REACHING ALL LEARNERS: A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY ON SPECIAL EDUCATION INCLUSION CO-TEACHING

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Abstract

Special education services have come a long way since placing students with learning disabilities in a separate setting away from their peers was the norm. Current practices allow special education students to be educated among their peers in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). One way this is accomplished is by having these students attend classes in a general education classroom with a general education teacher and a special education teacher. While this setting may seem ideal and may appear to allow those with learning challenges to more gainfully access the general education curriculum, this co-teaching inclusion model is not always easy to develop or maintain. Teachers with different personalities, values, experiences, and backgrounds do not always easily attain compatibility in the general education classroom and therefore reaching every learner in the classroom can be challenging. Past practices indicate that certain criteria are needed to successfully create and maintain a beneficial and working co-teaching experience.

This narrative case study sought to reveal the opportunities for success in co-teaching classrooms as well as crucial factors in establishing successful partnerships as co-teachers. While many classrooms seek to offer an ideal model, criteria for successful implementation may be lacking. This study offers suggestions for academic success through co-teaching, which directly benefits the diverse learners in inclusion classrooms.

Keywords: inclusion, co-teaching, collaboration, compromise, special education, differentiated instruction, special needs, disabilities
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## Contents

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION ...........................................................................................................6
  Statement of the problem ...........................................................................................................6
  Positionality ...............................................................................................................................10
  Background of Special Education and Inclusion .................................................................13
  Research Criteria and Inquiry .................................................................................................15
  Research Questions .................................................................................................................17
  Theoretical Framework ..........................................................................................................17
  Summary .................................................................................................................................21

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW ...............................................................................................23
  Introduction ...............................................................................................................................23
  History of Special Education Inclusion .................................................................................26
  Collaboration Between Special and General Education Teachers .......................................28
  Teacher Training .......................................................................................................................29
  Administrative Support ..........................................................................................................31
  General and Special Educators’ Attitudes Toward Inclusion .................................................31
  Summary .................................................................................................................................36

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN ...............................................................................................38
  Narrative Case Study .............................................................................................................38
  Research Questions ...............................................................................................................40
  Research Criteria ...................................................................................................................40
  Presentation of Findings .........................................................................................................45
  Summary .................................................................................................................................47

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS .............................................................................................47
  Context of the Study ...............................................................................................................48
  The Special Education Teachers ...........................................................................................52
  The General Education Teachers ...........................................................................................61
  Prominent Themes ................................................................................................................72
  Summary .................................................................................................................................81

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS ..............................................................................82
  Review of Problem of Practice ..............................................................................................82
  Review of Methodology .........................................................................................................83
  Discussion of Major Findings .................................................................................................85
  Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework .............................................94
  Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature Review .......................................................98
  Significance of the Study .......................................................................................................104
  Conclusion ...............................................................................................................................106
  Future Studies .........................................................................................................................108
Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

My problem of practice is the need for effective collaborative co-teaching between special education and general education teachers in inclusion classes to successfully meet the needs of students on Individualized Education Programs (IEP). Special education students, especially in the often socially stressful years of secondary school, generally do not seek to be singled out as needing special education services. Successful co-teaching can help ease their anxiety as well as reach the students who need services to access the general education curriculum. My research focuses on solutions to better means of collaboration, teaching practices, and co-teaching in order to best serve the needs of these students. The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to capture how two sets of teachers in inclusion classrooms effectively collaborate to meet the needs of their students. The overall research question guiding this inquiry is:

The challenges of inclusion in a secondary school setting. Secondary school is not often reflected upon as a time of acceptance and joy, but rather as a time of turmoil and magnified worry. A mundane event that may have raised little concern at other stages of life does not seem that way during the teenage school years when there are so many physical and intellectual changes. The average secondary school student is greatly concerned about what others think, is more concerned about approval of peers than parents, and worries about how he compares to others. He attends classes with many issues besides academics on his mind.

Daily life in school secondary is difficult enough without the additional angst of being singled out as a child on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) who needs different
academic services. An IEP is a legal document created by a team of teachers, parents and special education team members. It specifies services that enable special education students the means to access the curriculum along with their peers. Attending classes separately from one’s peers can be isolating and attention grabbing. This separation can cause unwanted focus on the inadequacies of a student’s academics as well as his or her emotional and behavioral needs. The physical and mental changes that occur during adolescence are stressful enough without the added burden of attending separate classes. Students on IEPs are already different than their peers as they require additional supports to help them achieve. Receiving special education services places them in an additional category of “different,” and different is not always a good place to be during adolescence. Inclusion classes with the general educator and special educator as collaborative co-teachers working together help ease this burden.

For the purpose of this research, special education will be defined as a “set of services, not a place, which includes adapting instruction (what’s presented, how it’s presented) to address the unique needs of the child that result from a disability” (IDEA, 2017). After students are referred for testing and then evaluated for possible disabilities, special education services are usually recommended if the child is found to have one or more of the following disabilities: intellectual disability; a hearing impairment, including deafness; a speech or language impairment; a visual impairment, including blindness; an emotional disturbance; an orthopedic impairment; autism; traumatic brain injury; other health impairment; a specific learning disability; deaf-blindness; or multiple disabilities (IDEA, 2017). It is important to note that special needs students have many different types of disabilities, not just learning disabilities. Children with special needs have a wide variety of challenges that require specialized services.
Research has found that “special needs conjures up more associations with developmental disabilities (such as intellectual disability) whereas disability is associated with a more inclusive set of disabilities” (Gernsbacher, Raimond, Balinghasay, & Boston, 2016).

As the word itself states, “inclusion” includes challenged learners in the general education classroom along with special educators who are able to differentiate (offer different versions of) instruction in order to allow them to access the general education curriculum. In inclusion classrooms, both special and general educators utilize creative and diverse lesson plans to reach all their students. Inclusion is a form of co-teaching, where each teacher contributes equally to the classroom. Co-teaching “provides a richly differentiated learning environment” (Tannock, 2009) in order for both general education students and special education students to achieve their full potentials in a classroom run by two teachers.

Special education inclusion services differ greatly by school, by town, and by state. A special education inclusion teacher can be in a classroom and work as a helper, or the special education teacher can be act as a co-teacher, with both teachers working collaboratively to instruct their diverse students of different abilities. While the definition of inclusion varies widely, it can be defined as a model of instruction “in which students with varying levels of disabilities attend their neighborhood school, where they are educated with general education students in the same classrooms” (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010).

Students on IEPs face unique challenges inside the general education classroom. To reach their special education students, general education teachers must run their classrooms with these challenges in mind. Inclusion teachers are trained to service their special education students with their unique needs taken into consideration for every lesson plan. General education and special
education teachers are faced with different challenges when trying to provide the best services for students on IEPs. By working collaboratively and teaching in a co-teaching environment, these teachers can create a learning atmosphere where the needs of all their students are met. The question of how such collaboration can be effectively created and sustained for the benefit of their students’ needs to be a priority to attain growth and success.

**Success and obstacles in inclusion.** Special education and general education teachers must help IEP students to access their needed services without isolating them from their peers. Successful inclusion co-teaching classrooms can provide this service. Both general education teachers and special education teachers need to collaborate in order to allow students on IEPs to be comfortable and confident in the general education classroom. Teachers need to meet frequently and provide accommodations and modifications in classroom materials. (Accommodations change how the student accesses the material; modifications alter the actual curriculum.) Professional development workshops and in-service learning sessions should encompass inclusion classroom models and elaborate on the many benefits of successful co-teaching models in inclusion classrooms. Differentiated instruction, which allows the learning challenged students to more easily access the curriculum, is key to this success.

Studies have shown that educators “may not have the necessary attitudes or dispositions, or perhaps more important, the professional skills to successfully instruct students in diverse, inclusive classrooms” (Van Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosman & Rouse, 2007). General and special educators have different views of inclusion classrooms, and they do not always understand or appreciate each other’s positions as to how to best educate students with special needs. General educators may resent having a second teacher in what is considered “their”
classrooms, and they may feel that because they are ultimately responsible for district test results and progress, it is up to them to run the classroom the way they think works best to meet these goals. Special educators do not always feel comfortable in a classroom that is typically run by the general education teacher and therefore they may not understand what their positions are as co-teachers. Special educators are responsible for making sure IEPs, which are legal documents, are implemented but at the same time, they do not want to undermine the authority of the general educator. There may be a clash of personalities that leads to an inclusion environment that is not conducive to successfully reaching all students in the classroom and therefore hinders the progress of students with learning disabilities. Teachers may simply not get along and find it difficult to teach together. Successfully educating learning disabled students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), therefore, does not always occur. Educating learning disabled students in an inclusive classroom requires collaboration and teamwork, and both special and general educators must be willing to compromise and make use of support systems to make it work.

In cases where successful collaboration occurs between co-teachers, the question remains, how do such co-teaching relationships develop and how do such relationships contribute to the experiences and outcomes of their students?

**Positionality**

As a special education inclusion teacher for the past 14 years, I have seen success in co-taught classrooms as well as a serious lack of collaborative co-teaching that has led to missed learning opportunities for special needs students. In my experience, educators generally agree that inclusion classrooms with collaborating teachers are the ideal setting for special education
students and this relatively new field continues to create opportunities for improvement and advancement. “Whereas collaborative teaching is viewed as a workable model for teaching students with disabilities who are academically able, there has been little investigation into what can be done to improve the system and practices as they currently exist” (Gerber & Popp, 2000). Research points to collaboration as being a key factor of successful inclusion, which means that both general and special educators must be willing to compromise and work together in a supportive environment (Gerber & Popp, 2000, p.233). This is not always easily done, but there are criteria that enhance the probability of making inclusion classrooms work. If both teachers commit to collaborating, and if both respect each other’s positions and responsibilities as educators, and if time, training, and administrative support are readily available, inclusion classrooms have a better chance of success (Gerber & Popp, 2000, p.231).

As inclusion continues to be the most readily available resource to educate special needs students among their peers, both special and general educators need to be involved in the policies and procedures of successful inclusion classrooms and make collaboration the priority for successful inclusion. Enhancing successful special education student learning is the goal.

In my role as a special education inclusion teacher, I have seen special education students singled out and made to feel differently in situations that are entirely preventable with a clearer understanding of the learning-disabled student in secondary school. Disservices occur by well meaning, but misinformed, general education teachers who may lack a solid understanding of the additional challenges special education students face in middle school. Special education students may be pulled out of general education classrooms with an announcement of “(IEP student), you need to go to your [special education] services now.” A teacher may unknowingly
show a behavior or academic incentive plan for an IEP student to the class and cause anxiety for
the student. General and special educators need to meet to make their inclusion classrooms
comfortable and accessible for all their students. Time needs to be scheduled to meet and plan
lessons together. True collaboration and adequate training will allow for more successful special
education services for IEP students. Part of this training and focus needs to be on the unique
challenges secondary school special education students face. Successful inclusion classrooms
require compromise, collaboration, and compassion on behalf of both teachers.

In my experience, there are very few truly successful co-teaching inclusion classrooms. There is such a serious lack of teacher training in this area that the teachers involved simply do
not know what a true inclusion classroom looks like. Teachers who are placed together in a
classroom may be instructed to make their classroom work for all their diverse learners, but these
instructions are often not accompanied by the necessary training or resources needed to
accomplish this. The teachers often do not even know each other except as colleagues in the
same school. Therefore, the teachers mean well, but they do not have the expertise required to be
successful as co-teachers. Starting with something as simple as the inclusion teacher having his
or her own space in the classroom, the teachers need to work out a system where they are
compatible and working toward a common goal. This goal needs to be the means to reach every
child in the room, regardless of the child’s level of learning. I believe that the majority of
teachers involved in co-teaching do want to experience a true co-teaching model, but the
resources to get them to that point are seriously lacking and the roadblocks are often too
numerous to overcome.

**Background of Special Education and Inclusion**
In 1975, P.L.94-142 (Public Law 94-142) the Education of all Handicapped Children Act, now known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, (IDEA, 1975) was introduced. This law essentially placed special education students in general education classrooms to be educated among their peers. In 2006, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2006) made the academic success of these students the responsibility of the teachers and administration and held them accountable for ensuring that learning disabled students could successfully access the curriculum. Significant changes in special education were created by placing students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms; this new placement put the students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Educating special education students among their peers has proven to be a successful method of education and centers on the LRE model. This change brought special educators out of small, structured classrooms into the mainstream of academics with the general education students. For many special education teachers, this change did not come with sufficient training on how to best work this new model. They were placed in classrooms with general education teachers and the general education teachers were unsure of the special educators’ roles in their classrooms. Inclusion classrooms, including co-teaching models, have given students with special needs the opportunities to be educated among non-learning-disabled students. These classrooms have also given general education students opportunities to learn in a diverse atmosphere of many learning styles. Providing opportunities for general education and special education teachers to collaborate and figure out the best way to educate learning disabled students in the LRE is crucial in successfully implementing these changes.
Inclusion services need to be managed together by general and special educators and these teachers must collaborate on many levels to reach the students in the classroom. Time, training, and administrative support contribute to successful collaboration, but ultimately it is up to the teachers to make the effort to collaborate and create a successful inclusion classroom. Teachers may not know how to interact with each other and they may hold firm beliefs about classroom management that are not easily altered. General educators are not always given the choice of whether their classrooms will be inclusion classrooms and they may be resentful when a special educator is placed in them (McCray, 2011). Meanwhile, special educators may believe that their responsibilities toward implementing the required services for their special education students should be the main priority when teaching the students (Orr, 2013). Each classroom is unique and there are no set rules for successful inclusion classrooms, but research has shown that there are major factors that contribute to its success. As inclusion is studied and new methods are introduced, changes are made and better ways are found to improve the inclusion concept. Research in this area is timely and relevant as new strategies are introduced, practiced, and implemented.

**Research Criteria and Inquiry**

Collaborative co-teaching is the means to reach many IEP students and diverse learners in a general education classroom. How do effective teams of a general education teacher and a special education teacher work together to teach, engage and create a learning environment that all the learners in their classroom can access?

This case study is presented in a narrative form and focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of two sets of general education teachers and special education teachers who work as
co-teachers. It reveals how they have learned to work together to provide inclusion services for their secondary school students. The research questions focus on their early interactions until present day. There is also significant background insight into how they figured out what worked and did not work, how they created their classrooms, and what they learned along the way about working as a team.

The major issues addressed in this study are what is needed in terms of teaching practices, teacher attitudes, and teacher collaboration in order to make the general education curriculum accessible to learning disabled students in an inclusion setting. Why do some general educators and special educators get along so well and seem to be able to create an excellent atmosphere of collaborative learning, and why is it so difficult for some general and special educators to work together? Co-teaching often does not come naturally. This research seeks to understand what each teacher offers and how it affects their teaching style. This problem of practice centers on what makes an inclusion classroom work and how general and special educators can work together to create a co-teaching model that best serves the needs of their learning-disabled students.

**What does a working co-teaching classroom look like?** This research is guided by a narrative case study of four teachers, two special education teachers and two general education teachers. They work as respective pairs in co-teaching classrooms in Massachusetts. One set works in a middle school and one set works in a high school. These teachers have worked out their co-teaching classrooms to the point where these classrooms are smoothly run cooperative teaching and learning environments. They have learned to collaborate through trial and error and have created highly respected co-teaching teams. They have all been presenters at Professional
Development workshops and are considered experts in their fields by their immediate supervisors in their current schools.

This narrative case study captures the stories of these teachers who were randomly placed together in inclusion classrooms. They come from different educational and teaching backgrounds. When they first started teaching together, they had to compromise, collaborate, and work out individual teaching methods to create one co-teaching classroom with special education students as well as general education students. The teachers have a class that lasts approximately one hour, five days a week. They agree it has not always been an easy transition, but they are all very pleased with the co-teaching classroom that they have created and that they continue to maintain today.

**Ideal inclusion classrooms.** In a perfect world, a general education and a special education teacher would be placed together in a classroom, create diverse and differentiated (changed to accommodate learning disabilities) lesson plans, and work together to allow students of varying abilities access to the curriculum. In a more realistic world, these two educators are selected to work together depending on schedules and convenience, not on personalities, past experiences, or common teaching practices. In some cases, the teachers are instantly compatible and are able to create and maintain a working co-teaching classroom. In other cases, the teachers are faced with adversity from the start and creating a welcoming classroom of diverse learners with creative lesson plans is filled with obstacles.

**Research Questions**

The three research questions guiding this study are as follows:
1. How did two sets of highly regarded co-teachers develop their co-teaching relationship and practices?

2. What factors do they believe contributed to their eventual and continued success as co-teachers?

3. How do they see their co-teaching relationship as benefiting both their identified special education students and general education students?

**Theoretical Framework: Social Learning Theory**

Before teachers can deliver instruction in an inclusion or co-teaching classroom, they must be able to collaborate and work together as one unit in the classroom. This is not always easily accomplished. These teachers learn differently, think differently, and have diverse background experiences. In order to learn to work together, they must be able to learn from each other and accept this newfound knowledge as part of the plan to provide a successful inclusion classroom. Their attitudes toward inclusion as well as their own teacher efficacy (desired results or outcome) play major roles in whether this collaboration can successfully occur.

One of the most crucial factors in the success of an inclusion or co-teaching model is “the professional relationship formed between teachers prior to and throughout the co-teaching experience” (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfield & Banks, 2010). Teachers who are going to work together need to develop goals, create rules and expectations, and access student needs (Ploessl et al, 2010) before they begin to work as co-teachers. They need time to communicate, figure out each other’s learning and teaching styles, and establish their own expectations as well as what they expect from their students. They need to use “skills to not only advocate for appropriate instruction that meets student needs, but also opportunities that most effectively utilize the
expertise of both the general and special educator” (Trent, 2003). When this initial negotiation is limited or does not even commence, teachers are thrown into an environment that they are not qualified to work in and the special education students will most likely not gain the full access to the general education they deserve and need to succeed (Friend, 2000).

