants’ experiences and perceptions were utilized to locate corroborating evidence and identify themes in the data. I provided detailed descriptions of the participants and the location of the study. As the interviewee spoke, I listened carefully for interconnecting details, strong verbs, and quotes. Significant phrases or sentences that pertained to the experience were noted (Creswell, 2013). I grouped detailed experiences and ideas common between the participants involved in co-teaching into themes. I used a digital recorder for recording and transcribing.

Preliminary data were shared with the participants who then checked for accuracy. This member checking procedure was critical for creditability, and provided the opportunity to check for any missing information or any area of uncertainty brought forth by participants concerning the study.

Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification

An imperative component for qualitative research is the trustworthiness of the study. Charmaz (2006) suggested, “gathering rich data will give you solid material for
building a significant analysis,” that “rich data are detailed, focused, and full,” and that "they reveal participant's views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives" (p. 14). Through interviews, rich data were collected to document the participants' experiences in co-teaching environments. Qualitative analysis is subjective because the researcher is the instrument for analysis and makes judgments about coding, categorizing, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

As required by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I complied with all regulations and practices to protect the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all participants. Furthermore, I utilized pseudonyms as a means to ensure that individuals’ names both directly and indirectly associated with this study remained confidential throughout the research process.

To ensure the protection of human subjects in this study, the proposal was submitted for approval through Northeastern University Institutional Review Board. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and signed a consent form prior to data collection. The consent form included the purpose of the study, a statement of voluntary participation, information about the confidentiality of the study, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. I sought permission to audio record interviews

Participants were solicited for the study through a recruitment email (Appendix B) that was sent to potential participants through the university affiliated email server. Informed consent letters were sent to each participant so that they were aware of the study, could pick where they desired for the interview to take place, and could ask any questions about it before the interviewing began. During the interviews, participants
signed an informed consent letter (Appendix C).

**Data Storage**

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants of the study, all individuals self selected the pseudonyms. Recordings of the interviews were collected on one device. The recordings and the transcripts are locked in a fire-protected safe in my home. Furthermore, the computer utilized for this research is password protected and only I know that password. All interview notes and any associated paperwork related to the study is kept in the aforementioned safe. The interview materials will be kept for 3 years and then will be permanently deleted and destroyed (shredded) unless advised otherwise. I am the only individual who has access to the data. Lastly, signed consent documents are also securely retained in along with the other noted documents.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to learn about the experiences of regular education and special education teachers providing instruction to students receiving specialized instruction through the implementation of a co-teaching model. The first section presents the participant profiles. The second section presents an analysis of the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the semi-structured interviews with study participants. Lastly, I present reflexivity relative to my positionality.

Demographics

Overall, interviews were conducted with eight female teachers. Out of all participants, four were regular education teachers (50%) while four were special education teachers (50%). See Table 1 for a breakdown of data based on gender, age, grade, and years of experience in education as well in teaching within the co-teaching model. It is notable that all participants were assigned alphabetized pseudonyms, unrelated to their actual names so as to not be identified.

During the semi-structured interview, participants provided basic background information including their years of service in education as well as the number of years that they have served as a certified teacher. Furthermore, they provided biographical information and responded to the question, “Why did you want to become a teacher?” Lastly, I noted information relative to their current positions, as well as their current role (if applicable) within the school’s co-teaching model.
Table 1

Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Currently Co-Teaching?</th>
<th>Current Grade</th>
<th>Co-Teaching Grade</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years Teaching Within Co-Teaching Model?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>3 &amp; 4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwendolyn</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxy</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Regular Education</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main Results

The sole source of data for this research study was obtained from transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with eight study participants. The shortest interview took 19 minutes, and the longest interview took 31 minutes from the beginning to the end. Following the interviews, I began the coding process using Creswell’s (2013) coding methods. I created detailed codes; those codes were grouped into themes that emerged from participants’ responses.

Caroline

Caroline has been teaching for a total of 19 years with 14 of those years in the district where she is currently employed. In addition to earning her Bachelor’s degree in elementary education, Caroline also has a master’s degree in elementary education. She has a teaching certificate in elementary education. She has experience teaching grades
three, five, six, and seven. Caroline is currently teaching grade five in a departmentalized model where she is responsible for providing instruction in English language arts and social studies to the entire grade five population of the school.

Caroline and I have worked together for approximately 10 years. She has held her current teaching position for 14 years and has been co-teaching for the past 6 years. Caroline was excited to share that she enjoys the school where she currently teaches and enjoys the supportive staff with whom she works.

This interview was conducted in a local lively coffee shop, away from the campus of the school. Caroline’s demeanor was engaging and upbeat, indicating that she was comfortable in the space, with me, and with sharing her co-teaching experiences.

Caroline described her path to become a teacher as her “destiny.” Specifically, she noted that she wanted to go into teaching because she wanted to help struggling learners. Her experiences as a student were with wonderful teachers who made her realize the importance of a great teacher. She indicated that she is able to see how the role of a teacher is truly influential in a child's life.

Caroline indicated that she feels she is able to make a difference in the lives of her students, particularly with individual students on the human level. She presented great enthusiasm as she described one of her past experiences with a student she described as a “Nervous Nelly who always drove his teachers crazy.” The student was afraid to take risks, and Caroline took it upon herself to promote risk-taking with this student. During the reflection, she connected her teaching a student to take risks to her ability to take risks as a professional. She shared that one has to be flexible and able to share leadership roles
with other teachers to establish a true team teaching model.

Elizabeth

This current school year marked Elizabeth’s 30th year of teaching. She has been in the same school district since the start of her career, excluding service as a long-term substitute in an urban district in close proximity to her current placement. Elizabeth started in this district as a daily substitute, which quickly turned into a long-term substitute position covering open positions across the school. Her first professional position was as a half-time kindergarten teacher. The following year, her position turned into a full time half-day kindergarten position consisting of a morning and afternoon session. After a few years, she transitioned into teaching first grade, a position that she held for 5 years. This was followed by a teaching assignment in third grade for 5 years. She is currently in her 10th year as a reading specialist. This professional holds a Master’s degree as a Consulting Teacher of Reading and a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education.

Elizabeth and I have worked together for approximately 10 years. In her role as a co-teacher, this professional co-teaches English Language Arts with both the third grade and fourth grade team for 60 minutes each day. She reportedly enjoys the collaborative aspect of co-teaching. She stated, “I do really like working with my colleagues, and I like the give and take of the planning and execution of lessons. I like bouncing ideas off of each other, and just having to be flexible.”

This interview was conducted outside of a local coffee shop on a beautiful early fall afternoon. The local coffee shop has external seating available and Elizabeth selected this space. The setting was busy and many passersbys peered curiously as we conducted
the interview. Elizabeth’s presentation was confident. This confidence in her presentation indicated that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer and comfortable sharing her experiences co-teaching.

Elizabeth shared that her co-teaching role has increased the amount of collaboration that she has with her colleagues. Furthermore, it has increased the quantity of interactions with her colleagues and eliminated previous feelings of professional isolation as well as increased levels of confidence around the delivery of instruction across settings. She shared the following vignette as an example of what a colleague told her on the day of the interview: “She told me today that I was the expert in reading, and I disagreed with her, and I said, “You know just as much as I do,” and she said, “No, I don’t.”

