

Review

When Can We Plan? Reclaiming Time as the Missing Condition for Effective Co-Teaching

Doreen N. Myrie¹ , Joana Idakwo^{2,*} , Kristen Barnes³ , Carolina Kudese⁴, Michelle D. Latiker¹ , Joann Anokwuru⁵ , Esohe Egiebor⁶, Nicci T. Dowd⁷ 

¹Jackson State University, Jackson, MS 39217, USA

²Mind Investors Inc., Houston, TX 77578, USA

³Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS 39174, USA

⁴The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA

⁵Vancouver School Board 39, Vancouver, BC V5K 3Y2, Canada

⁶Baldwin Arts and Academics Magnet School, Montgomery, AL 36104, USA

⁷School of Education, Marymount University, Arlington, VA 22207, USA

*Correspondence: jidakwo@mind-investors.com (Joana Idakwo)

Submitted: 22 March 2026 Revised: 8 July 2026 Accepted: 11 July 2026 Published: 26 August 2026

Abstract

Co-teaching is recognized as an evidence-based approach for advancing inclusive education by integrating the expertise of general and special educators to enhance differentiation, progress monitoring, and access to grade-level curriculum. When implemented with fidelity, co-teaching promotes inclusive learning environments and social outcomes for students with and without disabilities; evidence regarding academic achievement gains is more mixed and context-dependent, with outcomes varying by implementation quality, model used, and student population (King-Sears et al., 2021). However, it often underperforms when treated as a placement rather than as a collaborative instructional system that requires shared responsibility and planning. Research studies identify common planning time as a critical factor for effective implementation. Without protected co-planning opportunities, instruction frequently defaults to less effective models, such as one-teach, one-assist. Such models limit instructional parity and reinforce hierarchical roles (Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). Persistent barriers, including scheduling constraints and competing demands, continue to undermine the quality of co-teaching (King-Sears et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2022). Our paper positions protected co-planning time as an equity imperative essential to realizing the full potential of inclusive education.

Keywords: co-teaching; co-planning time; inclusive education; instructional parity; special education teachers; general education teachers; least restrictive environment (LRE)

Introduction

Inclusive education is widely recognized as both a civil right and a pedagogical imperative in contemporary schooling systems. National and international policy frameworks call for students with disabilities to access rigorous, grade-level instruction alongside their peers in general education settings (McLeskey et al., 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). Within this movement, co-teaching has emerged as a prominent service delivery model. By intentionally pairing general and special educators to share instructional responsibility, co-teaching promotes differentiation, strengthens progress monitoring, and increases access to the general curriculum (Friend et al., 2010; Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

When implemented with fidelity, co-teaching advances collaborative ownership of student learning, joint problem-solving, and inclusive school climates (Strogilos et al., 2023; Scruggs et al., 2007). Grounded in sociocultural and collaborative learning frameworks, the model emphasizes shared expertise, professional dialogue, and co-planning as mechanisms



for strengthening instruction (Friend et al., 2010; McLeskey et al., 2022). In practice, however, co-teaching often falls short of these ideals when it is treated as a placement plan rather than as the collaborative instructional system it is designed to be.

A persistent gap exists between the conceptual promise of co-teaching and its on-the-ground implementation. Without structured communication and protected preparation time, instruction often defaults to “one teach, one assist,” a configuration that limits instructional parity and reinforces hierarchical role patterns (Scruggs et al., 2007). Observational research confirms that, in the absence of deliberate structural supports, special educators are frequently positioned as classroom assistants rather than as equal instructional partners. This dynamic diminishes both the collaborative foundation of co-teaching and the specialized support to which students with disabilities are entitled (Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

Among the most consequential barriers to effective co-teaching is the absence of protected co-planning time. Collaborative planning is not a procedural formality; it is the mechanism through which instructional coherence is built, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals are meaningfully integrated, and differentiation is made possible (Friend et al., 2010; Strogilos et al., 2023). When educators have consistent, structured time to plan together, they are empowered to design proactively, share instructional authority, and fully utilize their expertise to benefit students. Competing demands, fragmented schedules, and insufficient administrative prioritization, however, routinely undermine these conditions (McLeskey et al., 2022). The result is predictable: role ambiguity intensifies, instructional coherence erodes, and teachers’ sense of professional efficacy and mutual respect declines.

This position paper argues that the absence of protected co-planning time is not a scheduling inconvenience; it is an equity issue that reflects and reinforces institutional priorities. When collaboration is relegated to informal exchanges or after-hours efforts, inclusive practice is structurally compromised. Students with disabilities experience reduced access to differentiated instruction and inconsistent implementation of accommodations (McLeskey et al., 2022), while special educators face professional marginalization and the chronic underutilization of their expertise (King-Sears et al., 2021; Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Reframing scheduling decisions as equity-driven structural reforms is therefore not peripheral to inclusive education; it is a moral imperative. If co-teaching is to fulfill its promise as a cornerstone of high-quality, inclusive schooling, schools and policymakers must treat protected planning time as a non-negotiable condition rather than a logistical afterthought. Although the policy contexts, contractual arrangements, and structural conditions discussed throughout this paper are situated primarily within the United States educational system, the underlying challenges of inadequate co-planning time and role imbalance reflect broader patterns documented in international research on inclusive education. Where applicable, international perspectives are incorporated to enrich the analysis. This paper is consistent with the Whole Schooling approach, particularly its principles of including all learners, building community, and providing authentic multi-level instruction through collaborative co-teaching practices that promote equitable access, participation, and support for students with disabilities.

Conceptual Foundations of Co-Teaching

Co-teaching has emerged as a prominent, inclusive, instructional service-delivery model that’s designed to increase access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities while maintaining their placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE). As inclusive education policies have expanded, researchers and practitioners have increasingly examined co-teaching as a means of providing substantive, embedded support within general education classrooms without removing students from the settings where their peers learn. Establishing a clear conceptual definition and shared understanding of co-teaching models is therefore essential for both rigorous research and effective practice.