**Social Learning Theory.** In order to work together, the special and general educators need to learn how to interact with each other. Social Learning Theory (SLT) focuses on the belief that humans act a certain way and that this pattern is based on a “three-way relationship between cognitive factors, environmental influences, and behaviour” (Bandura, 1977). Learning comes from knowledge, which comes from direct observation, which then creates a learned behavior, and this behavior can be beneficial or detrimental.

Research by Hoy and Woolfolk (1990) describes personal teaching efficacy (PTE) as “the teacher’s assessment of his or her own competence to promote student achievement”. How a teacher views his capacity to teach greatly influences outcomes and attitudes, which carry over to inclusion classrooms. Teachers with positive attitudes are more apt to be flexible and willing to take risks in order to help students with learning disabilities succeed. Teachers who believe special education students should not be taught among general education students may not be willing to put in significant effort to make successful inclusion occur. SLT demonstrates how teachers are able to observe, create, and maintain collaborating methods of teaching that enable special education students to best benefit from their expertise in inclusion settings.

**History of Social Learning Theory.** The founder of SLT is Albert Bandura, a psychologist best known for his experiments with Bobo dolls in 1961 and 1963. He wanted to research aggressive behavior in children and used the dolls to show that children who were
shown aggression with the dolls would apply this aggression to the dolls when left alone (Bandura, 1961). His experiments led him to believe that there is a direct link between how a person looks at his own abilities and how he can change this view with behavioral adjustments. As this pertains to special and general educators working together, the teachers must learn from each other and combine their expertise to best service the needs of all of the children in their classroom.

Other scholars have used SLT in their inclusion research. SLT has been studied and utilized in many articles, research, and books since Bandura’s extensive research in the 1960s. Another example of SLT corresponds with social work. Social work involves extensive learned behavior and observational knowledge to help change set patterns of possible destructive behavior. SLT “fits closely with social work’s traditional person-in-environment perspective. There is no assumption in Social Learning Theory that all behavior is learned, rather the view is that much of it is acquired via respondent, operant, and observational learning processes” (Thyer and Myers, 1998). As Bandura discovered years ago, the environment one observes can help create a learned behavior that can be destructive or beneficial. Learning to alter the destructive behavior can be challenging.

Further research (Smith, 2008) argues that special education teachers are influenced by past experiences with special education students. They bring these views with them to a new classroom and changing previous views can be difficult. New, positive experiences can help alleviate past negative attitudes, but humans need to observe the behavior that is expected of them and watch models of this expected behavior before it can result in the changes SLT (Bandura, 2007) addresses.
**Social Learning Theory in inclusion.** SLT opens up avenues for teacher redirection and newfound learning as two teachers learn from each other through trial and error and observation. These results can change teaching habits and styles. Teachers can learn to become part of an inclusion environment where new resources of differentiated teaching are developed because of changes in their actual learning and teaching styles due to direct observation. Teachers who actually observe the expected behavior by watching successful peers are more apt to make that a part of their classrooms. They are able to work with another teacher by compromising or altering a previously held teaching belief. Inclusion classrooms are then able to encompass the teaching styles of teachers who are able to work together and offer special education students more opportunities to learn partly due to effective learned behavior.

**Teacher Self Efficacy in inclusion.** Teacher self-efficacy can be defined as a teacher’s belief that he has the ability to influence the learning and achievement of the students in his care (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (2007) discovered that a person’s self-efficacy is a crucial factor in how “goals, tasks, and challenges are approached. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to believe they can master challenging problems and they can recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments.” While self-efficacy can be described as an individual’s expectation that he will be able to perform the actions required to bring desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977), in the case of co-teachers in inclusion settings, this expectation involves another person’s daily actions. Further, in regards to teacher efficacy in co-teaching, because a teacher’s “judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Bandura, 1977), successful co-teaching depends on the teacher’s willingness to want change to
occur. In inclusion settings with two teachers working together, teachers with high self-efficacy would be more able to observe behavior that is expected of them and allow it to become a part of their teaching practices. Teachers with low self-efficacy would lack the self-confidence to accept challenging and uncomfortable changes, even if it led to a better inclusion classroom.

In order to make co-teaching work, the general education and special education teacher need to develop a rapport that is based on respect, compromise, and commitment. It takes time and energy to get to a place where both feel comfortable in their classroom while also recognizing the constant changes that need to be made to enhance success. They need to learn from each other to make co-teaching work. Learning to work together is crucial and not always guaranteed. Much like a marriage, it takes patience and constant communication to develop a solid relationship. Many of these relationships do not survive; others thrive. Determining the difference between these two outcomes can help or hinder the students who need support in an inclusion classroom.

Summary

Special education inclusion classrooms vary greatly and do not always use their full capacities as learning environments to meet the needs of their special education students. General and special education teachers who are placed in inclusion settings are not always prepared to work as cooperative co-teachers. Biases, attitudes, past experiences and lack of training are among the many factors that hinder progress and success in an inclusion classroom. Teachers, however, are able to learn from each other and they can make the necessary changes in their teaching styles and habits through direct observation of each other. Teachers who look at their own teaching abilities and are willing to learn to adapt and change in order to work with another
teacher in an inclusion classroom can create inclusion classrooms for diverse learners (Gerber & Popp, 2000).

This issue is significant to the micro audience of special education students who have IEPs and who are legally required to be educated among their peers. These students are best served by two collaborating and compromising teachers who realize that every child in the classroom has different needs and learning styles (Gerber & Popp, 2000). Providing special education students with the skills and abilities they need to live and work independently as adults and citizens is, of course, the ultimate goal of co-teachers.

The greater audience consists of those who consider themselves advocates for these children. Parents of special education students have the right to demand that the educations their children receive are no different than that of non-disabled children, except for modifications and accommodations, and that the school system provides an education among their peers in a general education setting. These children’s teachers need to be trained properly in order to be able to create inclusion and co-teaching classrooms. This training includes college courses, staff development workshops and field work in the area of inclusion. Specifically, general and special educators need to be trained to be able to enter an inclusion classroom with confidence, a willingness to compromise, and a desire to truly educate all students in their care.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The review of the literature focuses on the research pertaining to special education inclusion and co-teaching methods, teachers’ attitudes and training in inclusion, the importance of collaboration, training and administrative support, and the modern-day approach to inclusion. Special education inclusion is still a relatively new concept compared to long held past special education practices. More experience in the field yields new solutions to success. The many definitions, variations, and examples of special education inclusion co-teaching models continue to change as the field is researched and more opportunities present themselves for growth and change.

History of Special Education Inclusion

The history of excluding students with special needs in education can be traced back to 1893 when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that a student who was “weak in mind” and could not be educated due to his disruptions to other students could be removed from his public school (Yell, M. L., Rogers, D., & Rogers, E. L. 1998). In 1919, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that a student could be removed from public school due to “a condition that caused him to drool and have facial contortions that nauseated the teachers and other students, required too much teacher time and negatively affected school discipline and progress” (Yell et al, 1998).

In 1975, there were approximately eight million children in the United States with various forms of learning disabilities who were not being educated to reach their full learning potentials or were not allowed to attend public school at all (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006). When
the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was implemented in 1975, it was originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Educating those who were considered disabled became a legal right and created what we know today as the implementation of Individualized Education Program (IEPs) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The interpretation of this ruling, however, was often left up to the discretion of the public school itself and often resources and attitudes toward special education determined the programs that would be implemented.

IDEA did not consider the “degree of educational opportunity” (Yell & Drasgow, 1999) and often the opportunities offered to special education students depended on the school’s administration and financial resources. Courts often decided what truly defined an appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for special education students.

In 1982, the first special education case was brought to the U.S. Supreme Court with the Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley. The result was that “students who qualify for special education services must have access to public school programs that meet their unique educational needs, and that the programs must be supported by services that enable students to benefit from instruction” (Yell et al., 2004). This was a major turning point in the field of special education because as a result of this ruling, specific standards had to be followed. Students with learning disabilities began to be placed in general education classrooms among their peers. IEPs needed to reflect the best possible environment for learning and this led to a law requiring that learning disabled students be educated among their peers. Inclusion services where special education students were mainstreamed became the new norm of
special education in the 1990s, but determining exactly how to make this work was still a work in progress.

Instead of assuming a learning-disabled student needed to be educated separately, IDEA now required the educational team who created the student’s IEP to explain why that student was not able to benefit from an inclusion setting in a general education classroom with two educators who consisted of one special education teacher and one general education teacher (Yell et al., 2004). Accordingly, special education students who would have previously been sent to different schools were now mandated to be educated in an inclusion setting. The IEP team was required to explain how to make an IEP work with inclusion services, rather than assume more services were needed, and could not be provided in a public school. Special education inclusion became more of the rule than the exception.

Within the past twenty years, the number of students who require special education services and who are being educated in inclusion classrooms has increased (Whitten & Rodriguez-Campos, 2003). Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (2006) show that 95% of students with disabilities are being educated in general education schools and 75% of these students require either full inclusion or partial inclusion services. Full inclusion means that special education students receive their services in the general education classrooms all day. Partial inclusion means that special education students receive part of their services in a resource room with special education personnel. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), “the number of children and youth ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.6 million, or 13 percent of all public school students.”
Special education inclusion models vary greatly. They may range from the special educator serving as a helper or aide to the special educator working as a co-teacher where both the general educator and special educator share equally in the classroom management.

**Collaboration between Special and General Education Teachers**

In order to create a successful inclusion classroom, the general education teacher and special education teachers must work together and collaborate. Collaboration, by definition, means working together toward a common goal. When used in the context of an inclusion classroom, collaboration among general and special educators is compromising, talking, organizing, and reaching common goals. Adults who are placed together in a classroom and told to work together do not always easily do so (Idol, 2007). Often there is a clash of personalities or contesting of roles, and sometimes teachers are simply not compatible. Without collaboration, a successful inclusion classroom is not possible. Teaching both general and special educators how to work with each other, starting at the college level, is the means to successful collaboration and successful inclusion classrooms (Janney, 2006).

Further literature stresses collaboration as the main factor of successful inclusion. Research points to collaboration being the crucial element, which means that general and special educators must be willing to compromise and work together in a supportive environment. This is not always easily accomplished, but there are criteria that enhance the probability of making inclusion classrooms work. If both teachers commit to collaborating and if both respect each other’s position and responsibilities as educators and if time, co-teaching training, and administrative support are readily available, inclusion classrooms have a better chance of success. “Most general educators do not feel prepared to teach students with disabilities” (Van
Garderen, 2012) or do not have the training to do so. Studies also show that special educators do not always know exactly what their roles are supposed to be in an inclusion classroom (Orr, 2009). Teacher training allows both teachers to learn from each other and utilize models for successful inclusion classrooms.

Further research which cited the importance of collaboration focused on two co-teachers and their experience creating a unique learning program (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, 2009). This program revolved around inclusion students who were given academic and learning choices in order to increase motivation in the classroom. Working together and using differentiated or specialized instruction, the teachers created a fifth grade classroom of various learners by providing challenging and guided choices for learning. The students, no matter what their abilities, successfully participated in their own learning by creating their own lessons. The students became more self-motivated and the teachers met the needs of the large array of learners in the room. Collaboration was essential in the success of this endeavor.

Time to collaborate is a frequently mentioned resource for successful inclusion collaboration. As Friend (2000) states, “Collaboration is the conduit through which professionals can ensure that students receive the most effective educational services to which they are entitled.” Adequate and substantial time is needed for teachers to meet and discuss what needs to be done in an inclusion classroom. The definition of collaboration is “often used generically, implying that collaboration happens when individuals are working together. This broad use of the term easily gives the impression that collaboration is an easy and natural process, when the opposite is true” (Friend, 2000). Simply meeting together does not insure success. Teachers need to be prepared with ideas, suggestions, and opportunities for learning. “By acknowledging the
time demands of collaboration, it becomes a legitimate professional responsibility and moves away from being an invisible but pressing expectation” (Friend, 2000) and this effort and diligence cannot be accomplished without shared time between general and special educators. Collaboration is “an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems” (Van Gardener et al, 2000). Teachers come from all backgrounds and have diverse personalities and outlooks. Making collaboration work is not easy, but can be accomplished with compromise, mutual respect, and opportunities to get out of one’s comfort zone to make a partnership work and to grow as educators.

**Teacher Training**

Van Gardener et al (2000) also offers training recommendations for teachers who have never worked in inclusion classrooms. Recommendations included deferring an inclusion teacher’s participation in an inclusion classroom until he is properly trained through opportunities such as mentoring or staff development opportunities. It is also recommended that general education teachers are trained on how to best utilize a second teacher, the special education inclusion teacher, in the classroom. The same recommendation, adequate training, pertains to administrators. Because administrative support is so important in a successful inclusion program, administrators should be trained so that they truly understand what is happening in the inclusion classrooms. Administrators should also confer with colleagues, seek advice, and offer suggestions to both general and special educators. The support of the administration is vital because one of the major factors for successful inclusion, time to collaborate, is often determined by the availability in teachers’ schedules.
Teachers generally agree that training is necessary for successful inclusion. A study on inclusion training found that “successful teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom is largely predicated on a teacher's knowledge, skills, and dispositions, all of which can be undermined by a belief system that is inconsistent with an inclusive paradigm” (McCray & McHatton, 2011). When teachers feel confident and knowledgeable about inclusion, they are more apt to buy-in to the practice, even if they are reluctant to do so at first.

Training of new teachers before their first day of class should include extensive information on making inclusion classrooms work. College courses should be available to teach special education inclusion skills. New teachers may feel woefully unprepared and training programs that include mentors, field work, and opportunities to visit successful inclusion classrooms, should be available and encouraged. Teachers already working in inclusion classrooms may benefit from more training in the form of staff development, workshops, conferences and field work. Mentoring programs can also be beneficial (Van Gardener et al, 2000).

**Administrative Support**

In order for inclusion to be successful, collaboration must be a priority. The administration needs to ensure that this is a priority. Gerber, P. J., & Popp (2000) focused on the administrative aspect of successful inclusion classrooms by starting with successful collaboration. Results showed that administrative support is needed in the form of (a) strategic scheduling, (b) planning time, (c) voluntary participation, and (d) program evaluation (Gerber, 2000). Teachers must have planned time to meet and collaborate. These set times should not be taken lightly; they should be a part of their schedules. The teachers should not be placed
randomly in classrooms they do not always want to be in. There should be a format for enabling co-teaching in a pleasant, cooperative atmosphere. Lastly, administration, parents, and teachers should be able to evaluate the success of an inclusion classroom and suggestions, critiques and improvements should be offered.

An inclusion study (Idol, 2007) sought to find out how schools provided educations for students with special needs in an inclusion setting, to understand how schools utilized the Least Restrictive Environment mode, and to determine how widespread inclusion was. This study focused on what the schools were offering in terms of inclusion resources. Interviews with classroom teachers, special education teachers, and administrative staff were conducted and services were studied. Questions addressed the attitudes of teachers about inclusion and collaboration, whether the educators felt that they were sufficiently trained for an inclusion setting, and how the staff felt the general education students were reacting to inclusion settings. This study concluded that the administrators were supportive of an inclusive model and offered teachers time to collaborate. The teachers indicated that when the administration showed support through scheduling, resources, and funding for inclusion programs, they were more apt to think of inclusion as important and worthwhile. The results of this survey showed a generally positive attitude toward inclusion, but the teachers expressed a strong desire for more training. Both general and special educators agreed that students with learning disabilities were best educated in the LRE, and they generally indicated that inclusion was working. Overall, the study summarized that inclusion was successful only with collaboration and adequate training. The teachers felt that the administration generally supported them and therefore supported their inclusion endeavors. It
should be noted that these schools had excellent resources for support staff and special education teachers were readily available as consultants as well as co-teachers.

Teaching both general and special educators how to work with each other, starting at the college level, is the way to successful collaboration and successful inclusion classrooms (Hudson, P., & Glomb, N., 1997). Resources, courses, adequate budgets, and time must be priorities in educating teachers. There must be plenty of available resources for new educators who seek information, and then after these teachers are working in their fields, they should be allowed onsite visits to successful inclusion classrooms. The training needed for successful inclusion must start at the teacher training level and then continue while these new teachers determine the best methods for successful inclusion. New teachers should not be forced to enter inclusion classrooms without knowledge of how collaboration and partnership work to ensure success. In order to meet these goals, the administration needs to be on board and support collaboration between teachers and inclusion training.

Teachers require training and administrative support to practice successful inclusion. Teachers who are supported in their inclusion practices by principals and administrators create working, successful classrooms (Obiakor, 2112). While there are many variations of inclusion, collaborating teachers can work out the best model for them. In the end, it is the students--both general education and special education--who prosper from their teachers’ abilities to work together.

**General and Special Educators’ Attitudes Toward Inclusion**

Inclusion services need to be managed together by general and special educators and these teachers must collaborate on many levels to reach the students in the classroom. Time,
training, and administrative support contribute to successful collaboration, but ultimately it is up to the teachers to make the effort to collaborate and create a successful inclusion classroom. Negative teacher attitudes may hinder successful inclusion practices. Studies have shown that while most teachers want inclusion to work, many are not sure what is needed to make it work. Studies also show that general education and special education teachers want and need more training before entering an inclusion classroom. They want to see successful inclusion models and they want to have mentors to help them. Often these teachers do not know how to interact with each other in the classroom and they may hold firm beliefs about classroom management that are not easily altered. General educators are not always given the choice of whether their classrooms will be inclusion classrooms and they may be resentful when a special educator is placed with them. Meanwhile, special educators may believe that their responsibility to implement the required services for their special education students should be the main priority in the classroom. Each classroom is unique and while the rules for inclusion success are many and varied, research has shown that there are major factors that contribute to its success and among these factors are teacher beliefs and attitudes.