Gwendolyn

Gwendolyn has been teaching for 19 years. She is currently assigned to the position of fourth grade special education co-teacher and reading specialist (Grade 1 & 2). This professional holds a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education as well as Moderate Special Needs. Furthermore, she holds a Master’s degree in reading. She is a certified in elementary education, moderate disabilities as well as reading. She has experience teaching grades K through 5 and has also worked as a teacher in a substantially separate program for students that experience significant difficulties acquiring the ability to read.

Gwendolyn and I have worked together for approximately 10 years. She has held her current teaching position for 9 years and has been co-teaching for the past 4 years.
This interview was conducted at the local town library off the campus of the school. Gwendolyn selected this location. The environment was quiet and we did not encounter any individuals with the exception of the librarian that greeted us at the door. Gwendolyn’s demeanor was calm and focused, which indicated that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer and comfortable sharing her experiences co-teaching.

Gwendolyn noted that she has always enjoyed reading. She developed this love early on and at a young age wanted to become a teacher. She described a proclivity toward helping struggling students. She stated, “I was often aware and sensitive to classmates who had difficulty learning, and I also decided that I would like to work with students with learning difficulties. In high school, I volunteered as a peer tutor and worked in various childcare roles” that helped to solidify her choice to be come a teacher.

**Jennifer**

Jennifer received her degree in physical education in the 1980s. As a result of the passing of Proposition 2½, many teachers lost their jobs; therefore, no openings for new graduates, which she was at this time. As a result, this individual coached Women's Field Hockey and Softball and taught some physical education classes at a local theological college for a few years.

Jennifer began teaching again 10 years ago. She taught Physical Education and upon funding she became an Inclusion Paraprofessional for a child on the Autism Spectrum. She has been employed by her current school district for the duration of this time. She quickly moved back into the teaching ranks as a special education teacher. She
describes the change of roles as “finding my true calling.” She was working at another elementary school in the district and was transferred into her current assignment 4 years ago. Jennifer is currently co-teaching in fifth grade and follows a cohort of identified students that matriculate in a departmentalized model where teachers specialize in English Language Arts and Social Studies, Science, and Math.

This interview was conducted in a local coffee shop off campus of the school. The environment was calm, and Jennifer’s presentation was enthusiastic indicating that she was relaxed in the space, comfortable with the interviewer and comfortable sharing her experiences with co-teaching.

Jennifer’s journey to becoming a participant in the schools co-teaching model is one that has taken many interesting turns along the way. After teaching in a substantially separate program, this professional shared that she is looking forward toward co-teaching for many years to come.

Jennifer confirmed her passion for being proactive with students when she shared the story “The Keeper of the Springs” by Marshall (Appendix F) during the interview. This was in reference to a sermon delivered by Marshall, former chaplain to the U.S. Senate some 50 years ago. In this story, he describes a small town located at foot of a mountain range. This town is well known for its pleasing pure spring water. People visit from all around to enjoy its delicious taste and to thank the well-known “keeper of the springs” who has dedicated his life to keeping the mountain springs clear and clean. For years he preformed this selfless service for the benefit of all who enjoyed the water from the springs.

Maria
Maria has been teaching for 17 years with 11 of those years in the district where she is currently employed. In addition to earning her Bachelor’s degree in elementary education, Maria has a Master’s degree in special education. Her teaching credentials include elementary education and moderate disabilities. She has experience teaching Kindergarten through grade three. She is currently co-teaching in grade three, a position that she has held for the past 4 years. Maria was excited to share that she enjoys the school where she currently teaches and enjoys the supportive staff with whom she works. Maria spoke of her journey to become a teacher with great passion. She indicated that she has known that she wanted to become a teacher since she was very young.

Maria has worked with me for approximately 10 years. This interview was conducted at the local coffee shop off of the campus of the school. Maria selected this location. The environment was quite boisterous and there was a lot of foot traffic in close proximity to us throughout the interview process. Maria’s presentation was composed and relaxed, which indicated to me that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer, and comfortable sharing her experiences co-teaching.

Maria shared that she has been fortunate to have worked in two very different school districts in her career. She noted that her teaching career has provided her with a multitude of experience working with students from varied populations. She purported that she is able to see how the role of a teacher is truly influential in a child's life and that she truly loves her job.

**Penelope**

This is Penelope’s 25th year of teaching in her current district. She has worked in two different schools but has been in her current school assignment for the majority of her career. She has been a fourth grade classroom teacher for quite some time but also
has experience teaching grades one, two, and three.

Penelope has a Bachelor’s degree in economics and a Master’s degree in elementary education. She credits her DNA for her desire to become a teacher citing the fact that her father was a professor of Elementary Education for both graduate and undergraduate students at the university level. She recalls attending night graduate courses with him. Furthermore, her mother taught fifth grade for 13 years, then was a Talented and Gifted Coordinator, an Elementary Principal and ultimately an Assistant Superintendent. She loves being a teacher and lives and breathes it every day.

Penelope has worked with me for approximately 10 years. She has held her current teaching position for 8 years and has been co-teaching for the past 7 years. This interview was conducted at a local coffee shop off of the campus of the school. Penelope selected this location. As it was a beautiful fall afternoon, Penelope elected to enjoy the outside atmosphere. The environment was peaceful and we did not encounter any interruptions during the interview as we sat off to the side of the main entrance to the coffee shop. Penelope’s demeanor was enthusiastic, which indicated that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer, and eager to share her experiences co-teaching.

Penelope described her passion for teaching and the increased levels of collegiality that she has experienced in recent years. She stated that currently she feels that she is able to meet the diverse needs of all learners through a collaborative model with increased levels of professional consultation. She stated, “Just having all of those different perspectives and things in our own life kind of ground us. But we've also read different books and we share with each other so if we come across a student with a
different make-up, either socially/emotionally, behaviorally, or academically, we make sure that we find out the best way to reach them.” Penelope also proudly noted that it is her desire to have a member of her family carry on the legacy of teaching, as she could “not imagine another profession that provides such fulfillment.”

**Roxy**

Roxy has been teaching for 18 years and has experience teaching in two school districts. In addition to earning her Bachelor’s degree in elementary education, Roxy has a Master’s degree in special education. Her teaching experiences range from her current position in grade one through experiences in grades two, five, six, seven, and eight. Prior to arriving in her current district, this professional provided co-teaching service delivery to students in a neighboring district. The professional focused on her role as a fifth grade co-teacher during the interview as she is not currently involved in co-teaching.

Roxy spoke of her journey to become a teacher as non-traditional. She was inspired to pursue art by her high school art teacher. Once in art school, Roxy realized her passion and her love of teaching. She worked as an art teacher, a freelance, and then found her niche in graduate school becoming a special education teacher.

Roxy has worked with me for approximately 10 years. She has held her current teaching position for 4 years and as previously noted, is no longer co-teaching. This interview was conducted at the local town library off the school campus. Roxy selected this location. The environment was peaceful and we did not encounter any individuals with the exception of the librarian that greeted us at the door. Roxy’s demeanor was passionate and reflective, which indicated to me that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer, and comfortable sharing her experiences co-teaching.
Roxy took great pride in her role as a special education co-teacher during the pilot for co-teaching back in 2009. She was able to connect her prior experiences within another district, the training she received in her current district, and her role in advocating for the use of this model as reasons for her passion to meet the needs of diverse learners. She spoke of how she and a colleague shared their initial experiences co-teaching with great fondness. She stated, “When you (me) allowed us to come back to faculty meetings and share our experiences and we shared with other teachers our enthusiasm was so great for what we had achieved that first year that I think other teachers began to say, ‘Oh, okay, well this isn't being forced on us’, they had a wonderful experience. And I think everybody became a little more open-minded.”

