Perspectives on Co-teaching: Views from High School Students with Learning Disabilities

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This study investigated the perspectives of high school students with learning disabilities on co-teaching. Two focus groups were conducted at two high schools in southern California, involving 10 students with learning disabilities. Guiding questions were used to seek students’ perceptions on how participation in co-taught general education environments has changed their lives, their teachers’ jobs, and how it has impacted their peers. Results indicated that students prefer receiving instruction in pull-out settings and that they perceive that special education teachers provide distinctly different instruction than do general education teachers. Furthermore, students indicated that general education teachers did not always provide necessary accommodations for their learning disability in co-taught classrooms and that they could not easily access either the special or general educator in co-taught environments. Students at the two schools had varying perspectives on how their peers’ perceived their special education services. These results are discussed in terms of four distinct themes: access to special education services, delivery of instruction, peer and teacher response, and class size.

How and where students with learning disabilities receive special education services has been a source for great debate for several decades. A wide variety of service delivery models are currently being implemented in school districts across the nation. Many of these models include full or partial inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom with or without support. The National Study on Inclusion (1995) reported that co-teaching had become the most popular model for service delivery for implementing inclusion. Cook and Friend (1995) defined co-teaching as two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space. Despite the prevalence of co-teaching as a special education service delivery model, the effectiveness of this model for students with learning disabilities remains unclear (Mageira & Zigmond, 2005; Murawski, 2006; Murawski & Swanson, 2001).

The Annual Report to Congress (2005) indicates that 67.4% of all students with learning disabilities spend 21-60% of their day in the general education environment. We speculate that many of these students are participating in co-taught classrooms, due, at least in part, to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that requires all teachers to be highly qualified in all core subjects that they teach. The highly qualified teacher requirements apply only to teachers providing direct instruction in core academic subjects. Special educators who do not directly instruct students in core academic subjects, but who instead collaborate with general education teachers, or provide consultation to highly qualified teachers in adapting curricula, using behavioral supports and interventions, or selecting appropriate accommodations do not need to demonstrate subject-matter competency in those subjects (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Therefore, a co-teaching model allows special education teachers to remain highly qualified in their positions because it is the general education teacher who is responsible for the content area expertise. Accordingly, many high schools are placing students with learning disabilities in general education settings with co-teaching support in certain core academic subjects in lieu of special education settings.

Despite its popularity, research exploring the effectiveness of co-teaching is sparse. A handful of proponents have asserted that true co-teaching is a viable method for increasing the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Friend & Cook 2007; Stainback, Stainback, East, & Sapon-Shevin, 1994). However, most of the research to date indicates that students with disabilities who are taught in inclusionary classrooms using co-teaching models of instruction make academic gains that are equal to or less than those of their peers taught in a special education setting (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). In 2006, Murawski compared four educational settings (i.e., co-teaching, mainstreaming, general education only, and special education) and found varied results in the outcomes of students with learning disabilities. Although students’ overall grades improved equally across all settings, those in the co-taught classrooms had significant gains at post-test for spelling and comprehension, but no significant differences at post-test on measures of writing. Commenting on these results, Murawski stated that the unevenness of these results leads one to speculate that the rationale behind those changes may not lie solely with the service delivery model provided (p. 239).
Magiera and Zigmond (2005) looked to teacher actions to draw conclusion about what is happening in co-taught environments—conclusions that could help explain, perhaps, the unevenness of results described by Murawski (2006). Magiera and Zigmond investigated whether students with disabilities received an additive effect by receiving instructional attention from both the general educators and special educators in co-taught classrooms, as compared to inclusion classrooms taught by the general education teachers alone. Their findings indicated that there is little additive effect of having two teachers present in a co-teaching situation. As a matter of fact, Magiera and Zigmond reported that students with disabilities received significantly less attention from the general education teacher when the special education teacher was present.