Most general education teachers have the desire to create inclusion classrooms that allow all students to access the curriculum, but lack of inclusion training often stands in the way. General education teachers may be reluctant to fully utilize the expertise of special education teachers in their classrooms. They may feel intimidated or overwhelmed with the student diversity of learning styles in their classrooms. Santoli, Sachs, & Romey (2008) suggest that “teachers may feel challenged, hopeful, and desirous of what can be accomplished, but they also feel frustration, burden, fear, lack of support, and inadequacies about their ability to teach
children with different kinds of problems”. General education teachers are concerned about reaching the learning needs of their special education students and at the same time are concerned about disrupting the flow of learning for their general education students. Block & Obrusnikova (2007) emphasized that the major problem associated with teaching in inclusive settings is the need for more training and expertise on behalf of the general education teachers.

A study by Taylor and Sobel (2001) involved 129 teachers who had just graduated from a teacher education program. The teachers were optimistic about being able to create classrooms that allowed students of varying abilities to access the curriculum. However, the majority of the teachers felt unprepared to do so and indicated that they needed more experience through field work or hands on instruction. Another study by Cameron and Cook (2007) surveyed 57 new teachers and found that, though good intent was present to create successful inclusion classrooms and the teachers felt that they had the appropriate knowledge through their coursework and studies, they did not have the actual ability to successfully create classrooms for their special needs students. Most were not confident about creating successful inclusion classrooms without further training, which they welcomed.

Another survey (Idol, 2013) asked educators what hindered progress in their inclusion classes. Teachers described frustration about a lack of support over how best to teach their curriculum to learning disabled students. Some teachers indicated that they felt the special education teacher in the classroom should be more responsible for providing educational resources for special education students. Other recently graduated teachers felt overwhelmed and inadequately prepared to deal with students who needed extra services. Most of these teachers
expressed an overall feeling of being unable to actively reach students with disabilities due to lack of resources and training (Idol, 2013).

Another important factor that influences general education teachers’ attitudes and perspectives regarding inclusion is how the presence of special education students in an inclusion classroom affects the general education students in the classroom. In a survey among eight schools in a metropolitan school district located in the United States (Idol, 2006), ten percent of general educators indicated that the general education students in their inclusion classroom were academically “adversely affected by the presence of children with disabilities” (Idol, 2006). The educators were asked how the behavior of the general education students changed when the situation considered was a social one involving the special education students and 16%-33% of the teachers thought that the overall behavior was worse in the classroom (Idol, 2006). The general education teachers indicated more confidence in managing academic issues than behavioral issues among their special education students.

Research also reveals the problems and insecurities new teachers felt about teaching students with special needs and how to utilize an inclusion teacher in their classrooms. Teachers who recently graduated from college were placed in inclusion classrooms with little training. Most felt woefully unprepared to deal with the needs of special education children and were not sure how to best utilize the special educator in the classroom. Teachers are often not trained to teach “significant disabilities and the severity of the disabling condition presented to them determines their attitudes towards integration” (Avramidis., Bayliss, & Burden, 2000).

Like general educators, special educators want inclusion classrooms to be successful, but they too need more training and collaboration. Special educators felt that the general educators
often treated them as helpers or aides rather than professional counterparts (Pugach, 2009). The special education teachers indicated reluctance to be fully engaged in an inclusion classroom because the material is so vast across the curriculum. They felt that they did not have expertise in one subject, but rather some knowledge about all subjects. Special education teachers also reported that some general education teachers referred to the special education students as “your students”. General education teachers reported feeling that they were expected to provide more instruction in the inclusion classroom without collaboration (Orr, 2013). Special education teachers, who generally work with small groups of special education children during the school day, indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of the demands of managing a large classroom. They also stressed that ultimately the implementation of the student’s IEP, a legal document, was their responsibility, so they were more aware of what needed to be done in the general education classroom for the special education students. They felt that the classroom belonged to the general education teacher, as that teacher usually grades the students, but the accommodations and modifications should be made whether the general education teacher was in favor of them or not.

General educators are under increasing pressure to provide quality instruction to the diverse learners in their classrooms (deBettencourt, 1999). These demands can affect teachers’ attitudes toward the learning-disabled students in their inclusion classes. This study found that the amount of special education classes the general education teachers completed, as well as the amount of time spent with the inclusion teachers, correlated directly with teacher attitudes and strategies. Teachers who felt supported by their inclusion settings through training and collaboration were more willing to offer strategies for reaching all the learners in the room.
These strategies, in turn, helped their special education students access the general education curriculum.

General educators and special educators are usually trained separately and they each bring a certain amount of knowledge to the classroom. While the general educator may be well trained in teaching non-learning challenged children, knowledge in teaching those with special needs may be lacking. The same can be said of special educators. Many do not have knowledge about teaching a classroom of twenty-five or so children in a general education setting. Research states that it is time to start training general and special educators together. They should be trained as “partners and collaborators in the cooperative venture of teaching children with disabilities in the educational and social mainstream” (Hobbs & Westling, 2002).

The results of a study centering on collaboration (Gerber & Popp, 2000) indicated that although most educators had positive attitudes about inclusion and supported it within their classrooms, they were unsure as to how to go about it. They did not want to overstep their boundaries with the other teacher in the room, but they had ideas and suggestions as to how to make their inclusion classrooms work better. They expressed concern that the needs of the learning disabled students would not be met. Most general education teachers were willing to try inclusion and wanted to support it, but they did not know how to establish a solid inclusion classroom and they admitted a lack of confidence in reaching the special education students without the support and expertise of a special education teacher. Along the same lines of thinking were the special educators, who wanted to be a part of the general education classroom, but were unsure of the general education curriculum in core classes.

Summary
Inclusion services in special education require the collaboration of both general education and special education teachers in order to be successful and fully support special education students. General education and special education teachers face obstacles as they work together to provide services for special education students in inclusion classrooms. They sometimes have conflicting opinions on how an inclusion classroom should work. The general education teacher may not want an additional person in the room and the special education teacher may not know his place in the classroom. Lack of adequate teacher training can hinder progress and make learning less accessible for special education students. Successful inclusion classrooms require collaboration and compromise from both teachers, as well as administrative support, time to collaborate, and training. Both general and special educators must be able to see each other’s points of view and be willing to work together to provide the best education in the LRE for special needs students.

General education and special education teachers should have training available to them which focuses on ways in which inclusion classrooms are and have been successful. Both special and general educators should be encouraged to seek workshops and outside resources to learn more about how to make their inclusion classrooms successful. They should be encouraged to attend workshops and conferences together. Both teachers should have adequate planning time to meet and prepare lessons together that allow them to reach all students of diverse learning styles in the general education classroom. The administration in the school district should provide co-teachers with sufficient and regularly planned time to collaborate as collaboration is imperative to successful inclusion classrooms.
While it is generally agreed among educators that an inclusion classroom with collaborating teachers is the ideal setting for special education students, this relatively new field continues to create opportunities for improvement and advancement. Despite the fact that collaborative teaching is seen as a workable model for special education students, research is lacking regarding possible improvements (Gerber & Popp, 2000). Most research investigates the problems associated with inclusion and offers recommendations, but there is not much research into evidence-based solutions. As inclusion continues to be the most readily available resource to educate special needs students among their peers, both special and general educators need to be involved in the policies and procedures of successful inclusion classrooms and make collaboration the priority for successful inclusion, therefore enhancing successful special education student learning. Ultimately it is the students who truly benefit when they learn from two teachers who are working as partners in their learning.
Chapter III: Research Design

Narrative Case Study

This study follows a qualitative narrative case study format. Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to search for new knowledge by seeking to learn about the participants’ lived experiences. The researcher interprets these experiences and seeks knowledge by writing about actual lived experiences and how the participants speak about them. Narrative case study “revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them” (Chase, 2011) and makes the smaller stories become larger experiences for the reader to interpret and experience. The stories themselves create the means to interpret the data by acknowledging that lived experiences, and how people learn and change from them, become a “part of the way they organize events into critical meanings” (Moen, 2006). Common assumptions become a part of a bigger picture and the stories are “solvent and worthy of distinction because of their common context as life experiences” (Trahar, 2009).

Narrative case study enables the reader to learn from a story as told by the authors of the story: “storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience” (Moen, 2006). Narrative research is used “in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives” (Mohen 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative case study allows the researcher to write about their subjects’ experiences in the environments they live in day after day, so the reader is able to understand how these people view their environments by looking at their daily lives.
Teachers who work in inclusion co-teaching settings have created their own environments with characteristics they deem important and manageable. Their stories reveal what has brought them to this place. They know what has worked and what has failed through their lived experiences. Assumingly, most teachers want their classrooms to work to meet the needs of all of their students, but these teachers may not always be aware of the rules and requirements to make this happen. Goodenough (1963) describes culture as “standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it.” This is largely due to the fact that these rules and requirements are very different in every classroom.

The field of study in this theoretical framework is cognitive anthropology, which looks at what “people have in their minds, their models for perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting” (Goodenough, 1963), and thus it is a mental outlook that can interpreted in many different ways depending on one’s own perspective. Goodenough (1963) expands on this theory and investigates the “culture of teachers” and how this culture embraces or rejects special education inclusion services. Some teachers want it to work and buy-in to the practice and others have a difficult time teaching in classrooms with both a special educator and general educator present.

**Research Questions**

The three research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How did four highly regarded co-teachers develop their co-teaching relationship and practices?
2. What factors do they believe contributed to their eventual and continued success as co-teachers?

3. How do they see their co-teaching relationship as benefiting both their identified special education students and general education students?

Research Criteria

This research on special education inclusion classrooms is told in a narrative case study format. The lived experiences of the participants as inclusion and general education teachers and how they collaborate to serve the needs of their special education students is the focus of the study. Because inclusion classrooms are different from one another, this research investigates how four highly regarded teachers use collaboration in this setting and how this impacts their students’ learning. The teachers’ experiences and evolving practices as a result of their collaboration and how they perceive their collaboration as impacting their students’ learning are what guides this study.

Biases. As an inclusion teacher in four classes daily, I have put aside my preconceived ideas of what the ideal inclusion classroom looks like. My experiences are not those of my research participants, even though we work in the same school district. I have kept in mind that ideal inclusion classrooms differ and though my 14 years as an inclusion teacher offers rich insight, what I consider the benchmark for a successful inclusion classroom may not be the same as my colleagues. I put aside my ideals of what a successful co-teaching environment looks like as I listened to and interpreted the history and present day to day workings of what is considered successful co-teaching classrooms by their respective administrators in my school district. I also recognize the degree of different teaching methods, personalities, and co-teaching methods that I
experience four times each day at work in my inclusion classrooms. I cannot compare my personal experiences to theirs, but rather listen and learn from their experiences. I discovered common themes that I might recognize in my own practice, but have isolated them from their unique stories.

I also realize that while I recognize the success of the teams I interviewed, there are other co-teaching teams in this school district who are successful in different ways. Success can be interpreted differently by different people and other teachers may not consider their co-teaching teams stories of co-teaching inclusion success. There may also be other directly involved administrators who would suggest other co-teaching teams as exemplars of co-teaching success in their respective schools.

As a researcher, I utilized this research to “focus on personal meaning and sense making” (McNabb, 2012) in order to fully access the themes that arose. Only when the researcher recognizes her own biases and realizes that she must make sense of the experience of the participant who is also making sense of their own experiences will the true value of the research be presented accurately with theme driven results.

**Phenomenology.** A researcher’s job is to see how participants view the world through a “stream of consciousness” (Husserl, 1962) that is related to the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher needs to see the experience as the participant interprets it and then constructs her research accordingly. Husserl (1962) believed that as humans we can interpret our world through our experiences in it. We then make sense of our existence through these experiences. Basically, he sought to clarify the world as we see it through our lived experiences. As researchers, we must become a part of our participant’s lived experiences by recognizing
their worlds as our own. Husserl (1962) used descriptive phenomenology to interpret these experiences and he bracketed aside any “preconceived opinions” and researched the “everyday conscious experiences” of his participants (Reiner, 2012). The lived experiences of my participants allowed further investigation into how others can create successful teams in inclusion classrooms.

The goal of narrative inquiry is to “transform data from, by, and about participants into a literary story format” (Saldana, 2014). This research investigated, analyzed, and wove the story of how four teachers who did not know each other very well came to create classrooms that are recognized as meeting the needs of their diverse learners. Through trial and error and learning to work together as a team, they created classrooms that are considered to be models of successful co-teaching by peers and administrators in their respective schools.

**Data Collection**

This data collection consisted of seven interviews. The interview questions were purposely constructed so that the participants revealed information that could be analyzed from their own experiences rather than interpreted from the researcher’s experiences. The interviews consisted of individual meetings with each of the four teachers and then paired interviews with the sets of teachers. The last interview was a second one with the teacher who has been in the school system for 45 years. The researcher sought more information about the advancement of inclusion co-teaching over the years with this additional interview. The first interview with each teacher alone was designed to gain the stories and experiences of her co-teaching and in particular co-teaching with her colleague. The researcher then interviewed the pairs of teachers
after analyzing the data for follow up questions. The researcher sent follow-up emails and clarified information. The data was recorded and transcribed.

Confidentiality

The participants were assured of confidentiality. Whether their real names or pseudonyms were used was up to them. The interviews were recorded and the participants were allowed to read the completed interviews and make any edits to ensure accuracy. The data was secured in a locked area that only this researcher could access.

Participants

The teachers participating in this study are highly regarded among administrators and fellow teachers in their schools and school system. They were recommended for this research by their respective administrators. They work together Monday through Friday for an average of one hour each day and also spend minimal time collaborating at unscheduled times.

Sharon and Carolyn work in a middle school grade six math classroom. Sharon has been in the education system for 45 years; for 25 of these years she was an Instructional Assistant. Ten years ago, she became a special education inclusion teacher and small group math teacher where she teaches math to special education students. She works in the general education math inclusion classroom with Carolyn, one of the three sixth grade math teachers at the middle school. Carolyn has been a math teacher for 14 years. Sharon and Carolyn were randomly placed together nine years ago when inclusion services at their school became more focused and more special education teachers were hired to meet the needs of the learning disabled population.

Sally is a special education teacher at the high school. She has been a special education teacher for 17 years. Emily is a high school English teacher who teaches classes that range from
inclusion to advanced. They have been together as co-teachers for six years. They were also randomly placed together because their schedules matched up.

Both sets of teachers have created an inclusion environment that is respected and highly regarded as a successful co-teaching team by their respective administrators. They were honest and open about the ebbs and flows of their relationships and the fact that it has not been easy to create and maintain a working co-teaching classroom. While they have established solid partnerships, they still face obstacles and learn from them in order to move forward. They are advocates for co-teaching classrooms that meet the needs of all their students and they are outspoken in their determination to make their co-teaching classroom one of successful diverse learners of all abilities.

**Analytic Methods**

The data was coded after each interview. By transcribing and summarizing each interview, the researcher made notes of the main points and emerging themes. Notes were taken during the interviews for future reference. The interviews, once transcribed, were read over multiple times. After initial interviews with each individual participant, the researcher reviewed the previously prepared follow-up interviews with both teachers and added to or amended the questions in order to obtain relevant information useful in answering the three research questions.

Once the individual and paired interviews were transcribed, the researcher sorted and summarized the material according to patterns by research question. The five “R’s: routines, rituals, rules, roles and relationships” (Saldana, 2014) were used to “solidify observations into concrete instances of meaning.” This was done by color coding certain relevant themes and
making notes of how they overlapped or stood by themselves. Each sorting was summarized and then the researcher was more easily able to compare the results and find meaningful information by comparing the different summaries. Once this was done, new and relevant concepts pertaining to the topic were revealed. After sorting, coding, summarizing and comparing the information, the researcher was able to determine her own theories. The researcher must “work out what your data say and mean” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) in the analysis stage and to do so, much reading, rereading, coding and sorting was needed. Themes and patterns eventually stood out and unique and relevant information took hold.

Patterns in approaches to teaching as well as attitudes toward co-teaching in general (and specifically as partners in these particular classrooms) emerged and were analyzed. Examples of trial and error, compromise, and how issues have been resolved were detailed and studied. Further, the material was coded and categorized. There were different categories that appeared. These were studied and analyzed until themes emerged that were relevant to the researcher’s goals of revealing what factors created environments of co-teaching that are considered to be successful models.

The researcher’s perspective is part of the analytic method data analysis. The researcher’s beliefs are subject to change when data is sorted through and interpreted. Heuristics are “rules of interpretation, developed through an internal analysis and organization of recurrent themes that the research exposes” (Gomes, 2014) and allow for researchers to interpret and change perspectives through discovery of new significant information as needed. The insight and meaning of the data discovered through research was interpreted by the researcher with room to observe, change and grow.
Presentation of Findings

Presenting the results of research in an accurate, interesting and easily read format was crucial in allowing easy reader interpretation. The researcher reaches his audience in the best way possible and determining this format allows interested readers adequate room to formulate opinions as well as respect the presented research. A narrative case study format emerged.

Presenting the findings allowed the researcher the means to interpret while considering his/her audience. A narrative approach to presenting the findings allowed the researcher to “draw on stories as a way to share, and to understand, who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming” (Huber et al, 2013). By telling the stories of the participants, the reader can represent their experiences in a detailed and personal manner. The story unwinds along with the research results and the reader considers, reflects and engages in the research.