Samantha

Samantha has been teaching for 22 years with 10 of those years in the district where she is currently employed. Samantha earned a bachelor’s degree in rehabilitation services. She also has a master’s degree in elementary education. She currently holds a teaching certificate in elementary education. She has experience teaching grades one, two, and three. She is currently teaching grade three in a co-taught model.

Samantha has worked with me for approximately 10 years. She has held her current teaching position for 6 years and has been co-teaching for the past 5 years. Samantha was excited to share that she enjoys her current role, as it would not be enjoyable teaching in isolation. She enjoys the immediate collaboration with immediate feedback from her colleague.

This interview was conducted in a local coffee shop off of the school campus of
and selected by Samantha. The environment was active. Samantha’s demeanor was enthusiastic indicating to this me that she was comfortable in the space, comfortable with the interviewer, and comfortable sharing her experiences co-teaching.

Samantha noted that her journey led her to a school that supported students with emotional needs. The experience was a positive one that provided her experience in the classroom and with the curriculum. She reported that she enjoyed these aspects and elected to go back to school for a Master’s degree. Samantha indicated that she enjoys the benefits of her current role. Specifically, the ability to work closely with so many teachers. Furthermore, she reports that not only are the children learning, but also the colleagues appear to be learning as well.

Upon a deliberate and intentional analysis of the participants’ transcripts, the following four major themes and six sub themes emerged from the interviews in relationship to the research question and are discussed in the remainder of Chapter 4.

**Thematic Data Analysis**

Through the analysis of shared stories and reflections, four themes emerged: Themes in this study include: (1) school culture, (2) professional growth, (3) least restrictive environment, and (4) student success. It is notable that each above-mentioned theme emerged out of the responses gathered from the questions pertaining to the participants’ experiences teaching in a co-teaching model with upper elementary aged student populations.

**School Culture**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged throughout the semi-structured interviews was school culture. Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, Blanks, and On (2010) noted
no matter which model of co-teaching is being employed, in a successful co-teaching model partners support one another. “Effective co-teaching is as much an art as it is a science. Embracing one, but not the other, can diminish the effectiveness of co-teaching, in turn creating feelings of frustration and mistrust between partners” (p. 167). Co-teaching impacts school culture by encouraging the faculty to work together for the benefit of all students and the school culture has to promote and environment where teachers work collaboratively to meet the needs of diverse learners as well as share the responsibility for learning.

Within the theme of school culture, the following two subthemes became evident: collaborative teaching and shared responsibility. Through the lens of CHAT these two keys components may impact the implantation of co-teaching and thus the professionals’ ability toward adopting a proposed change to the implementation of co-teaching. Through an examination of the co-teaching environment, teachers identified both a collaborative culture as well as shared responsibility as keys to successful implementation. Without these two key components, co-teaching could produce a less than optimal result based on the interviewees’ experiences.

**Collaborative Teaching**

Historically, teachers have taught in isolation. One teacher in the presence of content in a classroom. Collaborative teaching requires two professional working together to meet the needs of the learners. Co-teaching is often referred to as collaborative teaching in the literature as the focus of this model (as a practice) is placed on the collaborative relationship between the co-teaching staff that is essential to its realization. When teachers reported on their experiences in co-teaching, a majority
(75%) of the teachers made statements that suggested feeling that a collaborative culture was a necessary component of the adopted change to implement co-teaching. When asked more specifically about this, Penelope, a regular education teacher, stated, “We plan daily several times a day, together. In the afternoon, we co-teach Literacy Writing, and Math. And I, myself, in the morning teach Science and Social Studies.” Another regular education teacher, Samantha, also reported on the collaborative nature of the relationship that she has with her co-teacher. She stated:

We practice co-teaching I think in many different ways depending, I would say, on the situation. There are times when we are ... We're always using the different models of co-teaching. There are times when one's leading and one's hanging back, supporting. There are times when we're parallel teaching, there are times when we are small group and station teaching, and there are times when based on services that need to be provided that students have pull out services too. I think we're doing everything but I think the most important thing is that throughout the day we're continually collaborating. There's always a plan of what's going on.

It was also notable that 100% of the teachers indicated that shared responsibility is essential to the successful implementation of co-teaching. Based on the responses provided by the interviewee, it is apparent that the idea of shared responsibility as a key component to the school culture required to make co-teaching work at this site. When teachers reported on their experiences in co-teaching, another key component that was identified was shared responsibility for student learning. A majority (70%) of the teachers made statements that suggested feeling that a culture of shared responsibility
was a necessary component of the adopted change to implement co-teaching. The idea of shared responsibility was evident throughout the interviews. When Jennifer, a Special Education teacher defined co-teaching she included in that definition. Jennifer noted: “Co-teaching is two certified teachers in a classroom sharing responsibilities of the classroom with their co-teacher. …We share responsibility for the planning and teaching. Jennifer went further to describe that the idea of shared responsibility extends beyond special education status and extends to all children included in the cohort of students that the teachers are responsible for.” She stated, “My co-teacher and I share the responsibility for students, whether they're our plan or not.” Lastly, when addressing curriculum planning, Jennifer noted, “As far as the planning and execution of the curriculum, I would say that it is a shared responsibility.” Samantha, a regular education teacher, also described the idea of shared responsibility. Samantha noted the differences between the current model of service delivery (which is co-teaching) and the previous model when she described her views on shared responsibility. She stated:

Before I truly felt like special education comes in, supports the classroom, and then you don't have that connection after. Then during the pull out time you have no idea what was going on during that time. The communication, it was just not very easy. That's the way it was. Now there's accountability on both sides. I need to be accountable to share what the plan is and what the outcomes need to be, and so does that special education person, whoever it is that you're co-teaching with.

Maria, a special education teacher echoed the sentiment regarding the importance of shared responsibility:
I think that one of the biggest parts of co-teaching is sharing the responsibilities. So, it's not just, okay I'm going to come into the classroom and then like do the lesson and that's it. We kind of have to work on planning things together and yeah know whether it's planning a lesson, planning what the days look like, planning the months, and planning what the whole year looks like. We have planning time that we go through what the days going to look like and even the nitty gritty things just talking or picking up the kids there's that sharing of just of regular education classroom responsibilities with the special education.

**Professional Growth**

The overarching theme of professional growth also appeared in 100% of the interviewee’s responses. The teachers interviewed indicated that they felt that their participation in the co-teaching model promoted the continuing process of learning for them. Specifically, the act of participating in co-teaching improved their pedagogical practices. The teachers each had a different perspective on the motivator that supported and promoted that growth. For example, Elizabeth, a regular education teacher, observed that participating in the co-taught model helped her. She stated:

> Co-teaching helps me stretch my expertise, because if I’m co-teaching, there’s somebody else I’m co-teaching literacy. So, I think sometimes I’ll do even a little bit more research, or I’ll look into like what best practices are so that I can also be like informing my co-teacher, but also like stretching myself a little bit, too She went further to note that “I like that part. It’s a little bit challenging, and I like that little bit of a challenge. So,
I think that professionally and personally it’s a stretch sometimes, but it’s a good stretch.