Co-teaching is most widely defined as the practice of “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 1). This definition foregrounds three essential elements: the presence of multiple credentialed professionals, the provision of substantive rather than peripheral instruction, and a shared instructional setting. The emphasis on substantive instruction is particularly significant, as it distinguishes co-teaching from paraprofessional support or pull-aside assistance models. In a genuine co-teaching arrangement, both educators are expected to engage actively and equitably in instructional planning, lesson delivery, and student assessment, not merely occupy the same physical space.

Central to this conception is the principle of instructional parity. Parity refers to the professional equality of co-

teachers, encompassing shared authority, mutual respect, and joint accountability for student outcomes (Friend & Cook, 2017). When parity is absent, co-teaching risks devolving into a hierarchical arrangement in which one educator leads, and the other follows, undermining the collaborative foundation that distinguishes co-teaching from traditional support models and limiting its instructional effectiveness (Murawski, 2009). Effective co-teaching, therefore, requires not only physical proximity but deliberate, ongoing shared decision-making and instructional ownership between partners.

Co-teaching is also closely aligned with federal inclusion policy. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004) mandates that students with disabilities be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, with removal from general education settings occurring only when satisfactory education cannot otherwise be achieved. Within this policy framework, co-teaching is often conceptualized as a supplementary service that supports inclusive placement while preserving access to individualized support (Friend, 2013). Co-teaching thus functions simultaneously as a pedagogical model and a structural response to federal policy, one that holds considerable promise when its foundational conditions, including shared roles, collaborative planning, and instructional parity, are deliberately and consistently upheld.

Models of Co-Teaching

Although co-teaching is conceptually unified by shared responsibility, it is operationalized through multiple instructional configurations. These models, visually displayed in Figures 1–5, provide structured yet flexible approaches to distributing instructional roles and differentiating instruction (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend, 2013). Importantly, the models are not hierarchical; rather, they represent strategic options that should be selected based on instructional goals and student needs.

One Teach, One Assist

As seen in Figure 1, the *one teach, one assist* model designates one teacher as the primary instructor for whole-group instruction. At the same time, the second educator circulates to provide individualized support, clarify directions, check for understanding, redirect off-task behavior, or offer brief scaffolding. This approach works well during new content introductions, lectures, demonstrations, or assessments; however, it should be used intentionally and for limited periods rather than as the default co-teaching structure.

Prolonged reliance on this model risks undermining instructional parity by positioning one educator as the lead teacher and the other as a paraprofessional-like assistant, thereby constraining shared authority and collaborative decision-making (Scruggs et al., 2007). When overused, students may perceive an imbalance of authority between teachers, diminishing the benefits of distributed expertise (Scruggs et al., 2007). To maximize the potential of co-teaching, this model should be rotated with other approaches that foster visible instructional parity and shared responsibility.

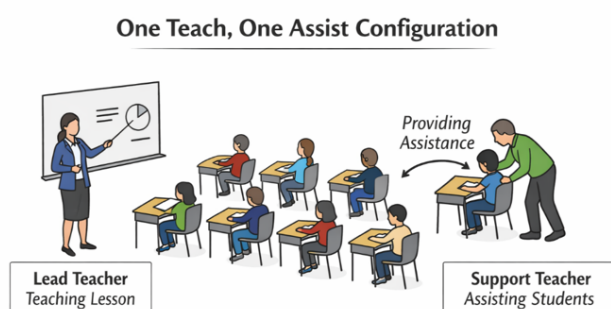


Figure 1. One teach, one assist configuration. Note. In this configuration, one teacher leads whole-group instruction while the other provides individualized support and monitors student understanding.

Station Teaching

In contrast, station teaching divides instructional content into segments and rotates students among stations, each led by a different teacher, as displayed in Figure 2. A third independent station is sometimes included to reinforce or extend learning. This model allows for small-group instruction, targeted differentiation, and increased opportunities for feedback. Consequently, station teaching can enhance engagement and support diverse learning needs within the same classroom, making it a valuable configuration within inclusive instructional settings (Friend, 2013; Friend & Cook, 2017; Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001).

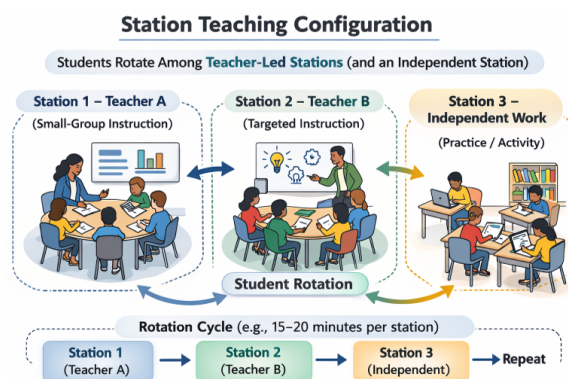


Figure 2. Station teaching configuration. Note. In the station teaching model, instructional content is divided into segments, and students rotate among teacher-led stations and, when appropriate, an independent practice station.

Parallel Teaching

Similarly, parallel teaching involves dividing the class into two heterogeneous groups, with each teacher delivering the same content simultaneously, as shown in Figure 3. Because this configuration reduces student-to-teacher ratios, it increases opportunities for student participation and individualized monitoring (Friend, 2013). Moreover, parallel teaching can reduce behavioral challenges by providing more immediate teacher proximity and responsive support, particularly for students with disabilities who benefit from increased structure and reduced whole-group demands (Friend & Cook, 2017; Murawski & Lochner, 2011). When implemented with intentionality and co-planning, this model promotes instructional parity by distributing professional leadership equally across both teachers, reinforcing the collaborative foundation that distinguishes effective co-teaching from hierarchical support arrangements (Cook & Friend, 1995; Strogilos et al., 2023).