Due to the limited positive results from studies regarding the achievement and service provision outcomes of co-teaching for students with learning disabilities, it is imperative to look at the practice from multiple perspectives, including that of the students themselves. Students provide a grounded perspective based on their life experiences that are critical to consider when evaluating the impact of any educational policy. In their review of the research, Vaughn and Klingner (1998) reported that, overall, students with disabilities prefer to receive special education support in pull out settings (i.e., resource rooms). Students reported that in resource rooms settings they learned more, participated in more engaging activities, were given more appropriate tasks for their ability level, and had a quieter environment in which to work when compared to inclusion classrooms. The results further showed that intermediate students preferred being pulled out because it avoided embarrassment for them. These findings were based on eight studies of inclusion practices (not co-teaching specifically) of which only two, both unpublished doctoral dissertations, addressed high school students. However, more recently, Wilson and Michaels (2006) reported that middle and high school special education students responded favorably to co-taught literacy environments. In fact, students with disabilities in that study also reported that they would choose to participate in a co-taught class if offered again. However, the special education students did state that they sought additional support outside of the co-taught classroom and expected a lower course grade than that anticipated by the general education students.

Certainly, co-teaching as a model for teaching students with disabilities in general education classrooms has evolved over time and the effects of its implementation have shown inconsistent results during the years. Because co-teaching currently appears to be a popular model for implementing inclusion practices, it is imperative to understand how co-teaching affects students. The goal of this study was to determine how students with learning disabilities perceive the co-taught inclusive environment. The perspectives of high school students with learning disabilities who were participating in co-taught classrooms on the following guiding questions were elicited through focus group interviews for this study:

1. How has participation in the general education program changed your life at school?
2. How has inclusion in the general education classroom changed the special education and general education teachers’ job?
3. How has your participation in the general education classroom impacted non-disabled students in the classroom?

Methods

Participants

Data were collected at two high schools in Southern California. A total of 10 students identified as having a specific learning disability according to California state guidelines (which define specific learning disability as a discrepancy between ability and achievement), who had been receiving special education services for more than three years, participated. Five students were female and five were male, and all were juniors or seniors in high school. Ethnicity among the group was diverse, with 3 Caucasian students, 1 Filipino student, 4 Latino students, and 1 African American student participating in the interviews. The special education teachers at each site selected all students for participation based on the teachers’ perceptions of participants being self advocates and willing to talk about their disability. Parents granted permission for their child’s participation in the focus groups and students assented to the interview. At the time of the interviews each student was receiving some portion of his or her instruction through a co-teaching inclusion model.

Settings

Two high schools in Southern California serving students in grades 9-12 participated in the study. The two schools are described in detail below.

School A. School A was attended by approximately 1,200 students in grades nine through twelve, with 75 of those students receiving special education services. School A began implementing its co-teaching model two years prior to this study. As one component of the co-teaching model, each of the three special education teachers spent two double blocks co-teaching with a general education teacher in a core subject area, such as Algebra, Science, and History. While providing a description of the program one of the special education teachers reported that,

\[\ldots\text{in the classroom, one teacher drifts through the classroom providing assistance to students, while the other}\]
teacher presents the primary learning objective to the students. The teachers switch roles according to their teaching strengths as identified in the pre-service planning. Situations also arise when a small group of students needs more assistance in a particular area. In this situation the larger group may continue with the planned lesson, while the smaller group receives more individualized instruction.

Applying Cook and Friend’s (1995) definitions of co-teaching to the description it seems that the teachers implemented both alternative teaching (i.e., one teacher works with a small group and the other takes the larger group) and one teaching-one assisting co-teaching (i.e., one teacher leads the class while the other drifts around the room assisting students) models. All special education students participating in the interview were enrolled in a Direct Studies/Resource (RSP) class in which they worked on assignments, test preparation, and study skills to support their learning in the general education classes. This class was taught by a special education teacher and was only available to students on IEPs.