Gwendolyn, a special education teacher described the benefits eloquently when she discussed her ability to learn specific practices from her co-teaching teammate. Gwendolyn noted: “I think that I've grown as a professional by working with another teacher, who has a lot of strengths that are different than mine, and it allows us to use both of our strengths in a way that benefits the kids, and I think that that's the biggest benefit.” Further, Penelope, a regular education teacher noted that the actions of collaborating and working closely with a colleague prompt her to self reflect more frequently and as a result she has become a better teacher:

I've become a better teacher from planning with her. And it's just constant reflection, it's constant talking about kids and learning about their specific needs so that we can reach each child, whether they are on an IEP or not and helping them….I feel that the last few years have been my biggest growth years professionally, from collaborating with so many different professionals who have that variety of experiences and backgrounds and knowledge.

Lastly, Roxy, a former co-teacher, reflected on her experience and indicated that her content matter expertise was enhanced as well as her repertoire of skills by working closely with a strong teacher in math. Roxy noted:

I think it's made me a better teacher because I picked up really great teaching strategies and styles from other teachers. I think that I became a
far superior Math teacher when I was in the general education classroom. I also became a better tutor. I tutored students that required tutoring that were not like my IEP students, but I would be able to work with students and I knew exactly ... My students will say to me ‘now, when I'm doing my homework sometimes I hear your voice in my head reminding me of strategies and things to do.’ When I would be working with a child helping them figure out their math problems, I would hear the general educations teacher’s voice teaching the math lesson.

**Student Success**

Student Success was discussed by the interviewees as academic and social gains as a result of involvement within the co-teaching classroom. Therefore, student success encompasses two categories as the school experience extends beyond the isolationist view that school is only about gaining academic knowledge or content matter. The idea of student success also encompasses the social aspects of school and the student’s ability to interact with peers and grow socially.

The academic gains or the act of increasing academic knowledge was reported by 100% of the interviewees while the increased acquisition of social skills was noted by 63% of the interviewees. When describing the increased acquisition of knowledge, Penelope, a regular education teacher observed that special education students: “With their accommodations ... I have to say we had two IEP meetings today and the mother was so excited. She said it was the first time that her daughter’s brought home tests that they didn't fail. I feel that given the make-up of our classroom and the staffing, that all of the kids can achieve and reach their highest potential.” In fact, she credited the model
with providing the structure to enable the professionals the opportunity to target instruction to meet the needs of all learners. She described, “The great thing about the co-teaching model is that we're able to target the kids, and with the i-Ready program and with the writing prompts, and our Science and Social Studies curriculum, we're about to constantly progress monitoring so that we can make sure that our groups are made up so that we're stretching the kids that need to be stretched and pushing them to their highest potential.” Gwendolyn, her special education colleague, went further to describe her past experiences in a traditional pullout model and was able to compare and contrast the two service delivery models while specifically noting the academic growth opportunities afforded to students in each design:

I believe the academic outcomes are much better for students that participate in the co-teaching model, I've been a special education teacher in a traditional pull-out model and a push-in model and I feel like ... kids benefit from strategies being embedded in their regular classroom environment, and then there's more carry-over of those strategies so, times that you're pulling kids out I think that, you know, it works if it's an alternative program that they need, but in terms of the regular curriculum, I see that the kids absorb those strategies and make more independent gains in a co-teaching environment, where things are individualized to them in a way that they don't even realize, and that they're not separated from the group and ...I think it's a way to target their needs but it still holds them to a very high expectation.
Roxy, a former special education co-teacher, made a further observation regarding her own practice and her employment of high expectations. Roxy felt that the act of being present in the general education classroom servicing a diverse cohort of learners enabled her to calibrate and increase her expectations for student learning outcomes:

I found that being in the classroom and co-teaching with a general education teacher in the general education setting was an eye-opening experience because it showed me what the expectations are and the performance of general education students who are typical students. When you take children and you pull them out into another setting, you're working with them on a level in which your expectations for them and their IEP goals are. But, when you're in the general education classroom, you're watching and hearing other children answer and write and perform in the general education setting and you're realizing that you need to close that gap. It's not in isolation in the learning center. It's in the classroom setting. So I began to look at my students and say, ‘Wow, there's a gap here that I need to close.’ I almost felt as if I were doing them a disservice by keeping them in isolation in a pullout model. Keeping them in the classroom, you're seeing what other children are doing and you're able to bridge the gap to get them to where they need to be.

As previously noted, there are many aspects to the school experience. There is not only the academic experience, but also the social one for students. Maria, a special education teacher, described her thought on the stigmatization of student who is removed from the classroom.
I think before when there was a lot more of the pull out, those kids were looked at as like, ‘Why are they leaving the classroom?’ Although in our school the culture has changed significantly, that really wasn't the case, but I think having more of the push in and the support in the classroom that those students kind of, both the regular education students and the special education students get the opportunity to work together and kind of not look at those differences that they're being pulled out from. They're getting less stigmatized.

Caroline, a regular education teacher noted the lack of perceptual feeling around being labeled different as a result of the removal from a classroom for specialized instructional services:

I think the social outcomes are great because the kids not on IEPs no longer where they look at the kids as different, because they're in a classroom together with them all day. All of our services come in now and when we have OT come in, speech come in, they don't just work with those two kids. They're there helping everybody, so they're mixing it all up so it's not kind of a stigma that kids used to have, and it also allows them to shine in different areas, where the regular kids might not be able to. Then they can take leadership positions within the classroom, which is really great to see.

**Least Restrictive Environment**

The least restrictive environment requirement of IDEA requires that students with disabilities participate in both academic and nonacademic activities with their non-disabled general education peers. Under this directive, schools are guided to determine
the necessary supports and supplemental aids required to ensure that students with
disabilities are educated in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible
(Solis et al., 2012). The interviewees that participated in this research all (100%) spoke
of inclusionary practices within the general education classroom as a means to comply
with the schools inclusionary practices as philosophy of educating students within their
least restrictive learning environment. The school’s handbook defines inclusion as:

The School District is an inclusive school district. As such, we are a
collaborative culture that welcomes all members into our learning
community. With the recognition that students share more similarities than
differences, our learning community respects each individual’s unique
contributions. In our schools, we expect all adults to share the
responsibility to provide every student with access to and participation in
high quality general education.

Roxy, a former special education co-teacher, defined inclusion as follows:

Well, I think it means that everyone is working together, maybe not doing the
exact same thing or using the exact same materials maybe some students have
manipulatives, but everybody is working together towards a common outcome of
a lesson or unit and everybody is participating equally in the general education
classroom.”

Caroline, a regular education teacher, described the feeling of belonging experienced by
those participating in the co-taught model as opposed the perceived feeling of those
students prior to it’s implementation:
Before we co-taught, kids didn't feel like everybody was a member of the classroom, and now they see expectations that we've set for everyone, and they work really hard to meet the same expectations as their classmates. Instead of before they would get pulled out and know they were maybe have an easy test or the teacher would give them more help. Now, they know they have to do it like everybody else and the modifications are built in without them even realizing.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Special Education describes the proficiency threshold for meeting the needs of diverse learners on their adopted teacher rubric as:

Uses appropriate inclusive practices, such as tiered supports and scaffolded instruction, to accommodate differences in students’ learning needs, abilities, interests, and levels of readiness, including those of academically advanced students, students with disabilities, and English learners.

The idea of using the co-taught practices as a means to respectfully provide service delivery to this population (special education students) was noted by 100% of the participants. Jennifer, a special education teacher, described how the co-teaching model creates a diverse classroom that enables the professionals to differentiate instruction to meet student’s needs. Jennifer noted, “In our classroom, we have the top, we have the students that are doing really well because we can differentiate instruction, too. It’s not just a group of children that are ... it’s everybody learning what they need to learn.”