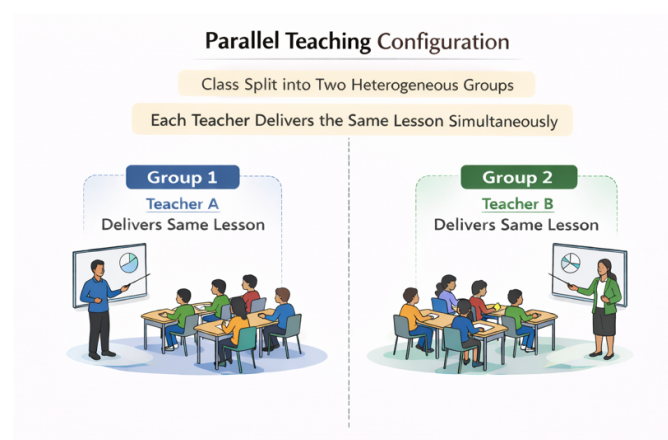


Figure 3. Parallel teaching configuration. Note. In parallel teaching, the class is divided into two groups, and each teacher delivers the same lesson simultaneously. This approach increases participation, provides more individualized feedback, and supports differentiated instruction while maintaining shared teaching responsibilities (Friend, 2013; Friend & Cook, 2017).

Alternative Teaching

Alternative teaching, by comparison, involves one teacher instructing the majority of the class while the other provides targeted instruction to a smaller group. As shown in Figure 4, this model is particularly useful for pre-teaching, remediation, enrichment, or behavioral intervention. However, it must be implemented carefully to avoid inadvertently stigmatizing students who frequently receive small-group instruction (Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001).

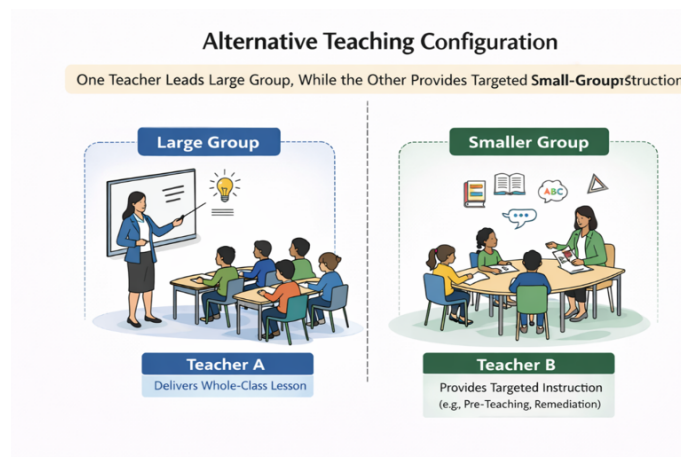


Figure 4. Alternative teaching configuration. Note. One teacher leads whole-class learning while the other provides targeted small-group instruction and support.

Team Teaching

Finally, team teaching represents the highest level of collaborative integration. In this configuration, both teachers deliver instruction simultaneously, often alternating explanations, modeling dialogue, or co-facilitating discussions, as illustrated in Figure 5. Because both educators are visibly engaged in instruction, team teaching most clearly reflects parity and collaborative synergy (Friend & Cook, 2017).

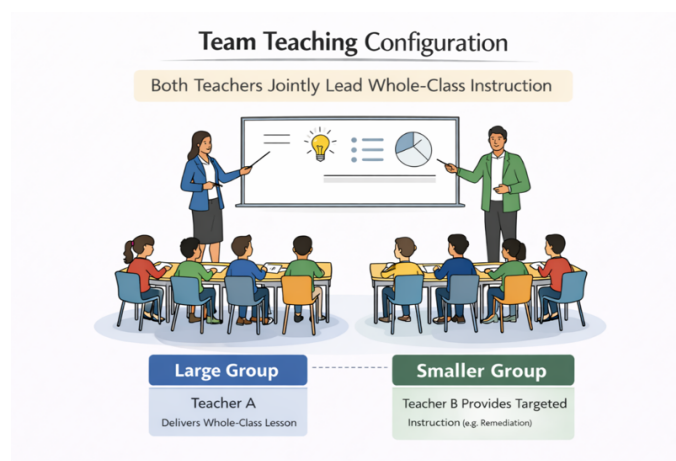


Figure 5. Team teaching configuration. Note. In team teaching, both educators share instructional responsibilities, co-delivering lessons and supporting student learning together (Friend, 2013; Friend & Cook, 2017).

Conceptual Implications for Research and Practice

Collectively, these models illustrate that co-teaching is not a singular practice but a flexible framework requiring intentional selection and deliberate implementation. Notably, different configurations place different demands on collaborative

planning; for example, one teach, one assist requires comparatively less coordination than station, parallel, alternative, and team teaching. Importantly, research suggests that more collaborative models are more likely to be implemented when teachers have structured opportunities for co-planning and administrative support (Friend, 2013; Strogilos et al., 2023). Therefore, schools seeking to move beyond one teach, one assist must address the structural conditions that enable more collaborative forms of instruction, particularly protected planning time and professional learning opportunities (Alsudairy, 2024; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022; Qualls et al., 2025; Rytivaara et al., 2024). When teachers engage in intentional co-planning and maintain shared instructional responsibility, co-teaching is more likely to support student engagement, instructional differentiation, and access to grade-level curriculum (King-Sears et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2022; Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Future research should continue examining how organizational conditions, implementation fidelity, and professional collaboration influence the effectiveness of co-teaching across diverse educational contexts.

Empirical Evidence on Co-Teaching Outcomes

Empirical research substantiates the conceptual claims outlined above. Murawski & Lee Swanson's (2001) meta-analysis found generally positive but modest effects of co-teaching on student outcomes, with effect sizes varying according to study quality and implementation fidelity, underscoring that the presence of co-teaching alone does not guarantee academic gains. Cook et al. (2017) similarly caution that the empirical base, while expanding, remains methodologically uneven, and argue that outcomes depend heavily on how co-teaching is implemented rather than on its use per se. Qualitative accounts reinforce this pattern: Pancsofar & Petroff (2016) found that teachers experienced co-teaching as most effective for advancing inclusion when paired with adequate role clarity and structured planning time, but as tokenistic or superficial when these conditions were absent. Taken together, this body of empirical work indicates that co-teaching's promise as an inclusive practice is realized only under specific implementation conditions, a theme this paper develops throughout.