Writing results using interpretation. Saldana (2011) suggests that researchers who write interpretatively seek to ask “What is to be made of it all?” He argues that the researcher and participants’ personal experiences work together to create a story that explains, interprets, and seeks to better the research itself by exploring how that story came to be. The themes that emerge are interpreted by an audience with their own biases and experiences. Writing interpretively “aims for higher or deeper levels of thought--the big ideas about the nature of what’s been investigated (Saldana 2011).

The researcher as a writer needs to offer insight into a new perspective by asking how to use the findings to move forward and implement in future practice. The story of inclusion practices is written every day in every school. It continues to seek ways to reach the students who need help in school and attempts to empower educators to provide their students the means
to eventually become independent members of society. In order to reach that goal, teachers have stories to tell about what does and does not work for special education students.

These are two of those stories.

Summary

A narrative case study was conducted of four highly regarded secondary school co-teachers who have created what is considered highly respected and successful inclusion classrooms. These teachers lead workshops in their fields and offer advice and direction to mentor other teachers in creating their own inclusion classrooms that meet the needs of all of their diverse learners. The research questions that were presented detailed and focused on what makes their partnerships successful, including the history of their inclusion classroom as well as the obstacles they have faced and continue to face as they work together. The stories that emerged are their stories of how they created co-teaching inclusion classrooms and what it has taken to get to where they are, co-teachers who enjoy working together in their respective inclusion classrooms.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal, analyze and begin to interpret the results of interviews with four co-teachers who work in special education inclusion classrooms. Two of the teachers, Sharon and Sally, are special educators and Carolyn and Emily are general educators. Sharon works with Carolyn in a sixth grade Math classroom and they have been together nine years. Sally works with Emily in a high school English classroom and they have been together six years. The special educators were both placed randomly in the general education classrooms. This chapter starts with definitions of the key terms that are used in this study and continues with a brief history of inclusion practices. The three main research questions are then presented. The chapter continues with the teachers’ stories as individuals and then as co-teachers. There is a second interview alone with Sharon, who has been teaching the longest, to get more information about how special education has changed in her experience. This information is presented in a narrative format. The themes that emerge are then narrowed down to four main concepts with quotes during the interviews and then the representative quotes are separated into four tables. A summary of the findings is revealed in the last paragraph.

Context of the Study

Definitions of key terms. The word “inclusion” offers a wide and far reaching range of interpretation. While being “included” is being a part of something, the term with respect to academics can look quite different in each classroom, school, district, and state. An inclusive classroom can be defined as having “a student with special learning and/or behavioral needs [who] is educated full-time in the general education program” (Idol, 1997). Students with learning disabilities attend classes all day in a general education setting in inclusion classrooms.
with a special educator in the classroom with them. There are usually options to receive small
group instruction as needed. Inclusion, as its name suggests, means to include, not exclude, as in
past special education practices. An inclusive classroom offers opportunities for all students in
the classroom to learn from each other as well as to be engaged in the general education
curriculum with special education support.

The word “co-teaching” refers to a design that “provides a richly differentiated learning
environment” (Tannock, 2009). General education students as well as students with special needs
can benefit from this environment. Co-teaching benefits both students and teachers by teaching
as a team rather than individually in a classroom setting. The co-teaching model generally
consists of a general education teacher and a special education teacher who combine their
knowledge and skills to teach a heterogeneous group of students with and without disabilities in
a single classroom for part of the school day (Friend, 2006). The benefits develop as co-teaching
relationships deepen. For the purpose of this study, co-teaching pairs include a general educator
and a special educator working together in the same classroom five days a week throughout the
school year. In this study, the co-teachers have 45 to 65 minutes class periods daily.

“Collaboration” as used in this context signifies a crucial part of inclusion success. It is
defined as a “keep-in rather than pull-out model of service delivery, and it is a radical departure
from the past…..special educators come to general education classrooms to co-teach with general
educators….the general educator shares expertise on all areas of the curriculum, effective
teaching, and large group instruction…the special educator contributes knowledge in learning
styles and strategies, clinical teaching, and behavior management” (Gerber & Popp, 2000). In
collaborative classrooms, the general and special educators each contribute their knowledge and
expertise to enable learning disabled students to access the general education curriculum. The classroom ideally features a co-teaching method where both teachers work together to allow the special needs students to be educated among their peers. Collaboration can be defined as the direct interaction of two co-equal parties who share in decision-making as they work toward a common goal (Friend & Cook, 2007).

“Differentiated instruction” can be defined as teacher made accommodations to instructions for learning challenged students in order to “facilitate student learning” (Friend and Bursuck, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, the inclusion classrooms in this research represent models of co-teaching and the words co-teaching and inclusion will be used interchangeably.

**Brief history of inclusion practices.** The concept of inclusion classrooms is relatively new in special education. As inclusion is studied, changes are made and better ways are found to improve the inclusion concept. Research in this area is timely and relevant as new methods and strategies are introduced, practiced, and implemented.

Historically, inclusion classrooms are offered in many varied models and the definition of inclusion classrooms has not been clearly established, leading to uncertainty from general education and/or special education teachers about the true definition of inclusion. The major change of special education students being taught outside of the general education environment to being taught among their peers is relatively new considering how long learning disabled students were excluded from the general population. This change has been an ongoing process and requires insight as to what works and does not work even today.
The inclusion model has “created challenges for both general education and special education teachers and teacher educators who have historically worked as separate entities and who may operate from very different paradigms and belief systems” (Robinson & Buly, 2007). The time has arrived for both teachers to meet, discuss, collaborate, and create successful inclusion models. There are no longer two separate entities.

Inclusion, the practice of placing students with special needs in general education classrooms rather than in separate settings, was enacted into law in 1975. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) increased the number of learning disabled students receiving most of their academics in general education classrooms. Statistics show that in 2004 about 96% of Students With Disabilities (SWD) were being included in regular education settings and 52.1% of these students spent most (80% or more) of the day in a general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Also, according to the Department of Education, Public Law 94-142: “….All children with disabilities have available to them…a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs.” Further, in 2004 with IDEA, also according to the US Department of Education: “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” (US Department of Education, 2009). By this definition, an inclusion classroom is the best setting for the education of a learning disabled student as he is educated
among his peers. A further description of an inclusive classroom is defined as “a student with special learning and/or behavioral needs is educated full-time in the general education program” (Idol, 1997). Students with learning disabilities attend classes all day in a general education setting in inclusion classrooms with a special educator in the classroom with them. There are usually options to receive individual clarification and teacher support. Inclusion, as its name suggests, means to include, not exclude, as in past special education practices.

Early studies showed that general education teachers were apprehensive about having special education students in their classrooms. These teachers were concerned about the level of work the special education students would be able to accomplish in a general education classroom (Bender, 1985). These teachers were also concerned that they did not have the proper training to teach special education students and they also indicated a concern for the amount of time it would take to create work that learning disabled students could understand. General education teachers were also hesitant to have special education students in their classrooms because they feared that behavior issues would affect the non-learning disabled students negatively. The general educators expressed concern that they would not have enough support, that they did not have the explicit knowledge of IEPs, and that their classrooms would be disrupted by special needs students (McKray, 2011).

Research Questions

The following questions are the foundation of the interviews for this study. Follow-up questions were presented after the initial interviews.

1. How did two highly regarded co-teachers develop their co-teaching relationships and practices?
2. How do they believe they were able to establish and maintain successful co-teaching relationships?

3. How do they view their co-teaching relationships as benefitting both the identified special education students and the general education students?

The Special Education Teachers

Sharon. Sharon has been an educator for 45 years and a special education teacher for 12 years in the same school. Sharon worked as an Instructional Assistant before she went back to college to become a special education teacher. She is a strong advocate for the special education students on her roster and is known for having compassion and an endless determination to ensure that the learning challenged students in her care get every chance to show what they can are capable of. She has a background in social work and she feels that this has helped her become a better teacher. Sharon strongly believes that some students arrive at school with social and emotional baggage that can hinder their learning. She digs deeply to find out how to reach her students. In return, many of her students confide in her once they realize she is there for them emotionally and academically.

Sharon will be retiring soon and she has seen major changes in inclusion practices during her career in the school system. When she first started, there was a completely separate classroom for some of the learning challenged students. They were not mainstreamed as they are now. They rarely saw the general population. The special education students would go to the Learning Center/Resource Room for their services and Sharon would assist the special education teacher there. Sharon says that when the inclusion program started, she was placed in a general education class and she remembers “joining a teacher who had no idea what inclusion was. We
were floundering around trying to figure out what our roles were.” That general education teacher told Sharon after they were no longer together that she had been “intimidated” by Sharon because she had been teaching for so long. Sharon explained to her that she also had no idea what she was doing as a so-called co-teacher.

Planning time then was nonexistent. Sharon says “We didn’t have time to meet to plan. I never knew what was taking place the next day unless I asked her when I left. I never felt like a co-teacher. I was a glorified Instructional Assistant.” Sharon says they were just “thrown together” and needed time to meet to figure out what they were supposed to be doing. She laments that if one of them had one task and one another task, it might have worked, but they never had the opportunity to figure out their roles. She says they needed time to meet and they never had that time, so the chances of creating a successful co-teaching classroom were minimal.

Sharon elaborates that she feels strongly that the co-teaching classroom should offer clearly defined differentiated instruction for the struggling learners. She says that if there are four math classes and one is a co-teaching classroom, the co-teaching classroom should not look like the other three. There should be other ways for those students to access the curriculum and the special education teacher should be able to offer accommodations and modifications. Sharon argues that differentiated instruction is what enables the challenged learners to be successful, more confident, and take ownership of their learning.

Sharon took a class with Carolyn about inclusion practices when they were first placed together and she believes that the class was crucial to their success. They learned about the practice of the special education teacher starting the class with an activity to set the tone that they are both equal partners. They still use that practice today. They also found out about ways to
utilize each other’s expertise to reach their varied learners. Sharon will often use differentiated instruction to reach students who are having trouble accessing the material, whether or not they have been identified as having special needs.

Starting from the first day of school, Sharon is introduced as a co-teacher. Her name is on the board and classroom door alongside the general education teacher’s name. Sharon said they have tried to get a desk in the room for her, but the room is too small. She feels like a true co-teacher in the classroom. She begins the class every day with a math problem she creates, which both teachers consider an integral part of their class. Sharon thinks this is an integral part of their class and shows that it is a co-taught class from the start. Carolyn has little to do with this initial start to the class. Sharon actively teaches the struggling learners by sometimes taking them separately to a small table in the room. She is also a visible co-teacher in regular lessons.

When asked about her current co-teaching practice, Sharon says that it has been a “growing process. We started off with really not knowing what our roles were.” Although they worked in the same school at the time, Sharon and Carolyn did not know each other very well. They have grown to become good friends as well as co-teachers, but not without challenges along the way. When they were first placed together, Sharon says that Carolyn “did not have a choice” about having another teacher in the room or who that teacher would be. Sharon believes that because of Carolyn’s “personality, flexibility and her expertise at communicating,” they have grown to develop a solid working relationship. She believes that there has to be “give and take” for co-teaching to work and that “control is a big part of this” because the general education teachers might feel that it is “their classroom and rightfully, it is.”
Communication is a major factor in their success. Sharon advises that “If you don’t communicate, it’s never going to go anywhere. Sometimes that is a hard process when you are working with another teacher.” She says that she and Carolyn bring issues to the surface right away and do not let problems fester or become more than what they are. She reveals that Carolyn can share what annoys her or bothers her and vice versa. Sharon believes that both teachers have to “be on board” with the co-teaching experience in order to make it work and she feels fortunate that she was assigned to co-teach with Carolyn. She believes that they have created a true inclusion classroom that reaches the many varied learners in the room, not just those who have IEPs. Sharon does not think their success is typical of most inclusion classrooms.

Sharon knows that math is a strength for her, so she is confident with the sixth grade math curriculum. She does not feel the same way about Language Arts and admittingly would have a hard time teaching that subject. Sharon has made mistakes in front of the class in math. She said Carolyn will laugh it off and say it is a common error or they will pretend Sharon did it on purpose to show the students what not to do. Sharon has heard of general education teachers who do not want another person in the room because they feel like they are being watched. She said she never feels like Carolyn is scrutinizing what she does. Sharon thinks that Carolyn trusts her math ability and teaching ability without reservations.

When asked about collaborating, Sharon says they never have enough time to meet, but over the years, they have learned what works and what does not, so sometimes long conversations are not needed. She said most of the time they meet in the teacher’s room at lunch or in the hallway to discuss a lesson plan. Ideally she would “love to have a planning time together”, but their schedules do not allow that. Sharon quickly answered “time” when asked
what is needed to make the co-teaching classroom better for both teachers and students. She says it has taken years of being able to say “Let’s try it this way” or “Do you think that is going to work?” with her co-teaching partner to get to where their classroom is really a co-teaching model.

Sharon strongly believes that training new teachers should include workshops with both the general educator and special educator in attendance together, not separately. Sharon says it “makes no sense” to observe a co-teaching classroom or attend a professional development workshop without your co-teacher. She says having upcoming teachers do some of their practice teaching in inclusion classrooms would be ideal and suggests that future teachers see and participate in co-teaching strategies in the classroom. She has taught co-teaching workshops and has gotten positive feedback from them. She thinks professional development workshops should focus on methods to create classrooms every learner with two active teachers. These workshops should show the teachers how to use the expertise and knowledge they have as general or special educators.

Sally. Sally has been a special educator for 17 years at the high school where she currently works. Before that, she taught younger children with identified special needs, but never as a co-teacher. Sally is determined to reach all her varied learners and her love for teaching her special education students is obvious. She knows what they need to be successful and she wants to provide the tools for success. Sally seems to really enjoy the high school students. She has worked with other general education teachers in inclusion classrooms, but she considers her current co-teaching experience with Emily to be the most successful and true to the concept of co-teaching. Sally was placed in Emily’s English class because “there was space in my schedule
after my maternity leave. It was kind of a coincidence.” At the beginning of their inclusion experience, Sally says they both “had a hard time figuring out our roles.” Sally was unsure of what was expected of her and Emily appeared to feel the same. They started to figure it out toward the end of the first year.

Sally says without hesitation that the major turning point in their relationship and overall success as co-teachers began when they took a class together on inclusion practices. The course was emailed to all the high school co-teachers as an optional course and Emily asked Sally if she wanted to attend with her. Sally believes the class was “monumental in our shift in co-teaching in general” and it “really changed both our mindsets as far as it being an equal partnership.” The class taught them many different models and methods of co-teaching. When asked if the students see Sally as a helper or co-teacher, Sally answers “co-teacher” without hesitation.

From the first day of class, Sally is introduced as an equal teacher to the students. Her name is not on the door, but she does have a desk. Sally was pleasantly surprised one day when Emily texted her that she had “a surprise” for her and found a desk in the room when she arrived to class. Sally says it makes a big difference to have a place to put her belongings and to feel a part of the classroom.

At the start of their co-teaching experience, Sally was hesitant to put herself out there as a co-teacher and equal partner. She was not sure of her role. She says years ago a student commented that she was not a “real teacher” and this led her to take a “hard look in the mirror.” She realized that the student said that because she was behaving more like a helper than a teacher. She decided that if she wanted to be treated with respect as a co-teacher, she had to show that she was worthy of that type of respect. She is grateful that she had Emily to “push” her to
the “level of wanting to be seen as a co-teacher and establish my presence as such.” By having Emily “push” Sally out of her comfort zone and put her “in the spotlight” more, Sally was forced to be challenged and has grown as a teacher. Sally is there for all of the diverse learners in the classroom, not just those with IEPs, but she makes certain their IEPs are followed. Sally speaks highly of Emily and obviously admires her expertise and commitment to co-teaching. She says that Emily is “invested in co-teaching, which is huge” and she is a “remarkably competent teacher”. Sally feels that this has helped her to keep an “academic mindset” as she works with the special education students.

Sally believes that the reason they are so successful is in part because Emily is open to details that Sally picks up on and is willing to try different ways to reach the struggling students. Sally will “bring Emily back to earth sometimes as far as the disability” and what the learning challenged students can handle. Sally says they have a common mutual respect for each other’s expertise and that this has helped them grow to where they are today.

The times Sally and Emily have to meet to plan lessons and collaborate are sporadic and there is not a set time in their schedules to meet. There was a year where their planning and study periods overlapped, but this was unusual. They have relied on a calendar and online document over the years and Sally thinks this has helped keep them organized and on the same page, even when they don’t have time to speak directly. Sally stresses that collaboration is “very, very difficult when you don’t have common planning time together.” She says that time must be dedicated to meeting in order to have a successful co-teaching experience. “You have to find ways around the roadblocks [of no time.] There’s email, Google Docs, calendars.”
She said that when it comes to emailing parents or handling certain situations, Emily gives Sally full reign. She says, “Emily respects me enough to hand off the tradition” [of the general education teacher being the one to handle emailing or certain situations.] Good communication is a very important part of their co-teaching success. Sally says one year they had a particularly challenging class and Sally told Emily she felt that they were not “really being effective right now.” So they met and “bounced ideas off each other, tried different approaches” and they were both open to allowing the other person to try anything to make the classroom more effective. When they disagree on something or have issues that need to be resolved, Sally says she takes “twenty-four hours to take some deep breaths” because her reaction could be damaging to their relationship. She says that if their relationship is damaged, it will “impact the kids” and she does not want this to happen. She says issues must be brought to the surface rather than getting upset and “complaining to other people,” and that listening to each other’s perspectives is crucial to co-teaching success. Sally says they leave “space for there to be disagreement” when they don’t see ‘eye to eye’ on something.