Gwendolyn, a special education teacher, reflected longitudinally on her practices to meet the needs of diverse learners and how the current model supports this practice:
I think what’s changed the most is approaching instruction in a way that is most meaningful for all kids, so putting some strategies and things into place that sort of target what we want as end results for students as readers and writers and math, and making that accessible for all kids, so that I think in previous models I was working with kids a lot individually or in smaller groups in a pull-out kind of way and those strategies were just being taught to them individually, but now we're putting a framework into place where that's embedded in the instruction for all kids in this model, and I think that's been really helpful because it's allowed us to, every year look at new resources to pull in, to make that effective, and so I think we're constantly changing what we do, and every year is a little different ... but it's always moving in a better direction, so I think from your year there's some strategies that we change and others that we keep but it's always different, and so when I look back I think there's a lot more ... refining of what we have been doing.

Summary

I interviewed eight teachers with knowledge of and experience in co-teaching children in grades three, four, and five in full-inclusion general education classrooms. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, participants shared their thoughts and feelings, both positive and negative, as they related to their experiences, often discussing the impact that co-teaching has had on them (personally and professionally) as well as on their students (socially and academically).

This study revealed many important findings, the first being that the school culture is very important and investment in the outcomes of students needs to be shared
while the programmatic design of the lessons needs to be completed collaboratively. In fact, one of the respondents, a regular education teacher, Elizabeth quantified it to a “50/50 split.”

Secondly, an unanticipated outcome of this research was the idea that participation in the co-teaching model promoted professional growth. Teachers are learning from one another and working to improve their practices as a means to support one another. Another important finding from this study emerged from the theme of inclusion and meeting the diverse needs of students within the general education setting as opposed to providing services via a pull out model. The notion that collaboration can serve as collaboration is noted within the literature on Professional Development. The idea is that colleagues can learn from one another. In fact, one can assert that this is more likely to occur amongst co-teachers working collaboratively on a frequent basis. The last major finding of this research study was revealed through critically analyzing the theme of student success. Based on the observations of the teachers, the growth of students is apparent in both the academic and social domains.

Before continuing on to Chapter 5, it is important to briefly examine the school based culture where the professionals that were interviewed work. This school had participated in a change model process as a means to meet the diverse needs of the identified “high needs” subgroup. Utilization of the Burke-Litwin Causal Modal of Organization (Burke, 2014) was utilized. I as the central authority figure, worked with the larger school teaching population as a means to define a vision for the school based team and lead a change initiative. Using this model, the principal served as the leader while teachers served as leaders amongst the school staff in a distributed leadership model. Burke (2014) clearly identified the difference between the two roles:
Organization transformation requires a change leader … who personally identifies with the change that is needed and sees no distinction between the organization’s new mission and his or her mission. Transactional change requires managers who see their jobs as constantly focusing on improvement and quality rather than on an overhaul of the local system (p. 230). Kotter and Cohen (2002) noted that part of positive change requires getting people together and defining a clear vision. In this process, the principal served as the change leader charged with defining the vision, and the teachers functioned as the managers as they met to focus on how to improve the co-teaching model.

Burke (2014) stated, “Organizations change all of the time, each and everyday” (p. 1). The school has been subjected to numerous changes during the past several years. One of the most significant changes has been the implementation of a co-teaching model to better meet the needs of the school’s student population. This change process can be analyzed through the lens of Burke’s four-phase model. Within this framework four phases are defined: prelaunch, launch, post-launch, and sustaining the change. These phases encompass activities relating to leader self-examination, establishing and communicating need, clarifying vision, dealing with resistance, maintaining consistency and persistence, dealing with unanticipated consequences, sustaining momentum, and choosing successors.

**Prelaunch**

The work of Gladwell comes to mind when describing Burke’s concept of prelaunch. In his book *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell identified three key individuals, connectors, mavens and salesmen. Connectors are individuals “who link us up with the world, who bridge Omaha and Sharon, who introduced us to our social circles.”
Connectors are people with a very special gift of bringing people together.” “A Maven is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. This person likes to initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests … they like to be helpers in the marketplace.” “Salesmen are the people with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups.” Gladwell also describes these salespeople. “Responsible for starting word-of-mouth epidemics which means that if you are interested in starting a word of mouth epidemic, your resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups” (Gladwell 2001, p. 256). During the initial implementation of the co-teaching model at the school I strategically employed teachers to work as Connectors, Mavens and Salespeople. The benefits of having a salesperson became quickly apparent as this individual fulfilled the role through spending success that she experienced working in the model.

Launch

In this phase, the message about the need for change needs to be delivered. The organizational change needs to be clearly communicated, activities need to be initiated, and plans need to be prepared in order to deal with resistance. In this phase I worked with the co-teaching study group in order to craft a vision and create a structure and a timeline for implementation. I held the opinion that the staff would respond to the change if the leader demonstrated staff buy-in. The teachers in the co-teaching study group represented various grade levels and disciplines within the school and this was important as they possessed the ability to refocus the teaching staff on how to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student learning profile. Furthermore, this group was
well-versed in the need for a change (the data) and the best practice that was being 
launched (co-teaching).

**Post Launch**

The post launch is described by Burke (2014) as the point in which it appears that 
“the process has taken on a life of it’s own” to the leader (p. 318). Burke further 
described multiple leverage strategies that were utilized in the change process. As it is 
this researcher’s opinion that the organization has launched this initiative and post launch 
practices will be highlighted as warranted actions. Lastly, practices involved in 
sustaining change will be described as recommendations to enhance this initiative.

Organizational change in schools is complex and time consuming. The simple 
but powerful phrase “change is a process, not an event” connotes that something is 
happening over a period of time to transform individuals and situations (Hall & Loucks 
1977). The implementation of co-teaching started with researching the topic during the 
2009-2010 school year and reached a pilot year in the 2011-2012 school year. During the 
2013-2014 school year this initiative was launched. The topic of co-teaching and the 
implementation of this model continues to be extremely interesting and has helped the 
school improve its Level 2 status within the state of Massachusetts accountability system.

Furthermore, the focus on teambuilding has been embedded in all of the 
discussions on co-teaching. Murawski and Swanson (2001) stated, “The roles and 
relationships between general educators and special educator proliferates the research on 
this topic.” As the leader, it is important to note that significant work continues to be 
done with the school staff. The school has a study group directed at improving the
professional culture of the organization and most of this work has focused on
teambuilding and improving staff relations. Through research this group has utilized the
following quote to guide its work: “Schools with a high degree of ‘relational trust’ are
more likely to make the kind of changes that help raise student achievement.
Improvements in such areas as classroom instruction, curriculum, teacher preparation,
and professional development have little chance of succeeding without improvements in
a school’s social climate” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The recommendation resulting
from this work would be for this study group to continue forward and focus on enhancing
relational trust in a professional environment to enhance and support student learning for
all students at the school.