Policy Foundations: Inclusion and the Least Restrictive Environment

Co-teaching is not simply a preferred instructional model; it is a structural response to federal and international policy mandates that situate inclusive education as both a legal right and an ethical imperative. Understanding these policy foundations is essential for recognizing why the structural conditions that make co-teaching effective, including protected co-planning time, carry obligations that extend beyond scheduling logistics.

IDEA and the Least Restrictive Environment

The IDEA (2004) requires that students with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. That removal from general education settings occurs only when satisfactory education cannot be achieved, even with the use of supplementary aids and services (20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)(A)). The LRE mandate establishes a legal presumption in favor of inclusive placement, positioning separation from general education as a last resort rather than a default (McLeskey et al., 2022). Co-teaching functions within this framework as a primary mechanism for delivering supplementary aids and services, enabling specialized support within the general education setting rather than through removal from it (Friend, 2013).

IDEA's IEP requirements reinforce this accountability. Schools must document the supplementary aids and services provided to each student and justify any time spent outside general education (IDEA, 2004). This creates an implicit legal obligation not only to place students inclusively but to support that placement substantively. Co-teaching that defaults to passive "*one teach, one assist*" configurations due to inadequate planning time does not credibly fulfill this obligation (Scruggs et al., 2007). Structural supports, such as protected co-planning time, are therefore legally significant, not only pedagogically significant.

Broader Civil Rights Protections

The inclusion mandate extends beyond IDEA. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (1973) prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in federally funded programs and requires schools to provide equal access and meaningful participation (29 U.S.C. § 794). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (1990) broadens these protections to all public entities. Together, these statutes establish that unnecessarily restrictive placement constitutes actionable discrimination (Yell et al., 2017). When co-teaching structures are deprived of the planning time necessary for

genuine differentiation, schools risk not only poor instructional outcomes but potential noncompliance with civil rights law (McLeskey et al., 2022).

International Frameworks: From Integration to Genuine Inclusion

The policy foundation supporting co-teaching also reflects an international consensus. The 1994 Salamanca Statement called on governments to adopt inclusive school systems as the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and achieving education for all (UNESCO, 1994). UNESCO (2020)'s Global Education Monitoring Report sharpened this vision by distinguishing between integration, placing students in general settings without modifying structures, and genuine inclusion, which requires schools to redesign instructional approaches and professional structures to support all learners actively. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) further establishes inclusive education as a binding human rights obligation, requiring individualized support within the general education system (United Nations, 2006). A co-teaching arrangement in which one educator delivers undifferentiated whole-group instruction while the other provides reactive assistance may satisfy the form of inclusion but falls short of the transformation these frameworks envision.

Policy Implications for Planning Time

The cumulative weight of these policy frameworks yields a clear implication: the structural conditions that enable effective co-teaching are inseparable from the legal and ethical obligations that schools hold toward students with disabilities. When schools adopt co-teaching as their mechanism for fulfilling IDEA's LRE requirements, they implicitly but consequentially commit to providing the supports necessary for that mechanism to function with fidelity (Friend, 2013). Protected co-planning time is the most foundational of those supports. Scheduling decisions that eliminate or minimize co-planning time are therefore not neutral administrative choices; they are policy choices that determine whether inclusive education is substantive or merely nominal (McLeskey et al., 2022; Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

The Role of Common Planning Time

Effective teacher planning extends beyond lesson preparation, data review, and communication with families or colleagues. Co-teaching requires collaborative planning, joint instructional design, clear role delineation, and shared decision-making regarding instructional strategies. This process often prompts teachers to redefine their professional identities, with general educators sharing instructional leadership and special educators assuming greater responsibility for lesson design and content delivery (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013). Consistent co-planning, openness, flexibility, and a willingness to adjust roles in response to student needs are essential to successful co-teaching partnerships.

Effective co-teaching also depends on mutual agreement, professional compatibility, and structured opportunities for joint lesson planning. Without collaborative planning, co-teachers may work at cross purposes, resulting in fragmented rather than coherent instruction (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013). Regular co-planning distributes instructional responsibilities, improves curriculum quality, promotes collaborative problem-solving, and strengthens professional trust (Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). Embury & Dinnesen (2013) found that teachers who engaged in collaborative planning utilized a wider range of co-teaching configurations and implemented them more consistently. Structured co-planning also strengthened instructional ownership among special educators, while both partners reported stronger collaboration, more coherent lessons, and a greater sense of shared classroom community.

A critical distinction must be made between individual planning and collaborative co-planning. Individual planning refers to the independent preparation undertaken by each educator, including reviewing content, developing materials, and considering instructional pacing. Collaborative co-planning, by contrast, involves both teachers jointly designing instruction, aligning responsibilities, integrating individualized supports, making instructional decisions, and coordinating lesson delivery. Although individual planning remains necessary, it cannot substitute for the shared decision-making processes that give co-teaching its distinctive instructional value. When co-planning is absent, educators may continue to plan independently; however, the shared instructional framework that supports effective co-teaching is weakened. What is lost is not planning itself but the collaborative design process that enables teachers to function as true instructional partners.

The amount of co-planning time required may vary depending on the context and co-teaching configuration. Research from Finnish inclusive classrooms suggests that as little as 15 minutes of structured co-planning may be sufficient to prepare

a lesson when teachers are experienced collaborators working within stable partnerships (Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). This finding suggests that planning time is not necessarily scarce when organizational structures support efficient collaboration. Nevertheless, some dedicated time for joint preparation remains essential. Co-planning enables co-teaching to function as an integrated instructional model rather than a simple sharing of classroom space. When collaborative planning is absent, instruction may become reactive, roles may default to hierarchical patterns, and the collaborative infrastructure that distinguishes co-teaching from co-presence erodes.

Additional empirical research confirms that protected co-planning time is a central enabling condition for effective co-teaching. Across qualitative syntheses, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and contemporary empirical studies, collaborative planning is consistently associated with greater instructional coherence, role clarity, differentiation, professional trust, and implementation fidelity (Friend et al., 2010; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022; King-Sears et al., 2021; Qualls et al., 2025; Rytivaara et al., 2024; Scruggs et al., 2007; Strogilos et al., 2023; Vembye et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that co-planning should not be viewed as an optional enhancement to co-teaching but rather as a structural prerequisite for its successful implementation.

