



Co-Teaching Comprehension Strategies in the General Education Classroom

By Holly Foarde

Due to both the Iowa Core Curriculum and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, special education students are receiving core reading instruction in the general education setting alongside their peers. One problem that has emerged, however, is that some students are unable to apply comprehension strategies to grade level texts because the texts are too complex for them. Co-teaching comprehension strategies with the general education teacher is one way to address this issue. This issue of *NASET's Classroom Management series*, written by Holly Foarde, discusses the rationale for co-teaching comprehension strategies in the general education classroom and explains to how to implement co-teaching during reading core instruction time.

Abstract

Due to both the Iowa Core Curriculum and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, special education students are receiving core reading instruction in the general education setting alongside their peers. One problem that has emerged, however, is that some students are unable to apply comprehension strategies to grade level texts because the texts are too complex for them. Co-teaching comprehension strategies with the general education teacher is one way to address this issue. This article discusses the rationale for co-teaching comprehension strategies in the general education classroom and explains to how to implement co-teaching during reading core instruction time.

Introduction

Josiah (not his real name) was a fifth grade student with special needs in the general education classroom. He attended the large group core reading instruction as well as the small group instruction that the general education teacher provided. In January, the general education teacher expressed concern about Josiah's difficulty in participating in both the large group and the small group instruction in the classroom. He was having difficulty applying comprehension strategies to different texts he was reading. Therefore, I observed Josiah during a large group lesson to see how he responded to the instruction. He was in a small group reading a reader's theater. He was able to read his part in the reader's theater with good decoding skills and good phrasing. However, when the general education teacher asked a question about the text, he did not respond.

At the end of the school day, I discussed the observation with the general education teacher. We concluded that although Josiah was able to decode grade level text, he can not comprehend it well enough to answer text dependent questions about the text or apply the comprehension strategy being taught. Therefore, we decided to implement co-teaching to provide Josiah access to the reading core curriculum.

All students should master Iowa Core standards taught in the general education curriculum. Regarding reading comprehension, www.iowacore.gov states, “students must also show a steadily growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of text, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts, considering a wider range of textual evidence, and becoming more sensitive to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and poor reasoning in texts.” As a result, special education students receive core instruction in the area of reading in the general education environment alongside their peers. The positive outcome is students learn the same reading comprehension strategies and read or listen to texts at the same complexity as those of their peers. According to Patricia Jordan Rhea, a former special education teacher and administrator, “Students with disabilities participate in general education not because they fit in but because they have a right to be there and with adequate support can be successful (Baker & Zigmond, 1995; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).” (Jordan Rea and Connell, p. 39, 2005). In addition, the Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1997 has led to instructional practices that teachers use to educate students with a variety of needs and abilities in the general education setting (Grazziano and Navarette, p. 110, 2012). The downside, however, is that, without scaffolding, accommodations, and modifications from the special education teacher, some students, such as Josiah, can have difficulty applying reading comprehension strategies to grade-level texts. Therefore, it is imperative special education teachers collaborate with general education teachers so students can apply comprehension strategies to increasingly complex texts.

Why Co-Teaching?

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey discuss two models of learning: The Traditional View of Learning and A New View of Learning. “The Traditional View of Learning” states that when “time and instruction are held constant, learning outcomes vary”. In other words, the amount of time of the instruction and the instructional methods remained the same regardless of student performance. On the other hand, “A New View of Learning” states that when “time and instruction are variable, learning outcomes are constant” (www.fisherandfrey.com/resources, adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). According to this view, if teachers provide additional instructional time to students who need it and adjust the instructional methods to meet the students’ needs, all students will learn. Teachers can vary the instruction by considering these instructional variables: “Assessment, group size, access to expertise, and staff collaboration” (www.fisherandfrey.com/resources, adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). When general education teachers collaborate with special education teachers, they acquire the access to expertise and consider assessment and group size when planning instruction.