Lastly, under my direction, the teaching faculty at the school became actively
engaged in the study of effective learning and teaching practices as a collective unit.
Learning communities were established and meet on a regular basis. Learning
communities are small groups of faculty and/or staff members who meet regularly to
identify new programs or topics to investigate, gather research and studies on new
approaches, or implement and study the effectiveness of new practices and share these
results with other school faculty. The teachers benefit from learning communities as they
enable them to integrate new learning into their classroom practices, reduce professional
and social isolation, address specific and relevant concerns, and allow for in-depth
learning over a period of time. One of these study groups is focused on the school’s
inclusion philosophy and the implementation of the co-teaching model. The district’s
inclusion statement is as follows:
We are an inclusive school district. As such, we are a collaborative culture that welcomes all members into our learning community. Recognizing that students share more similarities than differences, our learning community respects each individual’s unique contributions. As an inclusive school district, it is expected that all adults share the responsibility for providing every student with access to and participating in a high quality general education.

The co-teaching and inclusion study group meets frequently to discuss the implementation of this co-teaching model, the execution of the school’s inclusion philosophy, and advises me as the building leader on ways the groups feel we must proceed to meet the needs of all children in their least restrictive environments in compliance with the Individual With Disabilities Act. Based on Burke’s writings, this “self directed work group” has remained in place in order to provide advisement going forward.

These factors, the participants’ answers to my questions, and the themes that emerged from their answers point to some of the factors that support the implementation of a co-teaching model. The following final chapter explores the implications of these themes and strategies for practice. Suggested conclusions are compared with the reviewed literature to identify areas of consistency and of divergence. The limitations of the study and some recommendations for further research are discussed as well.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

Review of the Study

This study was conducted to examine the first-hand experiences of regular and special education teachers implementing co-teaching practices with upper elementary student populations. While further exploring these first hand experiences, this study aimed to specifically ascertain teachers’ “experiences of co-teaching practices with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades?” Multiple factors that have made a significant impact on the teachers’ experiences were revealed during this research study. I determined through qualitative research and a through the analysis of these shared stories and reflections the following four emergent themes. Teachers identified school culture, professional growth, least restrictive environment, and student success as essential components necessary to the successful implementation of co-teaching with special education students in the upper elementary grades. Based in the interviewees’ experiences, without these components, co-teaching may produce a less than optimal result.

In this chapter, the central findings are reviewed as they are pertinent to the research literature, the limitations of the study will be discussed, and recommendations will be provided for further research. The chapter will conclude with implications for professional practice.

Implications for Theory

In this qualitative research study, I analyzed the primary research question through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a means to reveal the key aspects associated with delivering instruction within a co-teaching model. As the
following primary research question: What are teachers’ experiences of co-teaching practices with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades? was addressed in a single case study described in the previous chapter. Through the analysis of these shared stories and reflections, four themes emerged: Themes in this study included: (1) school culture, (2) professional growth (3) least restrictive environment and (4) student success.

**Implications for Future Research**

This case study has identified four key components of co-teaching adding to the existing body of co-teaching literature. However, the given scope, purpose, and limitations of this case study affected the results in a way that prohibits an elaborate transferability of the finding to other settings. Therefore, further research that increases sample size and type of sample is recommended.

Given the small sample size of this study, it is recommended that further research expands the sample size to increase the validity of transferring results to other settings. In addition, the expansion beyond the northern suburban school district in which the study was conducted may offer additional or conflicting results due to the environmental and socio-economic factors that can affect these settings. A qualitative review of co-teaching practices with this increased and diverse sample size may provide new information to assist with the delivery of co-teaching models.

A survey completed by general and special education co-teachers could offer statistical data to help inform the depth and breadth of co-teacher needs. Lastly, further scrutiny on how general education teachers and special education teachers of lower elementary (K-2), middle school or high school teachers have implemented co-teaching
could help clarify successful strategies on how to implement co-teaching as described in this study.

**Direct Applications for Practice**

Through the analysis of these shared stories and reflections, four themes emerged: (1) school culture, (2) professional growth (3) least restrictive environment and (4) student success. As a result of these emergent themes numerous applications become appropriate regarding the implementation of a co-teaching model based on the information garnered in this qualitative research study. Understanding how to and why to implement co-teaching practices with upper elementary aged level students would be of great value to many constituencies. School leaders would be able to implement co-teaching practices more efficiently and effectively given a new understanding of the importance of school culture and professional growth. Teaching professionals would be immersed in a teaching environment that promotes the meeting of diverse needs through the implementation of inclusive practices. Lastly, improved academic as well as social outcomes may be experienced by the student population (both general and special education students) experiencing the co-teaching model.

The school culture is imperative to the success for the co-teaching model. School culture generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions. Specifically, this carries over to the way teachers treat and perceive their student populations. Cook et al. (1999) studied the attitudes of principals and special education teachers toward the inclusion of students with mild disabilities. The researchers examined the attitudes of principals and special education teachers in order to provide “a
unique comparison of those who determine school policy and school-level resource allocation (i.e., principals) and those with the most training and experience regarding the instruction and management of students with mild disabilities (i.e., special education teachers)” (p. 200).

The implementation of co-teaching promotes professional growth. Working with other professionals provided participants in this study the opportunity for professional growth and the support that is lacking structurally in an isolated single staff member-teaching environment. In a review of more than 60 studies of teacher learning, Borko (2004) noted powerful professional development occurs in contexts that feature interactions among individual learning, group learning, and professional development programs. The author’s conclusion was that impactful learning occurred when individual teachers were able to rethink and redesign instructional practices in response to their insights regarding students’ thinking processes. (p. 6). Walther-Thomas (1997) pointed to some of the potential benefits as teachers participating in a co-teaching model of instruction reported, “increased professional satisfaction, opportunities for professional growth, personal support, and increased opportunities for collaboration” (p. 401).

Studies of teacher development have shown that collaboration with colleagues is a key factor in continued professional growth. In her longitudinal case study of reform in an elementary school, Coburn (2001) described ways that teachers worked together to understand instructional improvement initiatives. Conversations that occurred formally in grade level meetings and informally with clusters of their closest colleagues demonstrated a process of “sense making,” which enabled teachers to integrate new ideas
into their work in their classrooms. Coburn concluded, “Work with other teachers helped them grapple with multiple and sometimes conflicting messages” (p. 162).

The use of co-teaching as a service delivery option for special education students is respectful of the federal mandates for inclusion. Villa et al. (2008), asserted co-teaching has become one of many collaborative strategies that schools are looking at in an effort to meet the needs of all students within this educational framework that we call school. Achieving this is one of the hallmarks of IDEA and specifically the LRE provisions contained within. Samantha, a regular education teacher, noted:

I think I had mentioned before I cannot imagine it any other way. If I were, for instance, to go someplace else to work and had students on IEPs, and it was still that one special education teacher servicing three different grade levels, and the kids were being pulled out ... That disconnect of services, if I were to have to go back to that I'm not sure that I could because that aha moment of reflecting back and saying, ‘This is so how it should be.’

Looking at learning from the perspective of Vygotsky is important as he asserted that learning happens initially between people (externally or socially) and then moved onto the intrapsychological level. This perspective emphasizes the social origin of learning. Through the implementation of the co-teaching model it is important to note that this occurs within two of the stakeholder groups. Student learning directly for students as well as teachers learning directly from teachers. These individuals are unknowingly or cognizantly participating in the shaping of their own learning.