Co-Planning Time as an Access and Equity Issue

Contemporary scholarship now views protected co-planning time as an equity issue, not just a logistical concern. Co-teaching is a key way schools give students with disabilities access to the LRE. Therefore, the conditions needed for effective co-teaching have legal, ethical, and educational importance (Friend, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2022). Collaborative planning lets general and special educators align goals, integrate IEP supports, and design differentiated lessons. This planning helps students with disabilities take part in grade-level instruction. Without enough planning, accommodations and individualized supports may be used inconsistently. This lowers students' chances of accessing the curriculum and benefiting from inclusive education (McLeskey et al., 2022; Murawski & Lochner, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). Decisions about scheduling and collaborative planning are not just administrative. They are structural choices that affect whether inclusive education is implemented well and creates real participation, rather than only physical placement (Barron & Friend, 2025).

Consequences of Insufficient Planning: Role Imbalance and the One Teach, One Assist Default

The consequences of inadequate co-planning time are predictable and well-documented, but insufficient planning time does not arise in isolation. It is one manifestation of a cluster of interconnected barriers that collectively undermine the effectiveness of co-teaching. Scheduling constraints are among the most frequently cited structural obstacles: master schedules at many schools do not designate shared planning periods for co-teaching pairs, leaving educators to negotiate collaboration during lunch, before school, or through informal hallway exchanges (King-Sears et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2022). Administrative mechanisms compound this challenge; school leaders often assign co-teaching pairings without providing the professional infrastructure, protected time, role clarity, and collaborative norms necessary for those partnerships to function (Barron & Friend, 2025; Jurkowski et al., 2023). Teacher professional competencies represent a third barrier: educators who have not received adequate preservice or in-service preparation in co-teaching models may default to hierarchical arrangements not solely due to structural constraints but also due to uncertainty about how to share instructional authority (Alsudairy, 2024; Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Khasawneh, 2023). Finally, home-school collaboration challenges can intersect with co-teaching barriers when families of students with disabilities are not clearly informed about how co-teaching operates, which educator is accountable for IEP implementation, or how to communicate concerns within a shared classroom context (McLeskey et al., 2022). Addressing planning time in isolation, without attention to these intersecting barriers, risks producing surface-level change that fails to transform co-teaching practice. Across methodologies and time periods, the research converges on a consistent pattern: when co-teachers lack protected time to plan together, instruction defaults to the one teach, one assist configuration, and with it, instructional and relational dynamics that undermine the purpose of co-teaching (Scruggs et al., 2007; Strogilos et al., 2023). The problem is not the model itself; when used intentionally and sparingly, it serves legitimate functions, but its chronic overuse is the de facto default for unplanned co-teaching (Friend, 2013). Paulsrud & Nilholm (2023) confirmed that this dominance persists in contemporary research, with the most frequently used co-teaching configuration still failing to leverage the special educator's expertise. In the absence of joint lesson design, the general educator assumes the instructional lead role. In contrast, the special educator provides reactive support resulting in instruction that may appear inclusive in form but lacks the intentionality that genuine inclusion requires.

([Friend et al., 2010](#); [King-Sears et al., 2021](#)).

Role imbalance, when embedded in daily practice through the one teach, one assist default, progressively erodes the professional parity on which effective co-teaching depends. Students observe which teacher leads and which monitors the margins, observations that shape how students with disabilities experience themselves as participants in the classroom community ([Murawski & Lochner, 2011](#); [Scruggs et al., 2007](#)). Research documents specific academic and social consequences of chronic one teach, one assist reliance: students with disabilities in such classrooms receive fewer opportunities to respond to academically challenging questions, are more frequently redirected toward compliance rather than engagement, and are more likely to be identified by peers as requiring special treatment dynamics that can compromise social integration and reinforce disability stigma ([Murawski & Lochner, 2011](#); [Scruggs et al., 2007](#)). At the academic level, the absence of proactive, co-designed differentiation means scaffolds are often applied reactively and inconsistently, reducing the likelihood that students with disabilities access grade-level content with the depth and frequency their IEPs require ([King-Sears et al., 2021](#); [McLeskey et al., 2022](#)). [Jortveit & Kovač \(2022\)](#) found that co-teachers with structured planning support reported clearer role definitions and stronger instructional coherence, whereas those without such support reported professional marginalization and underutilization. [Qualls et al. \(2025\)](#) identified planning as the variable whose presence propagated across every dimension of the co-teaching system. Recent studies consistently affirm that purposefully integrated structural supports, including protected co-planning time, professional development in co-teaching models, shared pedagogical responsibility, and strong administrative leadership, are essential to authentic co-teaching practice ([Alsudairy, 2024](#); [Jortveit & Kovač, 2022](#); [Qualls et al., 2025](#); [Rytivaara et al., 2024](#)). Structural models can support collaborative professional learning, but the quality of the professional partnership ultimately determines instructional outcomes. Scheduling, in this light, is not a background condition; it is a decision about whether co-teaching will function as intended or merely as a form.

Implications for Students with Disabilities

Academic Access

Protected co-planning time directly affects students' access to rigorous, grade-level instruction. Inclusive education needs more than physical placement in general classrooms. Students with disabilities must have meaningful opportunities to engage with the same academic standards and experiences as peers ([McLeskey et al., 2022](#); [UNESCO, 2020](#)). When co-teachers work together to design lessons, they can better provide differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, formative assessment, and multiple ways for students to engage and express themselves ([Friend et al., 2010](#); [Murawski & Lochner, 2011](#)). Limited co-planning time can restrict proactive instructional design. This reduces opportunities to embed supports that help all students access the curriculum equitably ([Scruggs et al., 2007](#)).

IEP Fidelity

The success of IEP goals and accommodations relies on strong collaboration between general and special educators. Structured co-planning lets teachers align lesson objectives with individualized supports. It also helps them address potential barriers to participation in advance ([Friend et al., 2010](#); [Strogilos et al., 2023](#)). Without regular collaborative planning, accommodations and modifications may be used inconsistently. This weakens the link between grade-level instruction and students' individual learning needs ([McLeskey et al., 2022](#); [Murawski & Lochner, 2011](#)).