Sally admits that it is has been hard to “put myself out there” in the classroom because she does not know the content as well as Emily, whom she considers to be an expert in her field. Sally has learned to let Emily offer advice and suggestions without feeling like she is critiquing her teaching style. At first, Sally felt that since she had been in special education for so long, she did not need “feedback” from Emily. She says she is grateful that Emily has challenged her and pushed her to look at her teaching. Sally was initially afraid to make a mistake the first year they were together and was intimidated by Emily’s obvious expertise in the subject matter. After sharing this insecurity about teaching the students with Emily, they became stronger as a team.
Sally believes she has become a better teacher because of Emily’s “investment in the co-teaching model” and her determination to utilize Sally’s skills as a special educator and challenge her in the classroom. Sally also stresses that in a high school setting, some general education teachers feel more comfortable teaching the older students who are usually more motivated to graduate, and these teachers might have a hard time with struggling students. Sally thinks Emily is “truly special in that regard because she is committed to the process of education, and she truly believes that kids can make improvements and learn new skills and that really has to be the mindset” [to make inclusion work.]

Training new teachers about co-teaching methods is crucial to inclusion success, Sally believes. She thinks teachers who are placed in co-teaching classrooms need to figure out their strengths and weaknesses right from the start and be honest about how they feel. They need to figure out their philosophies. If one person is “unwilling to budge on something, you have to get that out in the open” from the start. She also stresses that teachers should not “throw in the towel” when issues arise because challenging situations present “opportunities for growth.” Sally thinks workshops and professional development opportunities should be offered to both general and special educators and that co-teaching methods should be modeled in them. She thinks that special education teachers need to be made to realize that even though they are not experts in the subject matter, they bring skills and expertise of their own to the classroom.

**The General Education Teachers**

**Carolyn.** Carolyn has been a math teacher for 16 years and a sixth grade math teacher for 11 years. She is an enthusiastic and compassionate teacher who really enjoys the middle school age group. She is involved in activities for the students outside of math classes and welcomes the
challenges of teaching them academics as well as being involved in their social opportunities. Carolyn is currently taking classes that will eventually offer her leadership and administrative opportunities. She speaks very highly of Sharon as her teaching partner from the start of the interview and it is obvious that she admires and respects Sharon’s many years of teaching experience. Carolyn was willing to try co-teaching right from the start and feels that Sharon was the “right fit” for her personality.

At the beginning of their co-teaching experience, Carolyn readily admits that she “had no idea what we were doing.” She says Sharon was placed in her room and Carolyn was told to do whatever was needed to use the other teacher to help with her class. Basically, Sharon helped struggling students while Carolyn taught the lesson. Carolyn says there was not much collaboration. Carolyn would make all the tests and Sharon would walk into the classroom not really knowing what was going on that day. It is very different today. Carolyn says it is now “more of a 50/50 split” and Sharon does “much more” than at the beginning of their co-teaching days together. She says students used to view Sharon as “the helper,” but they are now both equal teachers in the classroom. Their beginning teaching experience together was “a lot of trial and error.” Establishing Sharon’s presence as a co-teacher on the first day of school is important to Carolyn and the students. She says that “from day one, the students need to see that we are both teachers. I am not the teacher and she is the helper. The students need to see that immediately.” She says that a co-teaching course they took together was a major component in their success and she is glad that they still use methods they learned from that course. Carolyn and Sharon start the class by having Sharon do the initial pre-lesson activity and Carolyn thinks this clearly establishes that Carolyn respects Sharon as an equal teacher. Carolyn agrees with
Sharon that while another desk in the classroom would solidify the equal partnership semblance in the classroom, the classroom is too small for two desks.

Carolyn thinks that Sharon’s background as a social worker has helped them establish their solid working relationship. She says that Sharon has an “incredible way of being able to truly understand that some of the kids have needs that aren’t just academic, but social and emotional as well” and she has a “really good way with those kids.” When students are struggling and Carolyn cannot determine the cause, Sharon will support her by finding ways to help them grasp the material better. Carolyn thinks she is the stricter of the two, so Sharon’s compassion evens them out and they “meet in the middle.” She thinks “sometimes teachers get stuck in their own ways” and Sharon forces her to look more closely at her own teaching. Sharon will tell her that she can see that some of the students are struggling with a concept and ask Carolyn to present it differently so the students can understand it better. Carolyn uses an example of a test that she uses every year because she thinks it works. Sharon will often notice that some students are not accessing it easily and this forces Carolyn to “reflect on my own practices” even after years of presenting successful lessons or tests. Carolyn says Sharon will pretend that she does not understand something in class and force Carolyn to teach it in another way: “It’s like we play good cop, bad cop, and the students get it when we present it another way.” Carolyn obviously admires Sharon’s ability to “identify right at the beginning of class” which students are struggling. Sharon will pull them aside or focus on them, whether the students have IEPs or not. Sharon also does some of the grading of quizzes and tests in the inclusion class.

Carolyn thinks that some general education teachers have a “hard time giving up control,” and she understands that. She advises them to give up one part of the class to start, as
when Sharon does the initial problem, and then increase the responsibilities. Having the co-teacher do an opening activity or review the homework answers, do an end of the class activity, or lead a reflection, creates an atmosphere of a co-partnership. Carolyn acknowledges that it takes “baby steps” to allow another person to be a part of what was considered “your” classroom. Carolyn will often walk around and check on the students as Sharon is teaching.

When asked about time to collaborate, Carolyn says there is “definitely not enough time.” When Carolyn has a planning block, Sharon is seeing her special education students for their other services. Because they have been together so long, they can meet “in the lunchroom or pass in the hall” and quickly discuss the lesson plan for the day. Carolyn says their time to collaborate is “very, very informal,” and she wishes they could meet on a regular basis. They have a shared Google Doc which Carolyn thinks helps them stay organized, but she would like to meet regularly to not only figure out lesson plans, but also talk about the students who are struggling and how to help them.

Open communication has become easier over the years because Carolyn is so comfortable with Sharon. They openly discuss whatever comes up. Carolyn says they do have disagreements and different points of view, and they discuss their concerns and act on them. “We never had anything happen that we can’t get over,” says Carolyn. Carolyn thinks that sometimes general education teachers do not want or know what to do with another person in their classroom, and it is important to not give up and to talk about their expectations. She believes that open communication is a key factor in her co-teaching success. She considers herself fortunate that she can talk freely and easily with Sharon and that they can work out their conflicts
in a timely and comfortable manner. She knows this is not always the case in inclusion classrooms.

Emily. Emily has been a high school English teacher for eight years. Her classes range from upper level classes to college prep freshman level classes, which are the inclusion classes. She obviously enjoys the challenges of both. Emily is enthusiastic about teaching and about her curriculum in general. Emily is truly “invested” in co-teaching, which Sally confirmed, and Emily thinks that inclusion classes benefit all of the students in them, not just those who have IEPs. She obviously enjoys her subject matter and the high school students.

Emily echoes Sally’s opinion that the co-teaching course they took together was a major turning point in their relationship as co-teachers. She said the course taught them “how to interact with each other” and “what our roles should be” as co-teachers. She said the course showed them models of co-teaching that they still use. Emily says that one of the main reasons she and Sally have a working and well-run classroom is that Sally “wants to be involved in teaching and she is excited about the curriculum.” Emily thinks that it can be difficult for special education teachers who do not feel comfortable in front of the class and who are not confident with the curriculum to teach as a co-teacher. Sally wants to teach and “lead the class” so that makes a big difference. Emily says that now that they have been together six years, they know each other’s teaching styles, and Sally often parallel teaches a familiar lesson. They are always making changes to their teaching methods and curriculum, Emily says, but Sally knows the lesson and curriculum well enough now to feel comfortable teaching both. It took time to get to this point for both of them. Emily says that the students think of them as partners in the class. She wanted to get Sally a desk to stress that she is another teacher in the class and not just a
“helper.” Before the desk was in the room, Sally put her belongings on a small table with other material on it, and Emily said she felt badly. Emily said, as an English teacher, the “symbolism” of a desk provides a physical presence to establish the fact that Sally is an equal teacher.

Emily wishes they had more planning time together and says for co-teaching collaboration to happen, it is “super important to have a common planning period.” At minimum, she wants to meet weekly to make sure their goals “are aligned and we have a sense of what we are teaching next week.” Emily stresses that face to face communication with each other is needed to check in and go over previous lessons and see what works and does not work. It is important to meet in person to touch base, even after years of teaching and being familiar with the curriculum. Emily would like more time to talk about students who are having difficulties and she says it is good to catch up with Sally in general, to sit down and talk without being rushed with students around. They do not need as much time to collaborate as in the beginning of their co-teaching career together, but Emily says she would like to be able to meet on a regular basis. They do use a lesson plan calendar which helps keep them organized. They both utilize the calendar frequently. Emily says “In past years, when I was not as good at this [co-teaching], Sally would be coming in and I would not have told her what we were teaching. That is super unfair.” Emily says she thinks part of what makes them successful as co-teachers is that now Sally always knows what is happening that day.

Emily recognizes that there are co-teaching partnerships that are not as fluid as theirs and she realizes that it is not easy to get to the point where they are today. “There is definitely more awareness of the direction we are going compared to five years ago,” Emily says, but she has heard stories of special education teachers being asked when they will be “real teachers” or
referred to as the “helper.” Emily believes that one of the many benefits of having two teachers in the classroom is that the identified special education students and general education students in the classroom are getting “twice the attention and check ins.” The students do a lot of writing in their classroom and both of them will check in with the students, but Sally will focus on the ones who are having the most trouble with an assignment. She says all of the students benefit from having the extra attention and time. There are not “my students or your students” in the class; they are all “our students.”

Resolving issues was not always easy, especially at the beginning years of co-teaching. Emily says that neither of them are “great at straightforward confrontation,” and it has taken time for them to get to the point where they can say “this is wrong, let’s fix it.” Emily says that when Sally seems upset, it is usually when Emily changed a lesson plan midstream or did not clearly explain her expectations to Sally. Emily says that one of the main differences in their teaching styles is that she does not “do well with dead time,” and she is not good about waiting for students to finish a task. Sally is more comfortable with the wait time and will tell Emily they need to wait for a few students to finish before they move on. Emily recognizes that this is a weakness for her, and she applauds Sally for realizing when students may need more time. Emily says that the content teachers are always going to know the curriculum better, and the special education teachers are skilled at knowing, for example, why the students need more time. She thinks that it is hard for some of the general education teachers to accept another teacher in the room because they are used to “being in control and in charge and not being questioned.” The general education teachers must also follow the educational standards and curriculum and need to show that they are doing so to administrators. Emily says that she is not a “special education
expert,” and at times she will be taken aback when a student isn’t grasping the material the way she taught it. She says that Sally is aware of this and will go to the student and “clean that up” by showing the student how to understand it in a different way. Emily says they look to each other to use their strengths and weaknesses to figure out how best to reach all the learners in their classroom. She says they “trust each other, and give each other strength.”

Sharon and Carolyn. Sharon and Carolyn laugh easily with each other and sometimes finish each other’s sentences. After ten years together, they have become good friends and admit they know each other very well. Carolyn says at this point she can tell what is going on with Sharon as soon as she enters the room. They find the middle school age group to be challenging and fun, and they say that there is rarely a dull moment when they are at work. They both agree that it has taken time, effort, vulnerability, and a willingness to change in order to be able to enjoy working together as co-teachers.

When asked what makes them unique compared to other co-teaching partnerships, Carolyn says that some general education teachers do not want to “give up control,” and the special educator becomes more of a support than a partner. She says that they do not think of their students as “your kids and my kids. They are our kids.” Sharon says she is comfortable in their classroom because she is not intimidated by the fact that Carolyn is a math expert, and she is not. Sharon knows that she can “make a mistake and be okay with that.” Carolyn never thinks that Sharon is a teacher in their room who is not capable of teaching the subject. Instead, they will either make Sharon’s rare mistake seem like it was on purpose because it is a common error or they will tell the students to avoid doing it that way. Being able to make mistakes without Carolyn being critical of her is one of the major factors in Sharon’s confidence to co-teach.
There was a new math curriculum last year and Sharon says even though Carolyn was stressed at times about implementing it, she never made Sharon feel that she was not an equal partner in presenting it to the students. Both Sharon and Carolyn agree that even when they do not see eye to eye about something, they put the students first. They say that when they face obstacles, it all comes back to respect and trust and compassion for the students and each other.

When asked if their own behavior has changed due to having another teacher in the room working with them and at times watching them, Carolyn says that her perspective of students who struggle has definitely changed because of Sharon. Sharon has shown her that some students have so much going on outside of academics that “school is the last thing they are thinking about.” Carolyn feels that she can now look at these students and think about the social and emotional factors and how they affect their learning. She watches the strategies Sharon uses and sees the success when the student works out math or social or emotional problems. Sharon thinks her perspective has changed because she realizes Carolyn needs to get through a certain amount of material and the students sometimes need to be “more on target with the curriculum” even when there are barriers. Sharon thinks there are times when she tends to “nurture them too much,” and Carolyn will be stricter about what she expects in the class. They “piggyback” off each other until they find a happy medium.

Carolyn was uncomfortable the first year of inclusion classes with Sharon because she was not used to having someone watch her teach. It took time to get used to each other and be comfortable together. Now Carolyn says Sharon “can read my mind.” While preparing a math quiz recently, she could not decide on the number of questions and she knew Sharon would ask why there had to be so many, so she lessened the amount. Sharon often grades the quizzes and
tests and will discuss how much credit individual students should get based on their abilities. If there is a math problem and a student makes an error halfway through, Sharon will argue that they should get some credit. Carolyn agrees that in the past she would not have given up this control, but now she is onboard with Sharon’s fair system of grading.

Sharon and Carolyn were asked about a questionnaire for teachers who were going to be placed as co-teachers together. Would it be a good idea to see how personalities fit before they were placed? Both agree that would be a good way to make good co-teaching matches, but they were not sure of its impact. They say that knowing the strengths and weaknesses of teachers is a good start to making compatible partnerships.

When asked about suggestions for teacher training workshops or Professional Development sessions, Carolyn says that teaching people how to collaborate when time is limited is crucial. She thinks finding “sneaky ways to get planning time in” is needed for good co-teaching. They both think the co-teaching workshop they went to should be offered to both special and general educators and that co-teachers should attend together. Carolyn says that showing teachers how to handle two people teaching at once through models such as teaching stations in classes should be offered to teachers. She also thinks teachers should be taught “how to manage disagreements, how to grow together and take ownership and how to divvy up responsibilities.”

**Emily and Sally.** Emily and Sally obviously admire each other’s expertise and are proud of their co-teaching classroom. They have fine-tuned their classroom to where it is smoothly run and they accomplish what they need to do. They seem to really care about what the other one
thinks and it is obvious that they have established a successful high school inclusion classroom with learners of different levels because of their compassion and commitment to co-teaching.

Emily thinks that there would be more active co-teaching classrooms if teachers could have common planning periods and if the “expectation is active co-teaching.” Emily and Sally both agree that the co-teaching course they took together helped create what they have today. Emily thinks administrative support and training is needed to show teachers how to establish and maintain co-teaching practices. Without administrative support, “you need a lot of motivation and commitment on your own.” Sally put through a proposal to her department head about mentoring an inclusion class to see where they needed help. She thinks that teachers need help when they have never “had the training or taken a class together.” Sally was a neutral person, not a supervisor, who offered advice to these new inclusion classroom teachers, and it worked out very well.

Sally says that at the beginning of their co-teaching relationship, Emily was “very delicate” with her and allowed her to stay out of the spotlight at first. Once Sally was not afraid to make mistakes and she realized that Emily would not be critical, they could laugh off any errors or mishaps and Sally became more of a co-teacher. Sally attributes a lot of this to Emily’s nudging her to get in front of the class.

When asked about a potential questionnaire to match up co-teachers, Emily says she is not sure what would be crucial and pertinent questions. She is not sure if there are questions that would establish criteria to match people. She agrees that some teachers are more organized than others, and she thinks being invested in co-teaching is crucial. Emily thinks it is more important
to find teachers who want to co-teach rather than teachers who are a good match. Sally also thinks finding out a person’s openness to co-teaching is the first step.

When asked if their behavior has changed with another teacher to observe, Sally says that “even though it is not advertised as such, it is modeling.” Because Emily models her teaching philosophy daily, Sally says she has picked up her ideas and ideals, and this has enhanced her teaching. Sally says she is grateful she can trust in Emily to discuss various ways about how to structure material for the students. Emily thinks “we should all be going into each other’s classrooms.” She says Sally has shown her how to give the students more time and be more patient when waiting for the students to complete assignments.

Emily and Sally both agree that Professional Development workshops should offer courses on how to make the most of common planning time and that there should be an inclusion mentoring program for new co-teachers. Sally says courses should offer teachers ways to establish right from the start what they both bring to the table and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Sally and Emily agree that workshops should offer models that teachers can participate in and actively try together. The workshop they taught presented different models and participants came up to them after the class and said that some might work and some might not. Sally and Emily urged them to try them all to see what worked best. Emily understands that special education teachers travel to different classrooms daily and she thinks making time for them to really get to know their co-teachers is crucial for successful co-teaching.

**The Four Prominent Themes**

In searching for themes as the teachers’ stories were told, the researcher relied on coded transcriptions with the addition of color-coded quotes per theme. The interviews were read over
several times in different order to enable full interpretation. After transcribing the interviews and rewriting them as narratives, the researcher asked several follow-up questions which were then incorporated into the previous information from the interviews. In searching for prominent themes, the researcher used quotes with relevant and frequent observations and comments from the teachers. Each conversation was sorted and coded into frequent keywords, ideas, and concepts.

