

DADD *Express*

Volume 35, Number 3 • Fall 2024



A publication of the DIVISION ON AUTISM AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, a unit of the Council for Exceptional Children
Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities

Teachers' Corner

Collaborative Co-Teaching



Heather B. Fischer

Special Education Teacher

Evansville, Wisconsin

The age-old saying, “Two is greater than one,” has been stated countless times over the course of history. It gets applied to many different situations and theories. Two are there to help, two are there to problem solve, and two are there to build off of one another. This is true in education, especially when general and special education teachers have the opportunity to work together in a collaborative, co-teaching classroom environment. Collaborative co-teaching has countless benefits for all involved: general education teachers, special education teachers, and students with and without disabilities. Each teacher has a role to play, but they do not have to stand alone in that role. When teachers collaborate effectively, they model how to problem solve and build off each other’s strengths. Effective collaboration creates a positive, strength-based learning environment that optimizes student learning outcomes. As a veteran high school special education teacher of more than 15 years, I have had the opportunity to observe the positive effects collaborative co-teaching has on students and educators at the secondary level. In this article, I will highlight the benefits of collaborative co-teaching and describe the rationale for prioritizing this model at the secondary level.

Benefits Collaborative Co-Teaching

We live in a world where stigmas exist everywhere we look. While high schoolers with autism and/or other developmental disabilities often have unique social, communication, and learning needs, and receive support from a special education teacher, they are teenagers who do not want to stand out or look different. All students want to feel a sense of belonging; they want to fit in. From my experiences over the years, I have found that high school students do not always welcome my support in the classroom, especially if peers label me as the special

education teacher. I mean, come on; we have all seen it! The special education teacher walks up to check in on a student and they tell you to “back off!” But let’s be serious, especially in the world of teenagers, their language is much more colorful than just a “back off.” They do not want to be singled out in front of their peers. So, as a reflective special education teacher, you learn from your students and change your approach. You walk around the room and check in with *all* students to ensure *everyone* understands the content. Suddenly, you observe changes in the student who once resisted your support. You begin to see them looking around the room for you and asking you to come to their desk when they have a question. Before you know it, the same student comes to find you in other locations in the building during their free time, and so do other students in the class. When special and general education teachers work together collaboratively, supporting *all* students, they are not only improving the quality of instruction but are also creating an inclusive classroom, where students who receive special education services feel a sense of belonging.

Collaborative co-teaching can help remove some of the stigmas surrounding the rate of learning acquisition and different learning styles. Having two licensed teachers share the same information in different ways while providing accommodations and modifications, enables all students to access the general education curriculum. Further, having collaborative co-teachers facilitates a deeper level thinking and understanding in students. When students have the opportunity to witness effective collaboration, they learn that it is okay to work together and to ask questions. As adults, we often seek guidance and assistance from colleagues or outside experts when needed, and it is important to model this in front of our impressionable students.

Co-Teaching at the Secondary Level

As special education teachers, we are tasked with creating and providing specially designed instruction to meet the individualized learning, social/emotional, and behavioral needs of students with a range of abilities and needs. For students who access the general education curriculum, special education teachers need to ensure instruction aligns with their learning goals while simultaneously meeting their individual social/emotional and behavioral needs. Having the ability to be present in a classroom setting and directly interacting with the curriculum enables special education teachers to provide specially designed instruction without removing students from the classroom envi-

ronment. At the high school level, it is very easy for students to fall behind when absent from the classroom, as they lose access to the curriculum and direct instruction, as well as the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers. However, when the special education teacher becomes familiar with the curriculum and effective collaboration occurs between co-teachers, students benefit from increased support. This allows for more direct and individualized approaches to student learning.

When one specializes in specific skills necessary to complete certain job requirements, they know they are not going to have answers for everything. Therefore, if questions arise or you are unable to complete a task, you go to an expert to receive guidance and support. This occurs regularly in the world of education. For example, if a parent or student asks a question or a situation arises where feedback is needed, collaborative professionals ensure the most appropriate response is provided. General education teachers are content area experts, whereas special education teachers are experts in understanding how to meet the unique needs of diverse groups of students. Collaboration between the two requires them to learn from each other and feel

comfortable asking questions. Modeling this in front of students can be very effective. I have discussed this with my 13-year-old son; if something is hard or there is something we do not know, we should ask for assistance and help.

To be effective co-teachers at the secondary level, it is vital for general education teachers to be familiar with the strengths and needs of all of the students in their classroom. Similarly, it is essential for special education teachers to spend time brushing up on the curriculum. I will leave you with another age-old saying that is frequently used in education: “The only stupid question is the one that is never asked.” When general and special education teachers work collaboratively in co-teaching environments, all of those involved (i.e., teachers and students) benefit. Collaborative co-teaching at the secondary level provides students with high quality instruction while simultaneously creating an inclusive learning environment where every student feels a sense of belonging. ■