Inclusive Participation and Belonging

Co-planning also boosts students' sense of belonging in inclusive classrooms. Effective co-teaching spreads responsibility for all learners across both teachers. This supports an environment in which differentiation is normalized rather than stigmatized ([Strogilos et al., 2023](#)). When teachers design instruction together and share visible roles, students with disabilities are more likely to feel valued in the classroom community. This matches the goals of inclusive education ([UNESCO, 2020](#)).

Impact on Special Education Teachers

The structural conditions that undermine co-teaching effectiveness do not affect students alone. Special education teachers face distinct professional consequences when co-teaching is inadequately supported, most notably the underuti-

lization of their specialized expertise and the resulting professional frustration, isolation, role ambiguity, and sustainability concerns (Myrie et al., 2026). Together, these dynamics threaten not only individual well-being but also the long-term viability of inclusive education models that depend on a stable, highly skilled special education workforce.

Underutilization of Specialized Expertise

Special education teachers bring a distinctive knowledge base to co-teaching partnerships, including expertise in individually designed instruction, IEP development, evidence-based interventions, and disability-specific pedagogy (Billingsley et al., 2020; Friend et al., 2010). However, poorly structured co-teaching consistently fails to deploy this expertise, instead positioning special educators in reactive, peripheral roles disconnected from the instructional decision-making for which they were trained.

The primary mechanism of this underutilization is chronic overreliance on the one teach, one assist model. Without protected planning time, instruction defaults to configurations in which the general educator leads while the special educator circulates, functioning closer to a paraprofessional than an instructional partner (Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007). Paulsrud & Nilholm (2023) found that the most frequently used co-teaching model across studies does not effectively leverage the special educator's expertise, with support roles defined by general educators rather than by special educators' professional judgment. Gilmour et al. (2023) documented a substantial increase in co-teaching configurations over 16 years, without commensurate increases in structural supports, thereby effectively displacing special educators from specialized contexts and failing to enable genuine instructional partnership in inclusive ones (Billingsley et al., 2020). When special educators are reduced to monitoring rather than co-designing instruction, students with disabilities lose access to the individualized, IEP-aligned supports that co-teaching is intended to provide (Friend et al., 2010; Strogilos et al., 2023).

Professional Frustration, Role Ambiguity, and Sustainability Concerns

Structural marginalization within co-teaching does not leave professional identity intact. Role ambiguity stemming from undefined instructional authority, unestablished role expectations, and insufficient planning time is among the most frequently cited stressors in the special education literature (Billingsley et al., 2020; Strogilos et al., 2023). The Institute of Education Sciences (2025) special education teacher workforce technical working group identified role ambiguity as a significant driver of burnout and attrition, with departing teachers citing the absence of clear, respected role definitions as a central reason for leaving.

These stressors carry measurable retention consequences. Bettini et al. (2020), drawing on conservation of resources theory, found that special educators' intent to continue teaching was shaped by the balance between assigned responsibilities and available resources, including time and collegial support. Stark et al. (2023) defined working conditions as precisely this relationship, framing the absence of protected co-planning time as a structural resource deficit. Brunsting et al. (2023) documented that working conditions predicted burnout trajectories more strongly than individual teacher characteristics in a longitudinal sample of special educators. These findings align with broader attrition data: special educators leave at approximately 15% annually (Gilmour et al., 2023). Billingsley & Bettini (2019) and Myrie et al. (2024) emphasized working conditions as among the most powerful predictors of attrition. Federal data underscore the urgency 21% of public schools were not fully staffed in special education at the start of 2023–24, the highest shortage rate of any teaching specialty (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2025).

Co-teaching arrangements that deny special educators the planning time, collaborative roles, and structural recognition their expertise warrants are not administratively neutral. Unfortunately, this can contribute to attrition, making high-quality inclusive education increasingly difficult to staff and sustain.

Variables Influencing Co-Teaching Implementation

Beyond the absence of protected planning time, several interrelated variables shape whether co-teaching is implemented with fidelity. These variables should not be treated as competing explanations but as components of a single structural system that either enables or undermines effective collaboration.

Administrative Support

Administrative support is one of the most consistently identified variables influencing co-teaching implementation. When school leaders actively schedule protected planning time, monitor collaborative practices, and intentionally pair co-teachers based on compatibility and expertise, co-teaching is more likely to move beyond one teach, one assist configurations (Barron & Friend, 2025; Jurkowski et al., 2023; Nápoles, 2025). Conversely, when administrative attention to co-teaching is inconsistent or absent, teachers are left to negotiate collaboration informally, and implementation quality suffers.

Teacher Preparedness

Teacher preparedness, encompassing both preservice training and ongoing professional development in co-teaching models, is a second critical variable. Chitiyo & Brinda (2018) found that many general and special educators enter co-teaching partnerships without adequate preparation in collaborative instructional models, contributing to uncertainty about how to share instructional authority. Similarly, Khasawneh (2023) and Alsudairy (2024) demonstrated that structured training in co-teaching skills improves teachers' confidence and their ability to enact more collaborative configurations. Where preparation is lacking, teachers are more likely to default to hierarchical arrangements not because they lack commitment to inclusion, but because they lack the specific skills co-teaching requires.

Competing Priorities and Scheduling Constraints

Even well-prepared, well-supported co-teachers face the practical reality of competing priorities. Master schedules that do not designate shared planning periods force educators to negotiate collaboration around lunch, before and after school hours, or informal hallway exchanges (King-Sears et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2022). Curriculum pacing pressures, standardized testing timelines, and other simultaneous instructional demands can further crowd out the time available for co-planning, even in schools where administrators are otherwise supportive. Addressing planning time therefore requires attention not only to whether time is allocated, but to how competing demands on that time are managed.