Students who matriculate within a co-teaching environment demonstrate growth academically as well as socially. As noted by Sailor (2002), the foundation of this
argument was that all children, disabled and non-disabled, should have access to the same academic and social opportunities within the school. The focus is not on the single domain of academic growth but on two domains under the larger umbrella defined as learning. Student success is measured and discussed within the two domains of academic growth as well as social growth or social learning. Walther-Thomas (1997) stated teachers reported that students with disabilities in co-taught classes learned appropriate classroom behaviors from their peers and behaved more appropriately in mainstream settings than they did in special education classrooms. In these cases, the teachers attributed students’ improved social skills performance to a number of factors, including good role models and a strong desire by special education students to “fit in” in the general education classroom. This also seems to be true when a comparative analysis was completed comparing two setting where special education students receive their specialized instruction. When comparing observable behaviors in both a substantially separate setting and within a co-taught model, Walther-Thomas (1997) found students with disabilities had more appropriate behaviors in co-taught classrooms than student taught in resource room classrooms.

To Co-teach Or Not to Co-teach, That Is The Question

According to an old African proverb, “when two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.” It is important to recognize individuals who may not be proponents of the education design described in this paper. hooks (2003) noted, “When I demonize them or see them only as always capable of being enemies, I become part of the problem and not the solution” (p. 75). Since special education is a set of services, rather than a specific place a child goes within a school, the general education classroom is considered
the LRE for most students. This means such students spend most of their school day in general education with “push in” or “pull out” support from the special education staff. In other words, a child’s educational programming may or may not be implemented in the general education classroom. These services may occur in a different “special education” classroom outside of the general education classroom as “pull out” services where the student is removed from the classroom to receive specialized instruction. Within the schools model for inclusive teaching, the focus is on implementing “push in” services for the schools student population.

There is historical precedent indicating that some educators believe that students with disabilities are better served in substantially separate or specialized programs designed for their disability type. In order to move from this design and to shift student populations from more restrictive to less restrictive settings, a mindset shift around student placement must take place. Tomko (1996) stated:

Inclusion in school requires a shift in the paradigm, instead of getting the children ready for the regular class, the regular class gets ready for the child. It’s not a decision of zero or one hundred percent, but what ever balance that can be achieved to maximize meeting all of the child’s needs. (p. 1)

Advocates for a more restrictive “pull out” model include Sindelar and Deno (1978). These authors concluded that resource rooms were more effective than general education classrooms in improving academic achievement of students with learning disabilities (LD). Sindelar and Deno (1978) conducted a narrative review of 17 studies to determine the effectiveness of resource rooms. Their findings indicated resource rooms were more effective than regular classrooms in improving the academic achievement of
students with learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral disturbances. Sindelar and Deno noted, “One clear trend has begun to emerge: The most carefully designed studies have . . . obtained the most affirmative results for special education programs!” (p. 24). There is an antiqued belief system at play that is in stark contrast to the legislative mandate for education in the LRE. This belief is echoed in the work of Francis, Joseph, and Howard (2004) who noted, “It was believed that students with disabilities were better taught with their own kind, and that they required special teaching approaches, curriculum and materials” (p. 15). This model, which reflects the “pull out” program, creates an environment that does not provide equal access to all learners and promotes a separate and not equal access to materials as well as pedagogical practices.

**Conclusion**

Co-teaching inclusionary practices are respectful of the federal, state and district mandates, which require specialized instruction to be provided in each child’s least restrictive environment, which is always considered to be the child’s home school. Home school is considered the school in which the student would attend regardless of a disabling condition. For the reasons reported thought this dissertation, it is my belief that this practice is the most efficient and respectful means to need the needs of this population of diverse learners while creating a “disability blind” environment that provides equal access to the core general education curriculum and the socialization that accompanies that exposure. It is important to recognize the arguments and research that supports “pull out” services. Readers must be cognizant that the actions of removing a child from the general education setting may be necessary to meet their individual needs. However, this action should be justified though the individualized educational planning
process as a need, as this action places a child in a more restrictive educational setting outside of the general education setting. In these cases, the students may not have direct access to the curriculum and pedagogical practices employed and utilized in the general education setting, and they put a child in a setting that does not promote the equal participation of all groups.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to reveal the first hand experiences of regular education and special education teachers implementing co-teaching practices with upper elementary student populations. The primary research question: What are teachers’ experiences of co-teaching practices with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades? led to much data that identified the essential component necessary for the implementation of this model as identified by teachers working within the context. Hopefully, this study fills a gap in the literature in regards to the identification of the key components necessary to essentially implement co-teaching with special education student populations in the upper elementary grades.

An important area of emphasis outlined in this research is the impact of classroom level programmatic design for students with disabilities. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that disability status is considered the predominant marginalizing factor. Socioeconomic status is also considered a marginalizing factor. It must be noted that the implementation of this model does carry a budgetary concern that may hinder the implementation in districts where funding is a major concern. In this scenario, the marginalizing factor may not be disability status but rather socioeconomic status. According to Anyon (1980), “Public schools in complex industrial societies like our own make available different types of educational experience and curriculum
knowledge available to students in different social classes.” Specifically, a hidden agenda exists in our public school system and that hidden agenda is to provide instruction at the students’ current socioeconomic level as a means to ensure that students do not receive instruction that provides multidimensional and varied teaching methods to reach their individual needs. This pattern of selective schooling greatly undermines the opportunities for equal access and success for all students. Practitioners need to be cognizant of the use of the general education classroom as a cost saving measure. Taking a proactive approach as a means to prevent movement to more restrictive settings may serve districts well as the general education classroom can be viewed as a less costly placement when compared to other placement options on the least restrictive environment continuum.

Obtaining more information on classroom placement options offered to students with disabilities is crucial in determining whether or not the design of an inclusive co-teaching model should be established for this student population across a variety of grades as well as types of schools. This research focused on the implementation of this model with upper elementary aged students. Next steps include the implementation of this model in lower elementary grades and across schools in the district under study. Considering the implementation of this model in rural and urban districts is certainly an opportunity for any researcher to explore and enhance the applicability of this work.
REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.1177/009430610403300366


https://doi.org/10.1007/s13398-014-0173-7.2

https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259902000403


implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2008.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: To ensure the free appropriate public education of all children with disabilities. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.


## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background Information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How long have you been working in education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How long have you been a certified professional teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is your current teaching position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How long have you been in this position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Describe your role within the co-teaching model at the J. Turner Hood School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do you describe co-teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do you practice co-teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Please describe your perceptions of the academic outcomes of special education students participating in the co-teaching model as opposed to the traditional pullout model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Please describe your perceptions of the social outcomes of special education students participating in the co-teaching model as opposed to the traditional pullout model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you believe that the implementation of co-teaching practices are effective means of improving student outcomes for special education students thus increasing this student population’s opportunity for equal access to the general education curriculum. Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does inclusion mean to you? Do you believe that others share your definition of inclusion? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Based on your experiences, do special education students make progress in a co-teaching environment and, if so, how? (Why?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Based on your experiences, do general education students make progress in a co-teaching environment and, if so, how? (Why?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional Factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are many factors, which may have impacted your students’ outcomes during your time as a co-teacher. Can you explain the benefits and challenges of co-teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How has co-teaching impacted you personally and professionally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does inclusion mean to you? What do you think inclusion mean to your colleagues? What do you think inclusion means to your students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has a culture of shared responsibility for student outcomes evolved? How? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does the relationship between the co-teaching professional need to look like in order to be successful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection on Process</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It has now been 6-7+ years and many students and staff have participated in the co-teaching model at your school. If you could, please reflect on how your teaching experiences may have shifted overtime from the time when you began teaching in this model to where you are at now working within this setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What has changed and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If you were to select 1 key &quot;ah-ha&quot; moment that you have experienced during your participation as a teacher in the co-teaching model, what is that moment and why was it so meaningful to you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

I have been in the doctor of education program at Northeastern University for the past six years. I am finally to the point in the process where I am ready to begin my research, and I am looking for study participants.