Interviews that are semi-structured or unstructured may be seen as a collaborative activity, according to Trahar (2009) In this case, the interviewees and interviewer shared in a “collaborative activity” as the researcher shared a few experiences in order to further conversation.

To write their stories, the researcher considered tone, expression and interactions with the interviewer. Because narrative inquiry looks at what happens to us in life—or what we make happen—as the means to identify what one learns from the experience and create meaning for our own identities, these stories reveal not only what the teachers have learned about co-teaching, but what they have learned from each other.

This study has determined that in order to create a co-teaching inclusion classroom that best meets the needs of all of the learners in the classroom and offers a strong co-teaching experience, it is crucial to have mutual respect, shared values and commitment, open communication, time for collaboration, and mandatory teacher training.

**Mutual Respect.** When asked to name three criteria necessary for a successful co-teaching classroom, all four teachers name “respect” as one of their choices. All four teachers say that they have a mutual respect for each other. They admire each other’s strengths and
abilities to reach the students using their expertise, whether that expertise be the subject itself or background in special education. The individual interviews are full of compliments for each other. The general education teachers stress that they understand their special education teachers are not experts in the subjects, but they admire their willingness to try and get out of their comfort zones and take risks. In fact, in both co-teaching partnerships, the general educators have encouraged the special educators to participate more in teaching, and this has helped develop their co-teaching partnership.

Both of the special education teachers think their general educators really know their subject matter and were intimidated at first when they started co-teaching with them. The general educators were willing to let the special education teachers make mistakes as they put themselves in front of the class. The general educators do not correct them in front of the students. They are willing to let go of the control of the classroom in order to allow their special educators to learn and grow because of the respect they have for their competence.

The general educators also felt intimidated with another person in the room and felt like they were being watched at times. At first, they were unsure of how to use the special education teacher. They stressed that they are not experts in learning disabilities or IEPs and rely on their partners to help them out when they push a struggling student too hard or when they are impatient or want to rush a student.
### Representative Quotes about Respect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily is a remarkably competent teacher who helps me continue to keep an academic mindset. (Sally)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I know she respects me enough to hand off certain traditions. (Sally)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling issues [by talking about them right away] demonstrates my respect for my co-teacher as a professional. (Sally)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You need to establish from day one that the two of you are the teachers...that it is not I am the teacher and this is my helper because the students need to immediately see that. (Carolyn)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the special ed teacher involved from the start (shows your respect for her). (Carolyn)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s always very open to certain details I pick up on and she doesn’t and vice versa. (Sharon)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes it work is a common mutual respect for the other person’s expertise. (Sally)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>We trust each other. (Emily)</td>
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**Shared values and commitment.** The special education teachers stressed that the general education teachers are invested in co-teaching in inclusion classrooms. The special educators are introduced as co-teachers from the first day of school. They are not seen as helpers or aides. They are equal partners. The special educators told stories about how the general education teachers put their names are on the door or board. Emily texted Sally one day and excitedly told her she had something for her. It was a desk that they placed in the room so Sally would have her own space.

The general education teachers made it very clear that they want and appreciate the special educators being in the classroom. While it was not always easy giving up control of the classroom to a co-teacher, they are invested in the co-teaching experience and believe it helps all
learners, not just those students on IEPs. General educators stressed that the special educators balance them out. They see where the students are struggling and encourage the general education teachers slow down or revisit the material from another angle.

All four teachers mentioned that in their classrooms, it is not “your students” or “my students.” It is always “our students” and they both share the responsibility of reaching all the learners in their room. There is not a clear division of who is on an IEP in the classroom, although the special educators make sure the IEP is followed and the general educator knows the students’ accommodations and modifications. They all agreed that the special education teacher is not in the classroom for solely the learning challenged students on IEPs, but for all the students who are struggling and need extra assistance to access the material. Often the students are not aware of which students the special educator is responsible for. The teachers all reveal many times in these interviews that there is no clear line between which students they are each responsible for. They are in the classroom for all of them, no matter what their abilities or needs.
Table 2

*Representative Quotes about Shared Values and Commitment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily is invested in the process of co-teaching and having a special education teacher working with a general education teacher. If a regular teacher is not committed to teaching, it’s a new level of work.</td>
<td>Sally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally wants to be really involved in teaching. She wants to teach and lead things and she’s excited about the curriculum planning.</td>
<td>Emily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to be tougher and say they are not trying and she notices that they are struggling and talks me off the edge.</td>
<td>Carolyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can get stuck in my ways and Sharon can question me and make me reflect on my own practices.</td>
<td>Carolyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I need someone to balance me out. She can be more compassionate than me. I have a very good knowledge of the content and she can look at it and say I think they will struggle with this part.</td>
<td>Carolyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn was just told a special education person was going into her room. Because of her personality, she was flexible and eager to compromise. I don’t think that is always the case. I got lucky.</td>
<td>Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a safe person I can bounce things off of … Should I have structured it this way?</td>
<td>Sally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I help bring Emily back to earth sometimes as far as the disability and this is what I think they can handle.</td>
<td>Sally</td>
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**Open communication.** The special education teachers were placed randomly in these general education classrooms. All four agreed that if not for willingness to openly communicate when they disagree with each other, they would not be successful collaborating co-partners. They have all encountered times when something has gone wrong in the classroom and someone did not handle it the way the other person wanted. Rather than fester about it, they bring issues to the surface right away. Sally said she sometimes needs time to think about disagreements because she does not want to damage their relationship. She said that when problems “are not brought to the surface and instead you get all upset and complain to other people,” that only
makes the issue worse. Sally said that their open communication “demonstrates the respect we have for each other.” All four teachers stressed that part of their success as co-teachers is based on their willingness to be open minded and listen to each other, even when the issue might be uncomfortable.

As the years have gone on, the interviewed teachers have grown more comfortable with each other and can more easily and effectively communicate, but they all said that in the beginning, when they did not know each other very well, the co-teaching model was difficult to attain. Open communication was not always easy. They grew to learn and appreciate each other’s strengths and weaknesses, but it took compromising, time, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Working together for years has strengthened their communication skills. Carolyn said that she will meet up with Sharon briefly and discuss the lesson and Sharon will know what she means because of past experience. “We have been together so long, I feel like she can read my mind sometimes,” Carolyn admitted. They were all challenged and grew as teachers as a result.

Table 3

*Representative Quotes about Communication*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We continue to learn to communicate. We have learned to allow space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for there to be disagreement. (Sally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When issues come up, they should be brought to the surface right away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We just talk about it because we have open communication. We play good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cop, bad cop. We have had our differences. (Carolyn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you talk about shared values, collaboration, none of that can happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unless you have honest communication. (Carolyn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you don’t communicate, it’s never going to go anywhere. And sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that is a hard process to do when you're working with another peer teacher. (Sharon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always know what is going to happen before I enter the room, even if it is passing her in the hall. (Sharon)</td>
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</table>
You have to learn how to manage disagreements. (Carolyn)
If she seems upset about something, we talk about it. (Emily)
(At times co-teachers) may need someone to sit down with them and clear the air and make sure they are listening to each other’s perspectives. (Sally)
It takes time to be able to say ‘Let’s try it this way’ or ‘Do you think that is going to work?’ (Sharon)

**Time to collaborate/teacher training.** Each teacher interviewed agreed that having time to talk about lesson plans and students is crucial to co-teaching success, but all four teachers stressed that they do not have a common planning time and most collaboration is done in a rush or at lunch. Emily and Sally have a shared Google Doc that helps them keep track of lesson plans and that they find very helpful. They have a shared calendar for upcoming lesson plans. Both agree this works out well, but it is not the same as face to face communication. Sharon and Carolyn see each other at lunch and catch up about what is happening or happened in class.

Both co-teaching partnerships changed significantly for the better after attending a co-teaching workshop together. Sally and Emily said it was a huge turning point and they learned a lot about how to run a co-teaching classroom and how to make their roles overlap in order to reach all the learners. Sharon’s and Carolyn’s co-teaching workshop taught them methods they still use today.

Training for future teachers was also stressed by all four participants. They all said they did not get enough training, if any, about inclusion or co-teaching before they were placed together and that future teachers, both general and special education, should get significant training on how to make co-teaching work. Professional Development workshops for general and
special educators that they both attend together was stressed throughout the interviews. Often it is only the special educator who attends and this is not sufficient or effective. Both sets of interviewed teachers have run their own in-service workshops on co-teaching in the district. They all agreed that having the special educator teachers and general education teachers attend these workshops together is more beneficial than attending separate ones without each other.

Table 4

Representative Quotes about Time to Collaborate/Teacher Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course was monumental in our co-teaching in general. (We saw) a lot of different models and methods about good co-teaching, but it also really changed both of our mindsets as far as it being an equal partnership. (Sally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course taught us how to interact with each other and what our roles should be. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[It is] super important to have common planning period. Not all co-teachers have it. Just to be able to meet once a week to make sure we have our goals aligned of what we are teaching for the next week. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We could say “We have taught this unit before so we are good”, but it’s good to have time to talk about students. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is definitely not enough time to collaborate. It is more in the lunch room or a quick talk before or after class. (Sharon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We went to a workshop together and learned a lot. That’s how we have me start out with our POD [problem of the day.] (Sharon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a common planning period would help a lot of co-teachers. (Carolyn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be an inclusion coach or mentor. Someone to help teachers who have never had training or taken a class together. There needs to be a person available for them. (Sally)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marriage metaphor. Two of the teachers, Carolyn and Emily, used a marriage metaphor to describe their co-teaching relationship. Co-teaching is “like a marriage. I have found no better way to describe it. You need to establish equal roles, communicate well, not ignore conflict, and figure out your strengths and weaknesses that work well together. You need to
figure out your discipline policy. And you put up a united front for the kids” (Emily).

Co-teaching is “like marriage. We put up united front for the kids. We have to have it out in the open or we will fester about it. You have to listen to someone else. We come together as a team (Carolyn).

Summary

Co-teaching is not often easily established in special education inclusion classrooms. It takes work to create a successful working co-teaching relationship. All four teachers who were interviewed say that if they had to start over with a new partner, it would take time and effort to get to where they are today. They all agree that considering they were randomly placed with a lack of significant inclusion training, they are grateful to be as successful as they are.

Mutual respect, shared values and commitment, open communication, and time to collaborate as well as teacher training are needed to create successful co-teaching pairs. The teachers were all in agreement that they need more time to meet and a planning period together would be welcomed. Administrative support for coordinated planning times would be ideal.

Mutual respect, shared values and commitment, and open communication are all already embedded in these interviewees’ daily lives as co-teaching partners. The teachers all agree that these components are necessary to create a solid working co-teaching environment that reaches the diverse learners in their classrooms. In making their classroom accessible to all their learners, and by committing to the co-teaching model, the teachers in this study have created what this researcher believes to be working models of successful co-teaching.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

Reviewing the Problem of Practice

Special education has changed dramatically over the years. The long-held belief that learning disabled students should be taught in separate settings from their non-learning challenged peers has been widely replaced by a mainstream model where they are educated among their peers in general education classrooms with a special education teacher in the classroom. The special education model changed significantly when inclusion classrooms were introduced. The roles of special education and general education teachers overlap and have not been clearly defined since this transition. While this shift occurred years ago, the co-teaching inclusion model is not without its challenges and these challenges continue to this day.

The teachers who are involved in educating special education students are not always aware of what is expected of them, and there are many barriers to creating a successful, well run co-teaching classroom. Establishing a model of what to do and who will do it is often demanding and takes persistence to accomplish. General education and special education teachers must work together to implement IEPs (Individual Education Programs) for their learning-disabled students and while collaboration is encouraged and usually optimistically attempted, there are factors that hinder its success. Reaching the wide range of learners in a single classroom through a co-teaching model is challenging and takes determination and work. It takes many factors to get to the point where both teachers are comfortable with their roles in a co-teaching environment. For many teachers, it is a struggle to get to the point where both the general and special educator feel compatible with each other and can work together. While co-teaching inclusion classrooms have come a long way, there is still much work to be done in order to get general education and
special educators teachers to where they use their varied abilities and skills to best serve the diverse learners under their care in one classroom.

**Review of Methodology**

This research study focuses on the participants’ responses to the following main questions. The research questions focus on when they first met and their early interactions until their present day careers as inclusion co-teachers. This includes background insight into how they figured out what works and does not work, how they created their classrooms, and what they have learned along the way about working as a team. There were follow up questions as the interviews progressed and as the teachers elaborated in detail about their experiences as co-teachers and colleagues.

1. How did two highly regarded co-teachers develop their co-teaching relationships and practices?
2. How do they believe they are able to establish and maintain successful co-teaching relationships?
3. How do they view their co-teaching relationships as benefitting both the identified special education students and the general education students?

A narrative inquiry was determined to be the best format to obtain the most information for this research. Because narrative study “revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them” (Chase, 2009), this inquiry is best suited to obtain information about the teachers’ actual experiences as co-teachers as they have lived them. The stories they tell reveal not only their experiences as individuals, but as co-teachers working together in a classroom. Through the teachers’ stories, the researcher was able to “learn from each
participant’s position as expert on her/his own life, understanding and co-constructing meaning through a reciprocal, dialogical interaction” (Carless, 2016) regarding their co-teaching experiences.

The teachers in the study all work in a public school system in a town north of Boston. They were referred to the researcher by a school administrator after the administrator was asked to recommend a successful co-teaching team for the purpose of this research. The teachers who were referred have all provided Professional Development workshops in the district. The teachers were interviewed individually first and then together as significant pairs. There were several follow-up emails or in-person inquiries for clarification. The researcher asked for clarification during the interviews to be sure the information was not misconstrued. The teachers often wanted to elaborate, and this was encouraged. They were all very interested in the topic and seemed happy to share information with the researcher. One teacher expressed that this research “made me reevaluate my co-teaching and why it works.” The interviews did not last more than an hour each; this was a sufficient amount of time to gather the pertinent information needed for this study. The interviews were reread, recategorized, and then labeled according to prevalent themes. The themes that developed were sorted into larger categories and then resorted to narrow down the major conclusions.

This chapter will first discuss the major findings which are divided into four major themes. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings as pertinent to the theoretical framework. Next, the findings as pertinent to the literature view will be presented. The limitations of the study will then be presented followed by the significance of the study. The
chapter will conclude with recommendations for future goals and implications as it pertains to co-teaching.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The participants in this study discussed their past, present and future experiences and their opinions and beliefs about special education co-teaching inclusion classrooms, specifically the present one they work in daily. After transcribing, sorting, coding and revisiting each interview several times, the following four key findings emerged.

- Their mutual respect was and is a crucial factor in the development of their successful co-teaching practices.
- Their communication and collaboration was and is a crucial factor in their successful co-teaching practices.
- Co-teaching benefits all of their diverse learners.
- Training, administrative support, and future opportunities for enhanced practices significantly contributed to and continues to contribute to their success as co-teachers.

Each of these themes as evidenced in the interviews of the teachers is presented below.

**Respect as a crucial factor in successful co-teaching practices.** Developing their co-teaching relationships has taken time and effort; all four teachers believe that respect for one another has contributed to their success as co-teachers. They all consider “respect” a major component of successful co-teaching and agreed that without respect, a working co-teaching classroom would be significantly more difficult to obtain. It is significant to note that when asked for four major components that must be present for successful co-teaching, all four participants in this research listed “respect” as one of them. The respect the teachers in this study have for
each other was obvious in their interactions with one other and the way they spoke about each
other. They often looked for verification or clarification from each other during the paired
interviews. Both sets of teachers were also at ease with each other and clearly admired the
expertise and skill of their partner. They laughed easily and seem to be very comfortable in their
established roles in the classroom as co-teachers and outside the classroom as colleagues. The
participants joked with each other and are clearly friends as well as colleagues. It is apparent to
the researcher that while respect for the skills each teacher brought to the classroom was there
from the start of their co-teaching experiences, it has grown and solidified over the years together
as they have watched and learned from each other. In reaching a common ground, “respect”
(Friend, 2000) is the key. Without respect for the skills that each teacher brings to the table,
successful collaboration is not possible.

Sharon admitted that she was not as sure of herself with regard to the math curriculum
when she first started working with Carolyn, but Carolyn never made her feel like she could not
make an irreversible mistake in front of the class. Sharon felt that Carolyn wanted her in the
room right from the start. Sally stressed that she sees Emily as a “remarkably competent teacher
[who] knows her stuff” and who clearly enjoys her subject. Sally said that she and Emily have a
“common mutual respect to the other person’s expertise” and that without it, they would not be
where they are today. Sally agreed that Emily has helped her to become a better teacher by
“pushing me to that level of wanting to be seen as a co-teacher.” She admires Emily for her
ability to teach a wide range of different levels of English classes and treat the students as
potential learners no matter what their abilities or levels of skill.
Both general education teachers admitted that the special education teachers give them perspective when their struggling learners are not grasping the material. They remind the general education teachers of the students’ disabilities and offer alternatives to understand the material. Carolyn admitted that at times she will think the effort is not there from the student and Sharon will force Carolyn to see where the barriers are. Carolyn admires Sharon’s intuition and compassion in always looking beyond academics to understanding what each child brings to school every day in the social-emotional realm. Emily said one of her weaknesses is that she thinks “I taught it. Why don’t they get it?” and Sally will “clean that up” and help the student access the material a better way. All four participants agreed that the special educators often see where the students are struggling and encourage the general education teachers to slow down or revisit the material from another angle. Carolyn said “I have a very good knowledge of the content, but Sharon can look at it as something she struggled with, so now I understand the other part of it. So, yeah, I need somebody to balance me out. “

Both general education teachers, Carolyn and Emily, feel that their special education co-teachers are invaluable in their classrooms, and they truly appreciate their presence. Because both special educators were placed randomly in the general education classroom and the teachers realize that this does not always work out, they are all appreciative that their relationships are strong and successful. As Carolyn said, “If a stranger came in [as a new inclusion teacher], I know how hard that would be.” All four teachers are concerned that the day might come when they are not a team, and they all expressed remorse and concern over this. They are concerned that because the mutually respectful relationships they have developed has taken time and effort,
developing new relationships will be challenging, and they feel like they will have to start all over again.