Recommendations

Administrative Leadership

School administrators play a central role in establishing the structural conditions necessary for effective co-teaching. Evidence suggests that administrative support remains inconsistent across educational settings, despite its importance to implementation quality (Barron & Friend, 2025). To support authentic co-teaching, administrators should prioritize protected co-planning time within master schedules. They should also establish accountability mechanisms that monitor collaborative planning practices and intentionally match co-teaching partners based on instructional expertise, professional compatibility, and student needs. Research further indicates that even brief but regularly scheduled collaborative planning periods can strengthen instructional coordination and implementation fidelity (Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Administrators should also provide clear expectations regarding shared instructional responsibility and collaborative decision-making. This is especially important for newly formed co-teaching partnerships (Barron & Friend, 2025; Jurkowski et al., 2023). As Nápoles (2025) argues, administrative support is not peripheral to co-teaching effectiveness but foundational to its success.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) offer a practical structure for sustaining collaboration beyond individual planning sessions. Through PLC participation, general and special educators can collaboratively analyze student data, discuss instructional challenges, examine evidence-based practices, and coordinate interventions across classroom contexts (Vescio et al., 2008). This collaboration promotes professional trust, strengthens communication, and reinforces shared responsibility for student outcomes. PLCs may be particularly valuable in schools where scheduling constraints limit extended co-planning opportunities. They provide recurring structures for collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. Research suggests that these collaborative relationships contribute to more sustainable and effective co-teaching partnerships (Blanton & Perez, 2011).

Embedded Professional Development

Professional development should be integrated into the daily work of co-teaching rather than delivered as isolated training events. While many special educators possess extensive expertise in individualized instruction and behavioral support, they may require additional opportunities to strengthen the content-specific pedagogical knowledge needed to co-deliver rigorous academic instruction (Leko & Brownell, 2009). Research indicates that professional learning is most effective when embedded in collaborative lesson design and co-planning activities, enabling teachers to apply new knowledge immediately to shared instructional challenges (Alsudairy, 2024; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). This approach simultaneously strengthens content knowledge, co-planning practices, and professional trust. Conversely, professional development disconnected from the structural realities of co-teaching is less likely to produce sustained improvements in instructional practice (Rytivaara et al., 2024).

Preservice Preparation and Mentorship

Preparation for effective co-teaching should begin in teacher education programs and continue through structured mentorship. Teachers need strong content knowledge to adapt curriculum and design meaningful learning for diverse learners (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Preservice programs should provide collaborative lesson planning, peer problem-solving, and co-teaching simulations that reflect real classroom partnerships. Khasawneh (2023) found that these collaborative experiences helped preservice teachers better understand co-teaching and handle shared instructional responsibilities. Mentorship from experienced co-teachers bridges theory and practice through observation, feedback, and reflection. These experiences build the collaborative skills novice educators need for long-term success in inclusive classrooms (Khasawneh, 2023).

Conclusion

Co-teaching is widely used to support inclusive education. Its effectiveness depends on often-overlooked conditions. Research shows that co-teaching can improve instructional differentiation, expand access to grade-level curriculum, and foster collaborative problem-solving. But these outcomes only occur when co-teaching has the structural supports needed for collaboration, such as protected co-planning time (Friend et al., 2010; King-Sears et al., 2021; McLeskey et al., 2022).

The evidence in this paper shows that co-planning time is more than just a scheduling accommodation. It lets teachers align instructional goals, integrate IEP supports, clarify roles, and share instructional responsibility. This shared planning sets authentic co-teaching apart from mere co-presence. Without it, co-teaching tends to become less collaborative, which limits instructional parity and underuses special educators' expertise (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023; Scruggs et al., 2007; Strogilos et al., 2023). The quality of inclusive education depends not only on placement decisions but also on organizational structures that support consistent implementation (Barron & Friend, 2025; Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

This paper argues that protected co-planning time is essential for inclusive education, not optional. Treating planning time as a structural and equity condition makes schools and policymakers responsible for providing the resources needed for effective collaboration. Future research should examine how planning structures, professional partnerships, and school leadership together influence implementation fidelity and long-term outcomes in diverse educational contexts. For co-teaching to deliver meaningful inclusion, schools must stop seeing collaboration as solely an individual task. Instead, they must ensure it receives deliberate institutional support (Friend, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Author Contributions

DNM contributed to conceptualization, study design, methodology, validation, supervision, and manuscript drafting. JI contributed to methodology, validation, supervision, manuscript drafting, and review and editing. KB, CK, MDL, JA, EE, and NTD contributed to methodology, validation, manuscript drafting, and review and editing. All authors contributed substantially to the development of this work, critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content, approved the final version for publication, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy and integrity.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Given her role as Editorial Board member, Doreen N. Myrie had no involvement in the peer-review of this article and has no access to information regarding its peer review.