One way to ensure all students can access the core reading instruction and implement the instructional variables of assessment, group size, access to expertise, and staff collaboration (www.fisherandfrey.com/resources, adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009) is by utilizing the “co-teaching” service delivery model. Co-teaching is described as “a service delivery model for providing special education or related services to students with special needs in the general education classroom. Generally, co-teaching consists of a general educator paired with a special educator or other licensed professional in a diverse inclusive classroom.” (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, p. 3, 2009). Co-teaching is one effective method of collaborating with one another and allowing both teachers to provide instruction in the general education classroom setting. By doing so, they can consider appropriate assessment tools (See Table 2, Question 4) and vary the group size, depending on the co-teaching model they choose (see Table 1). “There are many benefits of co-teaching including opportunities to vary content presentation, individualize instruction, scaffold learning experiences, and monitor students’ understanding. Co-teaching in its most effective form can promote equitable learning opportunities for all students” (Grazziano and Navarette, p. 109, 2012).

The Six Co-Teaching Models

When the general education teacher and the special education teacher decide to teach together, they need to consider six different models. The model that teachers should choose depends on the content, the needs of the students, and the preferences of both teachers involved. Listed below are the six different models of co-teaching:

Table 1: The Six Co-Teaching Models

Co-Teaching Model	Definition	Best Uses
One Teach-One Observe	One teacher teaches the entire class while the other observes the teacher and the students.	When both teachers want to track student data for decision-making. Teachers collect data to decide how to group students.
Station Teaching	Both teachers each work with a small group while the remaining students work independently. Students rotate to the different tasks.	When there are multiple instructional activities related to the content area. This model allows students to complete multiple learning tasks in a short period of time.
Parallel Teaching	Both teachers teach the same content while dividing the class into two groups.	When teachers want to teach the same content while decreasing the teacher/student ratio. Doing so intensifies the instruction and provides more opportunities for students to respond.
Alternative Teaching	One teacher teaches a small group while the other teacher teaches the rest of the class.	When there is a small group of students that need enrichment, reteaching, or preteaching of skills. This small group typically needs different instruction and/or different

		materials.
Teaming	Both teachers teach the same lesson to the entire class.	When teachers introduce a new unit or concept.
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher teaches the entire class while the other teacher provides assistance to students as needed.	When one teacher has greater expertise in a lesson than the other. Teachers should not use this model very often, as it does not utilize the expertise of both teachers.

Adapted From Sources: faculty.virginia.edu/coteachUVA/5formats2html#team

<http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/6-co-teaching-structures>

Collaboration Before Co-Teaching

In order to co-teach comprehension strategies, the special education teacher and the general education teacher must make time to collaborate. Before co-teaching a lesson, both teachers should answer the following questions:

Table 2: Questions to Ask During Before Co-Teaching

1. What comprehension strategy will students learn?
2. What key terms would be useful for students to know?
3. What will students do independently?
4. How will teachers assess students?
5. What accommodations or modifications will students need to be successful?

The class was about to work on the comprehension strategy “making inferences”. Here is an example of how I collaborated with the general education teacher before co-teaching a comprehension unit:

- 1) *What comprehension strategy will students learn?* The students were about to learn how to make inferences and draw conclusions within a piece of text.
- 2) *What key terms would be useful for the students to know?* They needed to know the terms “inference” and “evidence from the text”.
- 3) *What will students do independently?* They needed to read a text and answer text dependent questions about making inferences and drawing conclusions. They also had to cite evidence from the text to support their answers.

- 4) *How will teachers assess students?* We decided to administer a summative assessment consisting of a unit test with a passage and text dependent questions related to making inferences and drawing conclusions. We also decided to look at students' daily written work and conduct observations during small group reading instruction.
- 5) *What accommodations or modifications will students need to be successful?*

We decided I would start by using the STARS (Strategies to Achieve Reading Success, Curriculum Associates 2010) reading program (where I explicitly teach students how to make an inference using evidence from the text and background knowledge). Then, I would select a book at his independent reading level to practice making inferences using a graphic organizer. Another small group of students needed direct instruction on making inferences, so we decided that the general education teacher would provide this instruction. On the unit test, we decided to provide some scaffolding by indicating which paragraph to locate his answer to a question.

- 6) *What co-teaching model will be most effective when teaching this strategy?*

We decided to use the alternative teaching model. I would instruct one student the same comprehension strategy with alternative materials. The general education teacher would provide direct instruction to a small group of students in making inferences. The remaining students would work on independent reading tasks.