School B. School B was attended by approximately 2,300 students and 193 of them received special education services. School B began implementing its co-teaching model seven years prior to this study. All students with mild disabilities participated in general education classes and most had a special education Directed Studies/Resource (RSP) class in which they worked on assignments, test preparation, and study skills to support their learning in the general education classes. As in School A, the RSP class was taught by a special education teacher. Special education teachers also collaborated and/or consulted with the general education teachers on a daily basis in English, Social Science, Science, Mathematics, and at times electives. During this collaborative process, general education and special education teachers worked together to develop lesson plans and interventions, and to make accommodations and modifications. Teachers also co-taught in the general education classes, using the one-teacher one-assist model (Cook & Friend, 1995) in which the special education teacher assisted while the general education teacher provided instruction.

Study Design and Focus Group Procedures

To explore high school students’ with learning disabilities perspectives of co-taught inclusive environments we used focus group methodology. Focus group methodology is designed to elicit insights from a group interaction (Morgan, 1988). Focus groups are carefully planned discussions that obtain in-depth perceptions about defined areas of interest in a nonjudgmental environment. The qualitative method facilitated clarification of student comments and enabled researchers to ask for examples, clarification, and elaboration.

The focus groups were scheduled during the school day. Teachers at the school sites facilitated interview times and assisted with collecting permission from parents and assent forms from students. One interview took place at each school, with each lasting approximately 20 minutes after introductions were made. Students were provided refreshments, but no other incentive was provided. Discussions were facilitated by a moderator and audio taped for later transcription. The moderators began by introducing themselves, providing a brief overview of the topic and procedures, and assuring students that their identities would be kept confidential. Then the moderator posed the following guiding questions to the students and asked follow-up questions based on their responses:

1. How has your participation the general education program changed your life at school?
2. In your personal experiences, how has your inclusion in the general education classroom changed your teachers’ jobs?
3. In your personal experiences, how has your participation in the general education classroom impacted other students in the classroom?

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were analyzed to identify primary themes. The researchers employed content analysis methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify recurring, main thematic patterns in students’ responses across questions. Using the transcripts as data sources, two of the four researchers developed themes, then came together to compare emerging themes. Through discussion and application, themes were refined. Data were then independently coded in relation to finalized themes. Points of disagreement were discussed until coders reached consensus. At this point the coded transcripts were sent to the second author for verification and review.

Results

The results of the focus group interviews with high school students with learning disabilities are presented in relation to four themes that emerged during data analysis: Access to Special Education Services, Delivery of Instruction, Peer and Teacher Response, and Class Size. These four themes crossed each of the three guiding questions, with students’ responses to a particular guiding question often including multiple themes. Themes are presented in order of most frequently and most thoroughly developed, based on participants’ comments. Each theme is presented separately but due to the nature of the discussions during the interviews, themes often built upon one another.

Access to Special Education Services

Students made 45 comments about their access to special
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education services, a theme that garnered the greatest number of comments in the interviews. This theme revolved around students’ access to (or lack of access to) special education services while participating in a co-taught general education classroom. Comments coded as Access to Special Education Services specifically referred to issues related to accessing special education personnel, specialized instruction, and/or resource classrooms environments. Students from both schools reported similar views about Access to Special Education Services. Most comments focused on seeking help outside of general education because they felt they were not getting sufficient support while in the co-teaching environment.

...when you’re there [in an inclusive classroom], you don’t know what you’re going to do. You’re like, ‘What am I going to do? I don’t understand.’ That’s why most of the time, like if we are doing an activity or something, and I don’t understand what we are supposed to do, I’ll just go to the RSP [resource] class and have one of the teachers help me, whatever teacher is in the class.

When speaking about differences between the general education classroom and the special education classroom, students reported wanting access to the extra time provided in the special education classroom. Yeah, if you need help in the special education room, you can take the time you need to understand the [material].

Students also referred to lack of access to the special education teacher while in the general education classroom. In the following quote a student describes frustration with the special education teacher’s lack of availability, because that teacher works with all the students in the co-taught class.