**Communication in successful co-teaching practices.** Establishing and maintaining co-teaching relationships is dependent on establishing and maintaining communication and collaboration. Communication and collaboration can be intertwined and often defined as one entity. Honest, straightforward, and open communication is vital to successful co-teaching and in order to achieve successful open communication, collaboration, especially in terms of time to discuss, is crucial. All four participants listed collaboration and/or communication as one of the three crucial factors needed for a working co-teaching classroom.

All four teachers in this study were randomly placed without prior consent. Sally was placed in Emily’s high school general education English classroom because it worked with her schedule after she returned from maternity leave. Sharon was placed in Carolyn’s sixth grade math class when special education inclusion was first instituted in their school. At that time, the special education teachers in Sharon’s and Carolyn’s middle school were assigned inclusion classrooms by the administration. The inclusion teachers were paired with the general education teachers mainly because of their schedules and teams. All the teachers in this study knew each other from sight in the schools, but they did not know each other well. From the start, communicating was imperative to success and lack of collaboration hindered this initial success.

Developing their co-teaching relationships and practices has taken time, trial and error, and patience. The teachers all agreed that the beginning of co-teaching together was challenging. “It has absolutely been a growing process,” says Sharon, “We started off not really knowing what our roles were.” Sally said that “in the very beginning, it was pretty rough. We had a hard
time figuring out our roles. Toward the end of the first year, we started syncing together better.” Carolyn admitted that in her inclusion classroom the biggest challenge was figuring out “who was going to handle each responsibility.” All four teachers pointed to a co-teaching course that each pair took together at the start of the co-teaching experience as a major component to sort out roles and envision what a successful co-teaching classroom should look like. Their time to figure out roles was rushed and limited when they were first placed together. All four teachers said they rarely had a set time to plan.

All four teachers expressed that what they learned in that initial course they took together significantly helped shape and construct their co-teaching classrooms as well as helped them learn to better collaborate. Emily and Sally both received an email offering a co-teaching course during their second year teaching together and they decided to go to it together. Sally stressed that the course was “monumental in our shift in co-teaching together. It had a lot of different models and methods showing good teaching, but it also changed both our mindsets as far as it being an equal partnership.” Emily agreed that the course was significant in teaching them how to be better co-teachers. It taught them “how to interact with each other” and “what our roles should be” as co-teachers. Emily said that her biggest takeaway from the course was the co-teaching as a marriage metaphor. She said “I have found no better way to describe it. Because you need to establish equal roles, communicate well, not ignore conflict, and you figure out each of your strengths and weaknesses that work well together. And then you put up a united front for the kids.” Carolyn also mentioned the marriage metaphor: “Co-teaching is like a marriage. You have to take the other person’s thoughts into consideration. I can tell her mood-- if she is annoyed when she walks in--and the same with her.”
Interpersonal communication is imperative in a successful co-teaching classroom. The teachers all expressed the need to talk to each other face to face or through technology. Emily admitted that “neither of us are great at straightforward confrontation…. saying ‘This is wrong; let’s fix it’. Usually, it’s more like ‘You seem upset. What’s going on?’ and we talk about it.” She thinks a lot of their success in solid communicating is simply getting to know each other better. Emily admitted that in the past she would inadvertently change the lesson without Sally knowing or “spring something on her,” and that she now realizes this was “not fair” to Sally. Emily said they have learned to “figure it out” by talking it out. Sally, in turn, agreed that she and Emily have created a successful team because they “continue to learn to communicate and there are plenty of things that we disagree on and don’t always see eye to eye on, but what we have learned to do is kind of allow space for there to be disagreement.” Sharon seconded this with her view on communicating: “If you don’t communicate, it's never going to go anywhere. And sometimes that is a hard process to do when you're working with another peer teacher.” Sally lamented that it is also important that special educators advocate for themselves: “We can stand on our own two feet and let our regular ed teachers know that we have an expertise and skills set as well. I'm not sure if that’s always the case.”

All of the interviewees agreed that if not for the willingness to openly communicate when they disagree with each other, they would not be collaborating co-partners. They have all encountered times when something has gone wrong in the classroom and someone did not handle it the way the other person wanted. Rather than fester about it, they said that they bring issues to the surface right away. As the years have gone on, they have grown more comfortable with each other and can more easily and effectively communicate, but they all said that at the beginning,
when they did not know each other very well, it was difficult. They have grown to learn and appreciate each other’s strengths and weaknesses, but it took compromising, time, a willingness to be vulnerable, and open communication.

Every participant in these interviews agreed that having time to talk about lesson plans and students is crucial to co-teaching success, but all four teachers stressed that they do not have a common planning time and most collaboration is done in a rush or at lunch. Emily and Sally have a shared Google Doc that helps them keep track of lesson plans and they find that very helpful. They have a shared calendar for upcoming lesson plans. Both agreed that this works out well, but it is not the same as face to face communication. They would all like to see set planning times for collaboration so they can go over what works and doesn’t, discuss the students’ needs, and prepare and/or change future lessons. They all also agreed that presently there is not enough time to do this. Sally summed it up as “It is super important to have a common planning period. Not all co-teachers have it. We need to just be able to meet once a week to make sure we have our goals aligned of what we are teaching for the next week.” Sally said that at the beginning of co-teaching with Emily, they coincidentally had a common planning time, which worked out well. She added that in order to establish and maintain a successful co-teaching classroom, “You really need time. And I know I’m sure that's a common, very, very common thread.”

**The benefits of co-teaching for all diverse learners.** As in the definition of an inclusion classroom, the general education classrooms in this study all consist of both special education students and general education students. In the middle school, there are 22 students in the inclusion classroom. Six of these students have IEPs. Because the classroom is tiered, the students are in a lower level math class, but they still access the same math curriculum as the
other three blocks of math. The majority of the students do not receive special education services in the classroom. However, the special educators and general educator agreed that having a co-teaching classroom benefits the many diverse learners in the room.

    All four teachers agreed that in their classrooms, it is not “your” students or “my” students, but rather it is “our” students. Both the general educator and special educator share the responsibility of reaching all the learners in their room. There is not a clear division of who is on an IEP, although the special educators make sure the legal IEP is followed. As Carolyn stressed, “This is our classroom and when Sharon works with the kids, it’s all our kids, not just the special ed inclusion kids.” Sally believes that “in an inclusive classroom, what you want is to help the kids who are not on plans as well as those who are.” The students who need help grasping concepts may or not be learning disabled. It is the goal of inclusion classrooms to help all the learners. The students do not know who has an IEP unless that is disclosed by the student and the benefits of having two teachers can be taken advantage of by every student in the co-teaching classroom.

    Carolyn gave an example of how all students are helped by describing how she and Sharon manage their classroom. Carolyn will teach a lesson and Sharon will pretend she does not understand part of it and ask questions. Carolyn says “Sharon will put herself in the kids’ shoes” and ask for another way to grasp the material. Carolyn said that after teaching the same lessons, she starts to think “This is easy, but of course it is not easy for everyone” and having Sharon find alternatives ways is helpful for every student, not just the ones who have learning disabilities. Sharon joked that the students must sometimes wonder why she “has so many questions” and cannot seem to understand some of the math concepts.
The obvious benefit to having two teachers in the room is the extra attention all the students in the classroom can gain from. Emily said that one of the benefits of an actively co-taught classroom “is that kids get used to routines that involve all students and it’s not obvious when some students are getting more assistance or slightly different assignments. Having two teachers also benefits both the special ed and regular ed students because they all get twice the attention and check-ins." Carolyn said that Sharon will identify “right in the beginning of class who's struggling so then she can pull those kids aside of needed and they are not always the kids who are on IEPs.” Sharon also shares grading with Carolyn and they do not separate the students who are on IEPs and those who are not. The struggling general education and special education students both reap the benefits of having two teachers in the room.

**Common planning time/training.** Having time to plan lessons and meet is also crucial for co-teaching success. Every interviewee agreed that having time to talk about lesson plans and students is crucial to co-teaching success, but all of the teachers stressed that they do not have a common planning time, and most collaboration is done in a rush or at lunch. Emily and Sally have a shared Google Doc that helps them keep track of lesson plans, and they find that very helpful. They have a shared calendar for upcoming lesson plans. Both agreed this works out well, but it is not the same as face to face communication. Sharon and Carolyn see each other at lunch and catch up then about what is happening or happened in class. Sharon does the activity for the class at the start every day, and she lets Carolyn know what it is.

Both co-teaching partnerships changed significantly for the better after attending a co-teaching workshop together. Sally and Emily both said it was a huge turning point, and they learned a lot about how to run a co-teaching classroom and how to make their roles overlap in
order to reach all the learners. Sharon’s and Carolyn’s co-teaching workshop taught them methods they still use today.

Training for future teachers is also necessary for successful practice. The teachers all agreed they did not get enough training for their current co-teaching positions. They all believe that future teachers, both general and special education, should get significant training in how to make co-teaching work. Professional Development workshops or in-service opportunities for general and special educators that they both attend together is also recommended and even mandated. Often it is just the special educator who attends, and this is not sufficient. Both sets of interviewees have run their own workshops in the district.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

Social Learning Theory is the framework that informed this study. Social Learning Theory seeks to offer a detailed look at co-teaching through the eyes of those in the midst of the experience, who in this study are the teachers who participate in co-teaching classrooms that are regarded as successful models.

**Social Learning Theory.** In order to work together, the special and general educators needed to learn how to work with each other. The teachers in this study were placed together without consideration for personalities, teaching values, or a discussion about whether the general education teacher wanted another teacher in her room. Social Learning Theory (SLT) focuses on the belief that humans act a certain way and this pattern is based on a “three-way relationship between cognitive factors, environmental influences, and behaviour” (Bandura, 1977). Learning comes from knowledge which comes from direct observation which creates a learned behavior. This behavior can be positive or negative. All four teachers worked in other
co-teaching situations that were not as successful as their current one. They agreed that the beginning of their co-teaching experiences were challenging. Carolyn advised future teachers to not “throw in the towel” when starting out as co-teachers. “Being invested” in co-teaching is crucial, Emily said, and without that initial commitment, learning from each other in order to create a working partnership is difficult. Sharon said there has to be a lot of “give and take” for successful co-teaching.

Research by Hoy and Woolfolk (1990) describes personal teaching efficacy (PTE) as “the teacher’s assessment of his or her own competence to promote student achievement”. How a teacher views his capacity to teach greatly influences outcomes and attitudes, which carry over to inclusion classrooms. Teachers with positive attitudes are more apt to be flexible and willing to take risks in order to help students with learning disabilities succeed. Teachers who believe special education students should not be taught among general education students do not usually put forth significant effort to make successful inclusion occur. SLT demonstrates how teachers are able to observe, create, and maintain collaborating methods of teaching that enable special education students to best benefit from their expertise in inclusion settings.

Albert Bandura, the father of Social Learning Theory, believed that there is a direct link between a how a person looks at his own abilities and how he can change this view with behavioral adjustments. As this pertains to special and general educators working together, the teachers must learn from each other and combine their expertise to best service the needs of all of the children in their classroom. Sally acknowledged that Emily has “enhanced and made my teaching better” by forcing her to look more closely at how she was teaching. She said that in Emily she has found a “safe person to bounce things off of.” Carolyn echoed that sentiment
when she said that after years of the same lessons, Sharon makes her see new ways to present them to the learning challenged students. Both classrooms in this research consist of teachers who have worked through their differences, learned from each other, and created a classroom they are proud of. Emily mentioned that they trust each other and rely on each other. This is a far cry from their first year which they both admitted was challenging.

There is no assumption in Social Learning Theory that all behavior is learned. Rather the view of behavioral change over time is that much of “it is acquired via respondent, operant, and observational learning processes” (Thyer and Myers, 1998). As Bandura put forth, the environment one observes can help create a learned behavior that can be destructive or beneficial. Learning to alter the destructive behavior can be challenging. Further, Smith (2008) argues that special education teachers are influenced by past experiences with special education students. They bring these views with them to a new classroom and changing them can be difficult. New positive experiences help alleviate some of the past attitudes, but humans need to observe the behavior that is expected of them and watch models of this expected behavior before it can result in the changes SLT (Bandura, 2007) addresses. Sally addressed the inquiry as to whether her behavior has changed because of co-teaching with “Even though it is not advertised as such, it is modeling. So, on a daily basis, Emily models her teaching philosophy and I learn to pick things up.” Emily agreed that research about peer observation further offers insight into why “we should all be going into each other’s classrooms” to learn from each other.

Social Learning Theory opens up avenues for teacher redirection and newfound learning as two teachers learn from each other through trial and error and observation, and these results can change teaching habits and styles. Teachers can learn to become part of an inclusion
environment where new resources of differentiated teaching are able to be developed because of changes in their actual learning and teaching styles due to direct observation. Teachers who actually observe the expected behavior are more apt to make that a part of their classrooms. They are more able to work with another teacher by compromising or alternating a previously held teaching belief. Inclusion classrooms are then able to encompass the teaching styles of teachers who are able to work together and therefore offer special education students more opportunities to learn.

Bandura (2007) stated that a person’s self-efficacy was a crucial factor in how “goals, tasks, and challenges are approached. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to believe they can master challenging problems and they can recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments”. In inclusion settings with two teachers working together, teachers with high self-efficacy would be more able to observe behavior that is expected of them and allow it to become a part of their teaching practices. Teachers with low self-efficacy would lack the initiative to accept challenging and uncomfortable changes. Carolyn admitted that the first year with Sharon made her “uncomfortable having someone watch me teach” partly because Sharon is a veteran teacher. Sharon, meanwhile, admitted that she was afraid to make a mistake in math at first and she was intimidated by Carolyn’s expertise in math.

As put forth by the educators of this study, in order to make co-teaching work, the general education and special education teacher need to develop a rapport that is based on respect, compromise, and commitment. It is also based on the ability and willingness to learn from each other and be willing to make changes to accommodate each others’ strengths and weaknesses. It takes time and energy to get to a place where both feel comfortable in their
classroom while recognizing that constant changes need to be made to enhance success. Learning to work together is crucial and not always easy. Change is often difficult. Watching and learning from each other is a significant factor in creating a solid co-teaching partnership. As the participants in this study voiced, getting to where they are as solid co-teaching partners has not been without challenges, but the factors that have gotten them there resonate throughout their interviews.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

While the research findings are generally consistent with the Literature Review, there are several aspects of this research that conflict with previous findings. Previous research concentrates on four major factors that prevail in successful co-teaching classrooms: collaboration and compromise on the part of both teachers, administrative support, time to plan and teacher training. The results of this study indicate that these factors are crucial for successful co-teaching, but there are other factors that are equally as important. This research offers other crucial factors for successful co-teaching such as mutual respect, open communication, and time to collaborate as well as effective and mandatory teacher training.

**Inclusion-past and present.** Special education students are now mainstreamed and educated among their peers as a general practice, but the context and definition of how they are educated varies greatly. Historically, special education practices have certainly improved since the days when those with learning disabilities were kept in separate settings and schools. However, while there have been major improvements, the general education and special education teachers who are responsible for learning challenged students still seek the best
methods to accomplish this. Inclusion co-teaching is one of the most significant and promising methods of reaching all the learners in the classroom. Educating teachers on how to do this is the next step. Co-teaching does not come naturally. It takes work to get to a place where a co-teaching classroom is well run and both the teachers and students are thriving.

Of the four participants in this research and as a veteran teacher, Sharon has seen the most change in special education inclusion. When she first started, there were no special education students in the general education classrooms. All of the special education students were educated in separate settings away from their peers. She had a classroom of students with Down’s Syndrome, and other teachers had students of various learning disabilities. These students rarely interacted with their general education peers. When Sharon had her first inclusion class, she says she and the general education teacher were “floundering around trying to figure out what their roles were.” Neither of them had training in inclusion co-teaching Sharon says they never had time to “meet or plan. I never knew what was taking place the next day unless I asked her when I left.” Emily echoes Sharon’s sentiments when she says that “There’s definitely more awareness (about co-teaching practices) that this is the direction we should be going in compared to five years ago.”

All of the teachers in this study were placed randomly. The general education teachers were told that there would be a second teacher in the classroom. There were no questionnaires that were filled out to try to match personalities. There were no interviews to see where the teachers would be placed. The training prior to working with each other was minimal. Sharon said that if she and Carolyn had had time to meet before they actually started teaching together, that would have been helpful. In both partnerships, the teachers initiated their own training by
getting permission from their school district that allowed them to attend co-teaching workshops together. This training was significantly beneficial and helpful in developing their relationships as co-teachers.

**Respect for each other.** The researcher found few studies in the Literature Review that glorified respect to the extent the participants in this study do. It is a prevailing theme throughout the interviews. When asked to name three factors needed in a successful co-teaching classroom, all four teachers named “respect” as one of their choices. All four said that they have a common “mutual respect” for each other. They admire each other’s strengths and abilities to reach the students using their expertise whether it be in the subject content itself or using their special education skills. The individual interviews were full of compliments for each other.