Follow-Up After Assessment

It is also important to have a method of following up after both teachers have taught the comprehension strategy. Teachers should use both formative and summative assessments to determine the effectiveness of the instructional delivery. Formative assessments are especially important, as they help teachers make adjustments to instruction as needed. They are assessments “for learning”, so teachers do not assign a final grade. Instead, “Teachers can adapt instruction on the basis of evidence, making changes and improvements that will yield immediate benefits to student learning” (Chappuis & Chappuis, p. 17). If the instruction seems ineffective, then they can either 1) Change the materials, 2) Change the instructional strategy, or 3) Change the co-teaching model. Here are the questions that teachers should discuss after they have provided the instruction:

Table 3: Questions to Ask During Follow-Up

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What assessments did the teachers give to determine the effectiveness of the instruction, and what were the results?2. Was the instruction effective? If not, then what will the teachers do in response to the assessment results? |
|---|

Example

While I was using the STARS (Curriculum Associates, 2010) program to teach inferencing, Josiah was having difficulty learning this skill. Here is the collaboration that took place between the general education teacher and myself:

- 1) *What assessments did the teachers give to determine the effectiveness of the instruction, and what were the results?* In Josiah's daily work, he read a passage and then answered multiple choice questions regarding making inferences. He missed all the questions on that day's assignment.
- 2) *Was the instruction effective? If not, then what will the teachers do in response to the assessment results?* From this formative assessment, we determined that the instruction was not effective for him. We determined that the texts he was reading from the STARS (Curriculum Associates, 2010) program were too complex due to the increased knowledge demands they required and his lack of prior knowledge with the genre of one of the texts (www.fisherandfrey.com/resources). One of the stories involved a child who emigrated from another country, a topic which the student had no background knowledge. Therefore, the knowledge demands of that story were too great for him. Another text passage was a fable, a genre in which the student had no prior experience.

Therefore, we decided to change the materials and discontinue the STARS (Curriculum Associates, 2010) materials with him. We selected a book about friendships. Josiah had some background knowledge about this issue, and I could scaffold a few difficult aspects of this topic (i.e. when a girl was telling a lie in the story). It was a realistic fiction story, a genre in which the student was more familiar.

Regarding instruction, we decided to scaffold the lesson by having Josiah decide whether a student was or was not a good friend and find evidence from the text to support his inference. He would record his responses on a graphic organizer.

After teaching this lesson, Josiah determined that this student was not a good friend and provided evidence to support his inference. We administered the summative assessment at the end of the unit. After giving this test, the general education teacher reported that he made inferences about the passage on the unit test and cited evidence from the text to support his inferences.

Conclusion

Since the emergence of the Iowa Core Curriculum, all students are expected to comprehend texts with increasing complexity. However, special education students often have difficulty doing so without accommodations, modifications, and scaffolding to help them be successful. As a result, co-teaching has emerged as one way to solve this problem. To be sure that all students have appropriate access to the core curriculum, both the general education teacher and the special education teacher must collaborate before they teach the unit and administer assessments. They must decide who will instruct which students, which co-teaching model to use, and how to assess students. Then, they must meet after they administer assessments to determine the effectiveness of instruction and make adjustments as necessary. When both teachers do this, all students can make progress in comprehending texts with increasing complexity, meeting the demands of the Iowa Core Literacy Standards.

References

faculty./Virginia.edu/coteachUVA/5formats2html#team

www.fisherandfrey.com/resources

<http://www.inclusiveclassrooms.org/inquiries/6-co-teaching-structures>

www.iowacore.gov

Chappuis, S. & Chappuis J. (2008). The best value in formative assessment. *Educational Leadership*, 14-18.

Conderman, G., Johnston-Rodriguez, S., & Hartman, P. (2009). Communicating and collaborating in co-taught classrooms. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(5) Article 3. Retrieved [May 1, 2016] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/teplus/vol5/iss5/art3>.

Curriculum Associates (2010). *Strategies To Achieve Reading Success*. North Billerica, MA: Curriculum Associates LLC.

Grazziano, K. & Navarette, L. (2012). Co-teaching in a teacher education classroom: collaboration, compromise, and creativity. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 21(1), 109-126.

Jordan Rae, P & Connell, J. (2005). A guide to coteaching. *Principal Leadership*, 5(9), 36-42.

About the Author

Holly Foarde graduated from Drake University with a Master of Science in Literacy Education in May 2016. She taught for nine years as a K-1 Special Education Teacher in a school district in Council Bluffs, IA. She also taught Reading Recovery for three years while in Council Bluffs. She currently teaches special education students in a rural school district in central Iowa.