References

- Alsudairy, N. A. (2024). Effects of a training program to improve co-teaching and collaboration skills for in-service teachers of special and general education. *Sage Open*, 14(4), 21582440241288076. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241288076>
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12132 (1990). <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/ada/>
- Barron, T., & Friend, M. (2025). Co-teaching: Are we there yet? *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 35(2), 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2024.2422895>
- Bettini, E., Gilmour, A. F., Williams, T. O., & Billingsley, B. (2020). Predicting special and general educators' intent to continue teaching using conservation of resources theory. *Exceptional Children*, 86(3), 310–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402919870464>
- Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697–744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>
- Billingsley, B., Bettini, E., Mathews, H. M., & McLeskey, J. (2020). Improving working conditions to support special educators' effectiveness: A call for leadership. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 43(1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880353>
- Blanton, L. P., & Perez, Y. (2011). Exploring the relationship between special education teachers and professional learning communities: Implications for research for administrators. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 24(1), 6–16. <https://scispace.com/pdf/exploring-the-relationship-between-special-education-flpdgssebr.pdf>
- Brunsting, N. C., Bettini, E., Rock, M., Common, E. A., Royer, D. J., Lane, K. L., Xie, F., Chen, A., & Zeng, F. (2023). Working conditions and burnout of special educators of students with EBD: Longitudinal outcomes. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 46(1), 44–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064221076159>
- Chitiyo, J., & Brinda, W. (2018). Teacher preparedness in the use of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. *Support for Learning*, 33(1), 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12190>
- Cook, L., & Friend, M. (1995). Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 28(3), 1–16. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/31ca/3592c18acd238ce488cd7184017b904b646.pdf>
- Cook, S. C., McDuffie-Landrum, K. A., Oshita, L., & Cook, B. G. (2017). Co-teaching for students with disabilities: A critical and updated analysis of the empirical literature. In J. M. Kauffman, D. P. Hallahan, & P. C. Pullen (Eds.), *Handbook of special education* (2nd ed., pp. 233–248). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315517698-20>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teacher education around the world: What can we learn from international practice? *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(3), 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1315399>
- Embury, D. C., & Dinnesen, M. S. (2013). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms using structured collaborative planning. *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning*, 10, Article 3. <https://encompass.eku.edu/kjectl/vol10/iss2012/3/>
- Friend, M. (2013). *Co-teach! Building and sustaining effective classroom partnerships in inclusive schools* (2nd ed.). Marilyn Friend, Inc.
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2017). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-teaching: An illustration of the complexity of collaboration in special education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535380>
- Gilmour, A. F., Nguyen, T. D., Redding, C., & Bettini, E. (2023). The shifting context of special education teachers' work. *Remedial and Special Education*, 44(3), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325221113016>
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)(A) (2004). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1412/a/5/>
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2025, January). *Special education teacher workforce*. National Center for Special Education Research, U.S. Department of Education. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncser/2025/01/special-education-teacher-workforce>
- Jortveit, M., & Kovač, V. B. (2022). Co-teaching that works: Special and general educators' perspectives on collaboration. *Teaching Education*, 33(3), 286–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2021.1895105>
- Jurkowski, S., Ulrich, M., & Müller, B. (2023). Co-teaching as a resource for inclusive classes: Teachers' perspectives on conditions for successful collaboration. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1821449>
- Khasawneh, Y. J. A. (2023). An investigation of pre-service teacher preparation programs in teacher education and co-teaching models. *Information Sciences Letters*, 12(7), 2849–2857. <https://doi.org/10.18576/isl/120714>

- King-Sears, M. E., Stefanidis, A., Berkeley, S., & Strogilos, V. (2021). Does co-teaching improve academic achievement for students with disabilities? A meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review*, 34, 100405. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100405>
- Leko, M. M., & Brownell, M. T. (2009). Crafting quality professional development for special educators: What school leaders should know. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(1), 64–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990904200106>
- McLeskey, J., Spooner, F., Algozzine, B., & Waldron, N. L. (2022). *Handbook of effective inclusive elementary schools: Research and practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Handbook-of-Effective-Inclusive-Elementary-Schools-Research-and-Practice/McLeskey-Spooner-Algozzine-Waldron/p/book/9780367486778>
- Murawski, W. W. (2009). *Collaborative teaching in secondary schools: Making the co-teaching marriage work!* Corwin Press. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452219370>
- Murawski, W. W., & Lochner, W. W. (2011). Observing co-teaching: What to ask for, look for, and listen for. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 46(3), 174–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451210378165>
- Murawski, W. W., & Lee Swanson, H. (2001). A meta-analysis of co-teaching research: Where are the data? *Remedial and Special Education*, 22(5), 258–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250102200501>
- Myrie, D. N., Dowd, N. T., & Latiker, M. D. (2024). Addressing the shortage of special education teachers of color: Implications for teacher education programs and K-12 systems. *Social Sciences*, 13(11), 622. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110622>
- Myrie, D. N., Hurt, R., Pandey, S., & Ramdoss, S. (2026). Addressing special education isolation in the context of teacher shortages and retention: A call for research. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 26(2), e70074. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.70074>
- Nápoles, J. (2025). Co-teaching: A review of the literature. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 43(2), 34–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233231226131>
- Pancsofar, N., & Petroff, J. G. (2016). Teachers' experiences with co-teaching as a model for inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1043–1053. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145264>
- Paulsrud, D., & Nilholm, C. (2023). Teaching for inclusion – a review of research on the cooperation between regular teachers and special educators in the work with students in need of special support. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(4), 541–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1846799>
- Qualls, L. W., Arastoopour Irgens, G., & Hirsch, S. E. (2025). Co-teaching as a dynamic system to support students with disabilities: A case study. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), 733. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060733>
- Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794 (1973). <https://www.eeoc.gov/rehabilitation-act-1973-original-text>
- Rytivaara, A., Ahtiainen, R., Palmu, I., Pesonen, H., & Malinen, O.-P. (2024). Learning to co-teach: A systematic review. *Education Sciences*, 14(1), 113. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14010113>
- Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M. A., & McDuffie, K. A. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 392–416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290707300401>
- Stark, K., Bettini, E., Cumming, M., O'Brien, K. M., Brunsting, N., Huggins-Manley, C., & Shaheen, T. (2023). Measuring special educators' working conditions: A systematic review. *Remedial and Special Education*, 44(2), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325221079015>
- Strogilos, V., King-Sears, M. E., Tragoulia, E., Voulagka, A., & Stefanidis, A. (2023). A meta-synthesis of co-teaching students with and without disabilities. *Educational Research Review*, 38, 100504. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100504>
- Takala, M., & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, L. (2012). A one-year study of the development of co-teaching in four Finnish schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 27(3), 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2012.691233>
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2020). *Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all, Easy to read version, key messages, recommendations*. UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000373724>
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2025). *The federal response to teacher shortage impacts on students with disabilities*. <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2025-09/teacher-shortage-report-final.pdf>
- Vembye, M. H., Weiss, F., & Hamilton Bhat, B. (2024). The effects of co-teaching and related collaborative models of instruction on student achievement: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 94(3), 376–422. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543231186588>
- Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.01.004>
- Yell, M. L., Katsiyannis, A., & Bradley, M. R. (2017). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: The evolution of special education law. In J. M. Kauffman, D. P. Hallahan, & P. C. Pullen (Eds.), *Handbook of special education* (2nd ed., pp. 55–70). Routledge.