When you’re in a [co-taught] class and he [the special education teacher] won’t help you specifically, he’ll help like everybody like in front [of] the whole class and sometimes you don’t get it. Like, he’ll present it to the rest of the class [in] an easier way, but once it comes down to you, it’s like he has other people to watch out for, so.

In addition to students expressing that they did not have sufficient access to the special education teacher, students discussed a sense of not being able to get help from the general education teacher, as well. These comments suggest that students with learning disabilities felt they were sharing the special education teacher with the general education students yet they did not have equal access to the general education teacher, either. Sometimes if I don’t understand something, instead of going to the real teacher (referring to general education teacher) for help, I can ask somebody else (noting the special education teacher or paraprofessional) that I know better.

Overall, students’ comments about Access to Special Education Services indicate that they perceive less access to a teacher—general educator or special educator—when participating in a co-taught general education classrooms than when they were served in special education classrooms. Further, they seemed to connect the special education teacher specifically with availability of specialized instruction. Students reported receiving more specialized instruction from the special education teacher in the RSP room than what was available to them in the general education classroom, regardless of teacher.

Delivery of Instruction

Comments related to Delivery of Instruction were also frequently made during the focus group interviews. Students were very clear in their discussions that the special education teacher taught differently than the general education teacher and that the different instruction provided by the special educators was further differentiated when students were in the special education environment. Participants’ comments indicated they were acutely aware of how they learned and how they wished to be taught. Students reported needing to have the work broken down, explained more slowly, explained in different ways, and to have a smaller amount of work to complete. This theme was consistent across both schools. The following quotes are examples of the many that indicated the special education teacher was doing something qualitatively different and that the something different was more accessible in the special education environment.

Yeah, I agree. One time we were doing questions about a story we had read and she (general education teacher) was trying to explain it to me and I’m like, ‘I don’t understand.’ And I finally just told her I understood and then when I came to RSP [resource] I just told them, ‘I don’t understand this question, can you explain it to me please?’

Like when we are supposed to start an essay or something and you’re just sitting there staring at the paper or whatever. When you go to the RSP [resource] classroom, they’ll just explain it more to you, so that way you can understand it better, versus being in the regular classes.

One student elaborated about his preference for receiving instruction in the resource room: Because like Mr. S’s [special education teacher] a good teacher and just cause he’s laid back and I understand him a lot more than what the other teacher’s saying.

Students’ comments about Delivery of Instruction reflected their thoughts about the benefits of specialized instructional procedures. It is clear from the students’ comments that they felt better able to learn and understand instructional materials when taught using differentiated, individualized techniques that they typically did not encounter in their general education classrooms. Students, at least those
in this interview, believed there were instructional differences between the general education and special education teachers and settings and that the special education teachers as well as the special education settings were more effective for meeting their needs.

**Peer and Teacher Response**

Comments that fell under the theme *Peer and Teacher Response* referred to how peers and teachers responded to special education services. Specifically, the two school groups presented different views regarding how peers responded to the students with learning disabilities receiving the specialized instruction available through special education. Students at School A, which had provided co-teaching over a shorter period of time, reported they were constantly trying to avoid a social stigma—not wanting attention drawn to themselves in the general education classrooms. By contrast, students at School B reported that their peers were envious of the extra support they received.

*It's difficult to cope with some of the students and you feel like you have to dodge some of their 'B.S.'* (Student School A) *They always tell me, 'Oh you're lucky because you have that class and you get the homework and they can help you. We have to go home and do it by ourselves.'* (Student School B)

*My friends will be like, 'What are you doing?' and I'll be like, 'I'm going to a class where I can get some help.' Then they are like, 'Aw, you're lucky, I wish I had that class. How do you take that test so that you can be in that class?' I'm like, 'I don't even know'.* (Student School B)