The general education teachers stressed that they understand their special education teachers are not experts in the subjects, but they admire their willingness to try to get out of their comfort zones and take risks. The general educators also at first felt intimidated with another person in the room and felt like they were being watched at times. They stressed that they are not experts in learning disabilities or IEPs and relied on their partners to help them out when they pushed a struggling student too hard. Studies show that special educators do not know what exactly their role is supposed to be in an inclusion classroom (Orr, 2009). The general educators are grateful that there is a teacher in the room with them who is skilled in learning disabilities and can help reach the diverse learners in the room. Sally believes that she and Emily have a “mutual common respect” for each other’s skills.” Carolyn says she and Sharon “even each other out.”
The special education teachers both think the general educators really know their subject matter and were intimidated at first when they started co-teaching with them. The general educators were willing to let them make mistakes as they put themselves in front of the class. The general educators did not correct them in front of the students. They were willing to let go of the control of the classroom in order to allow their special educators to learn and grow. Emily knows she has “consistent routines and a clear vision for what each lesson and unit are supposed to accomplish” and at times she can “have trouble integrating another teacher's ideas and instruction into my vision.” Sharon maintains that some general education teachers have trouble giving up control of the room, and Carolyn has the mindset that “we are in it together for the same reason which is to help the kids and help each other.” The special education teachers also understand and appreciate the fact that the general education teachers are responsible for the content and curriculum and the often stressful responsibility of this. In reaching a common ground as a co-teacher, respect is a crucial factor. Without respect for the skills that each teacher brings to the table, collaboration is not possible.

**Communication as colleagues and partners.** Without opportunities to develop a co-teaching relationship, this research indicates that a successful inclusion classroom is not possible. While collaboration is a prevailing theme in the literature review, this study frequently offers communication as an even more important tool. Collaboration by definition means working together for a common goal, and when used in the context of an inclusion classroom, collaboration is the compromising, talking, organizing, and reaching of common goals for a general and a special educator. The sub category of “talking”--communicating--prevails throughout this research. While collaboration in itself is mentioned often in the interviews, all of
the teachers stress communication as a major factor in their co-teaching success. They all agree that their relationships have grown to where they are because of a willingness to discuss problems and not let issues become more than what they are, but rather bring them out in the open. Carolyn says “You can talk about collaboration and shared values, but none of that can happen if you are not having an honest conversation.” Sharon agrees that when one of them is upset, they “talk about it and get over it” and this is true collaboration. Sally agrees that gossiping and talking to others about problems in a co-teaching classroom just creates disharmony and that issues should be brought to the surface.

Because the special education teachers were placed randomly in these general education classrooms without notice and without specific training, all four teachers agree that if not for the willingness to openly communicate when they disagree with each other, they would not be collaborating co-partners. They have all encountered times when something has gone wrong in the classroom and someone did not handle it the way the other person wanted her to. Rather than fester about it, they all said that they bring issues to the surface right away.

As the years have gone on, they have grown more comfortable with each other and can more easily and effectively communicate, but they all said that at the beginning, when they did not know each other very well, it was difficult. They grew to learn and appreciate each other’s strengths and weaknesses, but it took compromising, time, and a willingness to be vulnerable.

**Not “yours” or “my” students.** The participants in this study reiterated several times that the students in their classrooms are never “yours” or “mine” but rather they are always “ours.” This is a far cry from the Literature Review where early studies showed that general education teachers were apprehensive about having special education students in their classrooms. These
teachers were concerned about the level of work the special education students would be able to accomplish in a general education classroom (Bender, 1995). These teachers were also concerned that they did not have the proper training to teach special education students and indicated a concern for the amount of time it would take to create work that learning disabled students could understand. The general educators expressed concern that they would not have enough support, they did not have the explicit knowledge of IEPs, and their classrooms would be disrupted by special needs students (McKray, 2011). The general educators in this research admitted that they are not experts on IEPs, and they rely on their special education teachers to keep them up to date and informed about the learning challenges in their classroom. Emily admits that “I am not a special ed expert” and at times she can become frustrated if a student is not grasping the material. She says Sally’s expertise and skills in special education are clearly what is needed. Emily said that most classroom teachers are “used to being in control and being the one in charge and not being questioned” so it is an adjustment to have someone else in the class. Carolyn agreed that some general educators have a hard time giving up control and suggest they give up one activity or part of the lesson that becomes the special educator’s job. She believes that “in a true, inclusive classroom, we are equal and all of our kids are all of our kids. We don’t delineate between special education and regular education. Once you are doing the ‘these are mine, these are yours’, it’s not going to be true collaboration.”

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in this study that hinder the generalization of the results. The small number of participants who were interviewed reduce the amount of data collection, although the interviews themselves were in depth and revealing. The demographics of the
interviewees also limit expansion as they were all white women and all from the same school district, although not the same schools. The inclusion model is very similar in both schools.

Researcher positionality must also be acknowledged. The researcher works as a full time special education inclusion teacher in four classes a day. The researcher’s colleagues often discuss varying amounts of praise and complaints about their own co-teaching experiences. While inclusion classes greatly vary, this personal experience is solely in one district and therefore knowledge of other co-teaching models is limited. Even after having attended several workshops and in service programs, the researcher has a limited scope of inclusion classrooms.

The last limitation is the changing definition of collaboration throughout this research. While some teachers may consider collaboration to be a set and planned meeting time, others may consider it to be as more of a time to talk or even to briefly update. What one person determines is collaboration is not necessarily how another defines it. Therefore, time to collaborate can be varied. It can mean set planning times to one person and meeting in the hall or after class to another.

**Significance of the Study**

This study aims to determine how two teams of co-teachers, who were recommended as models of successful special education inclusion practices by administrators, have created their working classrooms. Successful co-teaching classrooms allow access for diverse learners in the classroom, whether learning challenged or general education students. While it is generally agreed among educators that inclusion classrooms with collaborating teachers are the ideal setting for special ed students, this relatively new field continues to create opportunities for improvement and advancement. As Gerber and Popp (2000) state, “Whereas collaborative
teaching is viewed as a workable model for teaching students with disabilities who are
academically able, there has been little investigation into what can be done to improve the
system and practices as they currently exist.” As co-teaching in inclusion classrooms continues
to be the most readily available resource to educate special needs students among their peers,
both special and general educators need to be involved in the policies and procedures of
successful inclusion classrooms. Teacher collaboration needs to be the priority for successful
inclusion and this will enhance successful special education student learning. Most literature
continues to cover the problems associated with inclusion and offer recommendations, but there
are not many concrete patterns of success.

This study offers insight into pertinent factors needed for co-teaching success and
therefore diverse student learning success by interviewing four teachers who are proud of their
successes and work daily to maintain their co-teaching partnership. Respect, open
communication and time to collaborate are crucial factors in successful co-teaching and in
creating a classroom where all students can have access to education and a promising future as
independent members of society.

Social Learning Theory is explored and found to be a relevant theory to explore how
coteachers interact with each other and actually change their behavior after seeing modeled
behavior. Carolyn believes Sharon has helped her to see that some children “have so much going
on, school is the last thing they are thinking about” and “there is so much going on with this
child’s learning that is not academic and Sharon gives me the ability to look at them more in a
social emotional way.” Emily said she has a hard time “with dead time” as they are waiting for
the students to finish their work and Sally is “much more comfortable with being okay that ¾ of

the kids are finished and we are just waiting for the last five.” It has taken time for Emily to see that this is okay. Sally said she is grateful that Emily “has really pushed me to the level of wanting to be seen as a co-teacher and establish my presence as such.” Sally mentioned that students had previously asked her if she was a “helper” and she decided that if she wanted to be seen as a co-teacher, she needed to take Emily’s lead. Sharon seconded this when she said that before this current teaching experience, she was more of a “glorified IA” (Instructional Assistant) and that she “never felt like a co-teacher.” Carolyn has modeled what co-teaching should look like and offered opportunities for Sharon to fully participate in the class. Sharon agreed that she is an equal partner after following Carolyn’s lead.

While special education co-teaching inclusion has made vast strides from the time when separating special needs students from their peers was the norm, the practice still has a long way to go before both general and special educators truly use their expertise to reach all the learners in the classroom. This research shows that in order to attain success as co-teachers, respect for each other must be a dominating factor. Obstacles such as not enough planning time, random placements, and lack of training can be overcome when both teachers respect each other and are willing to compromise. In addition, open communication is vital to success and not always easy to attain. Being comfortable enough to make mistakes without judgement, taking risks, and breaking stereotypical versions of co-teaching are crucial factors in changing the mindset to where students do not see the special educator as a helper, but as an equal teacher. Trial and error can result in advancement and setbacks, but if both teachers are truly invested in the co-teaching method, they are able to actively seek ways to reach all the learners in a classroom. It is only
when all students are given the opportunity to learn, no matter what their abilities or disabilities, that successful co-teaching will become more the norm than the exception.

**Conclusion**

The research questions that drove this study centered on how four teachers developed, established and continue to maintain their co-teaching practices, how these practices benefit the diverse learners in their classrooms, and what this research offers to future studies on co-teaching inclusion practices. The teachers in this study started in unfamiliar territory when they were placed together in a classroom and instructed to work out a co-teaching inclusion classroom for their students with learning disabilities. Past literature seems to indicate that this is more the norm than exception and teachers are not always comfortable or willing to take on the challenge of co-teaching. Different personalities, values, backgrounds, and experiences are all obstacles that may hinder a cooperative and working co-teaching environment. Special educators may not feel comfortable in a classroom where a general educator is ultimately responsible for, especially in terms of the curriculum. General educators may not know exactly how to utilize the special education teacher’s skills and expertise. It takes effort and the willingness to be in a vulnerable position, as well as the ability to get out of one’s comfort zone, to meet the many challenges teachers face as co-teachers.

Respect for each other’s roles is crucial in accomplishing success as co-teachers. Both teachers must be willing to consider the other’s strengths and weaknesses as they decide on the roles in their classrooms. They must also be willing to allow for mistakes, realize that they are experts in their own fields, and be willing to work together and help each other in the classroom not only as colleagues but as learners who seek to improve by modeling the behavior of their
co-teacher. They must be willing to respect each other enough to allow room for change, even if it is not always comfortable. As co-teachers, they must also be willing to communicate and allow room for disagreement as a means of growth and improvement. Honest conversations, bringing issues to the surface, and talking and collaborating are essential for success. While collaboration is a priority in establishing roles as co-teachers, time to meet to make plans and create diverse lessons is limited. Therefore, the means to collaborate can be creative even if it is rushed in the course of a busy school day. In addition, in order to benefit all the learners in the classroom, there needs to be a mindset of all of the students are “our” students. When there are two teachers in the classroom, the students, whether on IEPs or not, get twice the attention and support in a successfully run co-teaching classroom. It is up to the teachers to make this arrangement work to its full potential.

Successful co-teaching does not happen naturally. Just as some arranged marriages work and some do not, some co-teaching partnerships do not develop into successful models. Teachers who are placed with another teacher and told to “work it out” do not always succeed. Prior intervention to success includes time to get to know each other as well as training in the field of inclusion. As this study indicates, those who do succeed require mutual respect, open communication, and time for collaboration and training.

**Future Studies**

There are vast and varied opportunities for future studies in special education co-teaching inclusion. Further research would ideally focus on proper training for those teachers who work in inclusion models. As indicated by this research, presently the offerings for training are limited. Both sets of teachers actively addressed the lack of training by strongly voicing the immense
knowledge they acquired, and continue to use, from workshops each pair took together. Emily says the course “taught us how to interact with each other” and “what our roles should be.” Carolyn and Sharon agree that the workshop they took established their roles and created an opportunity for Sharon to start the class with an introduction of an initial activity and they use that same format today. Sally says the workshop “was monumental in our co-teaching in general” and that it “changed both our mindsets as far as it being an equal partnership.” All four teachers believe that attending workshops separately is not nearly as beneficial as attending them together. They stress that it defeats the purpose of inclusion training to attend classes without your partner. This part should be required.

Co-teaching training should involve both special and general educators and start off by “defining what your strengths and weaknesses are as teachers” and “what your philosophies are” (Sally). She says special educators have opportunities to learn that they should “put yourself out there” and let the general educators know that “you have expertise and a skill set as well.” Sharon said more special education inclusion courses should be taught in college. Training should also include “actual models that show students how to handle two people teaching at once” (Carolyn.) Carolyn also suggested that courses be offered to teach teachers “how to work with someone else, how to manage disagreements, how to grow together, how to take ownership and divvy up responsibilities.”

Coincidentally, on her way to one of the interviews, Sally was stopped in the hall by a teacher who is going to have an inclusion class next year. He wanted to ask her what he needed to “be prepared for.” She thinks teachers need mentors or an experienced teacher to oversee inclusion classes that are just starting out and struggling to establish their roles. Sharon agreed
with this when she stated that upcoming teachers “should have to do some of their practice
teaching in an inclusion class to see what it is like.”

**Implications for Practice**

Overall, this study reveals that future trainings for co-teachers in inclusion classrooms
should offer opportunities to attend workshops together, observe established inclusion
classrooms, and receive mentoring from experienced educators. Administrative support is vital in
providing opportunities to strengthen inclusion classrooms. Administration should provide
in-service training and staff development workshops for current co-teachers and should also
require specialized training for future teachers. Teachers should be able to actually observe
successful co-teaching environments.

Ideally, in-service or staff development workshops should begin with activities that allow
co-teaching pairs to get to know each other. Although the teachers in this research were unsure
of the possible value of questionnaires for co-teachers before placement to determine
compatibility, they did see some value in trying to match teachers when possible. Teachers who
are placed together should figure out their values, how to give and get feedback, and how their
classroom should be managed. Teachers need to be able to work together to provide
differentiated instruction, which is another skill that needs to be incorporated into training. They
need to observe co-teaching classrooms in action and participate in various methods of
co-teaching including station teaching, with each teacher having a certain job, and parallel
teaching, with each teacher teaching at the same time but with different students. Models of
co-taught lessons should be experienced in real life, not just as reading material or in videos.
Teachers need to experience co-teaching methods and experiment with different styles of co-teaching so they can figure out what works best for their classrooms.

Co-teaching inclusion classrooms have allowed students with special needs to participate in engaged and active classrooms with their peers. It is up to their general and special educators to work together in these classrooms to provide the educations these students deserve and need to become lifelong learners. Successful co-teaching reflects the preparation and positive mindset of the teachers involved. All students benefit from having teachers who appreciate that every student in the classroom setting has an individual learning style. Successful co-teaching does not come easily, but the students who benefit from it will be more successful because of the effort and determination their teachers put forth, contributing to their lifelong learning.

“The most valuable resource that all teachers have is each other. Without collaboration, our growth is limited to our own perspectives.” (Robert J. Meehan)
References


Reiners, Gina. (2012). Understanding the differences between Husserl’s (descriptive) and Heidegger’s (interpretive) phenomenological research. *Journal of Nursing & Care, 01*(05)


Appendix A

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduce myself, describe the study, answer any questions, and reassure confidentiality. Thank my participants for their time. All of the necessary forms have been signed.

Introduction: You have been selected to be part of these interviews because you were recommended by your principal or department supervisor. He or she was asked to recommend a successful co-teaching team in your school building and your inclusion team was brought forth as a team with a working co-teaching relationship. I hope to find out what factors are needed for successful inclusion co-teaching.

This interview, as previously arranged, will be recorded. If you would like to use a pseudonym, I would be happy to do that. This information will be strictly confidential and kept in a locked filing cabinet that only I have access to. It will be destroyed once the interviews are over. If possible, I would like you to read the transcripts after the interviews, so that I can be sure I captured what you meant to say and did not misinterpret anything you said.

I will be transcribing these interviews myself, so no one else will have access.

I am hoping to spend about an hour with each of you alone and then about an hour with each set of co-teachers. If, at any time, you wish to stop the interviews or feel uncomfortable talking about a certain subject, please let me know and we will stop or adjust the interviews.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Introduction: As previously established, my name is Marcia Murphy and I am a sixth grade special education inclusion teacher. I am currently pursuing my Doctorate of Education at Northeastern University in Boston, MA.
Appendix B

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Individual Interviews
1. How were you placed together as co-teachers?
2. What are some of the major differences of working together from the beginning of your relationship as co-teachers until now?
3. Is there anything that your general education/special education teacher does that is unique compared to others in the same position?
4. Do you think your students see you as co-teachers? Why or why not?
5. Do you have set times to collaborate? If so, when, and if not, how do you collaborate?
6. How do you reach all the learners in your classroom?
7. What are some of the obstacles you have faced?
8. How do you resolve differences?
9. Is there anything about the concept of inclusion teaching that you do not agree with?
10. Tell me three things that are needed for successful inclusion co-teaching.
11. If you could offer professional development workshops on inclusion co-teaching, what would they look like?
12. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven’t touched on?

Interviews with sets of teachers
1. You were placed together randomly. Do you think future co-teaching placements should consist of a way to match teachers so they are compatible as co-teachers?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the theory that teachers who observe each other’s behavior in a classroom can learn to change through observation of other’s behavior?
3. How long would you say it took before you were comfortable enough with each other to bring up issues that bothered you? How do you manage disagreements now?
4. Is there anything you do to let your students know that you are co-teachers from the first day of school?
5. Why does your partnership work and others do not?
6. How is the physical presence of the co-teacher established in your classroom?
7. What would you offer for training for future teachers entering co-teaching relationships?
8. How do you collaborate when there is no time to meet?
9. What does your co-teaching classroom look like?
10. Is there anything else you would like to say about your co-teaching relationship?