My research seeks to gain insight into the experiences of teachers implementing a co-teaching model. In order to learn about the experiences of teachers, I need study participants, which is the purpose of this letter.

I am requesting volunteers to participate in this study. There is one requirement for the participants in my study: participants will be either general education or special education teachers that are currently or have previously worked as co-teacher at the designated site. I will by utilizing interviews as a means to collect data for this study. Interviews will last 45 minutes. Each participant will be given the choice as to where he or she prefers for the interview to occur, though no interviews can take place in any of my workspaces per Northeastern University’s IRB. You also have the right to not answer any questions they prefer not to answer and to leave the study at any time. After the interview has been transcribed and the data has been analyzed, I will ask to meet with participants once more to confirm the data collected from the participants. You have the choice to review as much of the data collected as they wish.

Please know that should you choose to participate in this study that you might also choose to leave the study at any time. Please let me know if there are any other questions or concerns about this study that I may address for you.

If you have any questions about the study or are interested in participating, please contact me at mckay.g@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters at b.sankofawaters@northeastern.edu. Since this is a research study being conducted through Northeastern University, it is required that I follow all procedures to maintain a valid study and kindly ask that you contact me about this study through the contact information I have provided to you in this letter and not through our district; emails to any other email address must be deleted without response.

Thanks for the consideration, Glen S. McKay
APPENDIX C

Participant Consent Form

Northeastern University, Ed.D. Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, Student Researcher, Glen S. McKay

Title of Project: Case By Case: An Exploration of upper Elementary Co-Teaching Experiences in Special Education Learning Spaces

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the experiences of regular education and special education teachers implementing a co-teaching model.

**Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?**

We are asking you to be in this study because you meet the participant requirements of this study. You are either a general education or special education teacher that is currently or has previously worked as co-teacher at the designated site.

**Why is this research study being done?**

There is a gap in research on co-teaching outlining the experiences of teachers implementing a co-teaching model.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in one interview where you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your experiences co-teaching.

**Where will this take place, and how much of my time will it take?**

You have been given the opportunity to choose where the interviews will take place, though no part of this study may occur in any of the student researcher’s workspace. The interview will require approximately 45 minutes of your time, but no more than an hour. After the interviews have been transcribed, I will present you with the opportunity to review the transcription of your interviews to confirm your statements and to clarify any remarks you feel are unclear. After the data has been analyzed you will have the option to review the data collected in the study and ask any lingering questions.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There is no calculable risk or discomfort for this study. You are not obligated to answer any questions and may stop participation in any part of the study at any time.
Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, all the information gathered in this study will potentially lead to new information for teachers and administrators in school systems about co-teaching and will uncover your experiences.

Who will see the information about me?

Only the researcher will know the information directly pertaining to you. During this study the school system will have the name the Bernard Village School District and you will be given a pseudonym in all areas of the collection of data. All others who read the data in this study will only know the pseudonyms. All information will be kept strictly confidential following IRB guidelines, and all transcripts and computer records will be destroyed within three years of study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Yes, you may stop your participation in this study at any time. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you choose not to and may stop your involvement in this study at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters at b.sankofawaters@northeasterns.edu or (617) 390-3852 at any time.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection

960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115.

Tel: 617-373-4588,

Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to participants.

Is there anything else I need to know?

If you have questions that have not been answered in this consent form, please let the IRB administrator or the principal investigator know and they will be happy to elaborate or provide further assistance.
I agree to take part in this research.

__________________________________________            ________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

__________________________________________
Printed Name of Participant

__________________________________________
Signature of the Researcher                      Date

__________________________________________
Printed Name of the Researcher
APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: October 6, 2017  IRB #: CPS17-08-09
Principal Investigator(s): Billye Sankofa Waters
                        Glen S. McKay
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
        Northeastern University
Title of Project: Case by Case: An Exploration of Upper Elementary Co-
                 Teaching Experiences in Special Education Learning
                 Spaces
Participating Sites: School permission in file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: OCTOBER 5, 2018

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
APPENDIX E

SITE APPROVAL

Research Consent

As you know, I have been in the doctor of education program at Northeastern University for the past several years. I am finally to the point in the process where I may begin my research. In order to begin my research I need permission from the school system in which I will conduct my research. As an employee of this district for the past 10 years, I would prefer to conduct my research in North Reading Public Schools. I will be protecting the school system and participants by using pseudonyms in all aspects of the study and publications about the study.

The research will gain insight into the experiences of both general education and special education teachers implementing a co-teaching model. In order to learn about the experiences of these teachers, I need to gain access to them, which is why I am writing this letter.

I would like to interview at least six teachers that have participated in the co-teaching model. I will conduct one interview with each participant that will last for at least 45 minutes, and they will be given the choice as to where and when they prefer for the interview to occur. These interviews will be conducted outside of the school hours and will not disrupt the professionals teaching hours.

I have attached the IRB approval form, the letter I will send to possible participants, and the interview questions that will be asked to the participants. Please let me know if there are any questions or concerns about this study that I may address for you.

I approve the research to take place in North Reading Public Schools.

Signature of person agreeing for the study to occur  Date

Printed name of person agreeing for the study to occur

Signature of the researcher  Date

Printed name of the researcher
APPENDIX F

THE KEEPER OF THE SPRING
The Keeper of the Spring

This story has been attributed to the late Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate.

There was once an old man who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. He had been hired by the village council many years ago to clear away the debris from the pools of water up in the mountain crevices that fed the lovely stream flowing through their village. With faithful, silent regularity, he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches and wiped away the silt that would otherwise choke and contaminate the fresh flow of water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for visitors. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear stream; picnickers gathered along its banks; and the view of the water from local shops and cafes was picturesque beyond description.

Years passed. One evening the council met for its semiannual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, they noticed a small amount that was being paid to the "keeper of the spring." The village treasurer asked, "Who is this 'keeper of the spring'? Why do we keep him on the payroll year after year? No one ever sees him. Have any of you ever met this man? For all we know, he is simply taking our money and doing us no good whatsoever. In my opinion, this person is no longer necessary."

Everyone agreed with the treasurer and the council voted unanimously to dismiss the old man.

For several weeks, nothing much changed. The village went about with its business as usual. But by autumn, the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools that fed the stream, hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon, someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the water. A couple days later the water was much darker. Within another week or two, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was soon detected. The swans left the village, as did the tourists. The economy of the village was in serious peril. Likewise was the health of the village, as many were getting sick from drinking the water.

An emergency meeting of the village council was held. After much discussion, they realized their error in judgment and they hired back the old "keeper of the spring." And within a few weeks, the beautiful stream came back to life. The swans and visitors gradually returned, as did the vitality and well-being of the little village in the Alps.

What the "keeper of the spring" meant to the little village, we Christians mean to the world. Jesus called us "salt," which is to say that we are "preservers" of what is good and true in the world. Like the old man in the mountains, we are called to serve--and to be faithful. We may not get a lot of recognition or appreciation for our efforts, but we have the power to change the world. That's what Jesus wants us to do. He put us here to serve, and in a very real sense, the well-being of the whole world is dependent upon us. We do make a difference!
### Demographic Breakdown of Student Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Total Student Population</th>
<th>Number of Classroom</th>
<th>Class Sizes (Highlighted Is Co-taught)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22, 18, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20, 20, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19, 21, 23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>