On the other hand, the two school groups reported similar responses from their general education teachers. Both groups felt that teachers did not always respect their IEP provisions, but instead made judgments about whether to provide accommodations based on how well the students were performing in class. Participants perceived that if they were failing they always received their accommodations, but if they were getting good grades they did not. One student’s comment illustrates this point clearly:

*Some of my teachers don’t even let me go and take my tests in RSP anymore, because I get such good grades and I score too highly. But then once I start to slack off a little bit, then they’ll let me go.*

In summary, the theme *Peer and Teacher Response* gives us a look at how students with learning disabilities interpret others’ reactions to their special education services. Peer reactions varied between the schools, with students at School B having a positive reaction to special education and students at School A perceiving a negative stigma. These differences might be related to differences in the schools, among which are (a) the model of co-teaching taking place at each school and (b) the amount of time that the school has implemented co-teaching instruction. The students with learning disabilities at both schools had similar perceptions regarding the reactions of the general education teachers. The students perceived a decline of accommodations when they were successful in class.

**Class Size**

In addition to the manner in which teachers delivered instruction, students identified *Class Size* in the general education setting as a hindrance to their learning. They did not perceive having an extra teacher in the room as replacing the effectiveness of the separate smaller classroom or the one-on-one instruction typically provided in classrooms with fewer students, such as resource classrooms. Students mentioned both the distraction of being in a large class with many friends and the lost benefits of instruction with small groups when in general education settings. Students from both schools agreed on this point. *Like in our special ed. classes it’s just like there’s fewer students.*

*It’s better when you go to the RSP [resource] room, cause then it’s more time and it’s more one-on-one. And you’re not distracted by the teacher wanting you to do stuff, and you’re talking with your friends...and there’s just a lot less (that is distracting) going on in the RSP class.*

Summarizing both class size and climate, one student stated, *like a general education classroom, like there are a lot more students or a lot more faster paced.*

The theme of class size is relatively straight forward; students in our focus groups wanted to have access to small group or one-on-one instruction. They felt they learned better in small groups and that this type of instruction was not available to them in the co-taught general education classroom.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support and extend research regarding the perceptions of students with learning disabilities regarding co-teaching inclusive models. Our findings suggest that issues related to instruction are prominent among students’ thoughts related to co-teaching. Participating students, who were all receiving instruction in co-taught inclusive classes, felt that receiving services in the resource room was more useful than services provided in the general education room. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that students with learning disabilities prefer learning in special education settings (Vaughn & Klinger, 1998).

In response to questions about how participation in the general education program has changed their life at school, students highlighted a lack of access to what they perceived
as special education. When probed, students explained how even though the special education teacher was present in the co-taught classroom, he/she taught differently when in the special education classroom. Student discussion went beyond the question of where the instruction took place and focused on the dynamic of the classroom and what students perceived to be the value of the specialized instruction taking place in the special education setting. Students reported that instruction was delivered qualitatively differently in special education environments than in co-taught classrooms. Even when a special educator delivered instruction in a general education class, variables such as the number of students, the pace, and the style of teaching proved overwhelming or ineffective for many of the participants. It appears that perceived instructional benefit is not merely a function of who delivered the teaching, but also where. Students with learning disabilities said that being in a general education classroom, even when they were receiving instruction from the special education teacher, did not work for them. However, receiving instruction from the same special education teacher in the RSP room was beneficial.

Students gave a great deal of importance to the special education teacher being able to teach fewer students, change the pace of the lesson, and teach in a different manner within the special education setting. This is in conflict with the rationale for co-teaching, which states that students will receive a wider range of instructional options when in a co-taught classroom (Zigmond & Magiera, 2001). It is possible that the general education environments at these two schools do not allow for the flexibility needed to truly individualize instruction, thus leaving special education teachers to fall back on less systematic instructional techniques that likely lack the intensity needed by students with learning disabilities (Zigmond & Baker, 1996).

Student responses about how inclusion/co-teaching changed their teachers’ jobs were less direct. Although student responses wavered from directly responding to how their teachers’ jobs were different, the students continually discussed how the special education teachers taught differently depending on the setting. With regards to the general education teacher, students did not reflect a great deal on how their job was different because of their presence, likely because they do not know how it is different when they are not present. However, the students did comment quite clearly on how and when general education teachers provided accommodations. Across both sites students reported that accommodations were provided when a student was struggling, but when the student began to perform well the accommodations were removed. One interpretation of this finding is that learning disabilities is a hidden disability that general education teachers do not perceive as outside of the range of normalcy (Cook, 2001). Therefore when a student is performing well in class, the teacher is no longer faced with an obvious difference and reverts back to general classroom practices. In theory this should be mediated by the presence of the special educator in a co-taught classroom. In the case of the two schools studied it is possible that the students were reflecting on times that the special education teacher was not present, or due to the model of co-teaching being implemented, the special education teacher may have deferred to the general education teacher’s authority within the general education classroom.

The last of the three guiding questions provided the students an opportunity to discuss how their participation in the general education class has impacted the lives of their peers. Once again students did not respond directly to this issue, but spoke to how their peers reacted to special education in general, specifically in relation to adaptations and assistance given in the co-taught classroom and the special education classroom. Participants provided two views, determined by school setting, related to how general education peers responded to the special education services received by students with learning disabilities. Students at School A reported a social stigma associated with special education, whereas students at School B reported that special education services were desired by their peers. It is possible that the length of time that the co-teaching model had been implemented could account for this difference—School A had just recently begun co-teaching where as School B had been implementing this model for seven years. These distinct perspectives from the two school sites align with the discrepancy reported in the literature regarding social stigma and inclusion (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Although, social issues are reputed to improve in co-teaching, the evidence is not clear that this is the case. In this study, the results are mixed. It is possible that for schools that have been using the model for several years it is not clear who is in special education because all students have various classes together. Over time, the climate of the school may change and there could be a reduction in social stigma. Another reason for this difference could be the manner in which co-teaching is being implemented. In School A the special education teacher had a more active role in the classroom. At School B the special education teachers were more of assistants in the classroom and provided consultation services only. For future research, observation data may shed light on concrete differences in the manner in which the special education teachers provide services that could lead to differences in peer responses.

Across all three guiding questions students referred to Class Size as a factor in their education. This theme gives us insight into exactly why students wanted access to a special education setting. Students from both schools reported that small class size and one-on-one attention were critical to their school success. As Scruggs and Mastropieri (1995) have
described, class size is a variable that allows for adapting the environment, a factor in making special education special. It appears that in these two schools this flexibility was not available. It appears logical that significantly reduced class sizes do allow teachers to individualize instruction to meet the unique needs of their students, which is a core, guiding principle of special education that is not shared by most in general education and is not possible in typical general education classrooms, particularly at the high school level with 30 plus students in a class (Zigmond and Baker, 1996).

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Due to both the limited number of participants and the qualitative nature of the study, the results of this study can not be generalized beyond the students we interviewed. However, the results of this study have demonstrated that it is worth listening to the perspectives of students about their education. These students provided insight into the benefits and challenges of inclusive, co-teaching models.

The student perspective provides valuable information that has implications for future research. The contradiction in students’ perspectives about peer response to special education at the two school sites suggest that future research investigating school factors that contribute to the peer acceptance in inclusive settings is warranted. The two schools in this study were using different models of co-teaching and had been implementing the models for a different length of time. Therefore, specifically examining how various models of co-teaching influence peer response to special education and investigating if peer response changes over time as co-teaching models are implemented are two areas in need of additional research.

Furthermore, the schools in this study are just two examples of how different models for co-teaching are being implemented. It is likely that with NCLB highly qualified requirements more and more schools are or will be implementing a model of co-teaching and that these models will be highly variable. Thus, it will be important for research to investigate differences among co-teaching models and specifically the components that students with learning disabilities perceive as beneficial and non-beneficial.

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