

2021-2022 WTU Teacher Leaders Program

Two Heads Are Better Than One: An Exploration of DCPS Co-teachers in Math and English Language Arts Classrooms *Dorothy Graves, Special Education Resource Teacher*

Research Question

How do DCPS Math and ELA (English Language Arts) teachers co-teach?

Rationale

The purpose of this research is trying to examine if co-teachers are truly prepared to teach in a co-taught environment and the effects on students. Research surrounding the benefits and challenges of co-teaching has documented pathways to student success, specifically for Math and English inclusion classrooms. Successful co-taught classrooms have produced increased graduation rates and subject-level proficiency, namely in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. Schools across the United States aim to increase graduation rates, reading and math proficiency, and maximize student learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms. The focus is on Math and ELA classrooms in the District of Columbia because most standardized, required tests are in those subject areas. After working with several co-teachers without any formal training, I wondered if my student achievement and engagement would have increased earlier with proper training on strategies and best practices.

However, successful co-teaching experiences have several common components: shared planning time among teachers, administration who view co-teaching as an essential facet of the school, shared responsibilities, specially designed instruction and lesson plans, adequate training and teacher preparation, open communication streams between co-teachers and administration, and a positive co-taught classroom environment. My study aimed to discover if DCPS co-teachers in middle school ELA and Math utilized these strategies and found co-teaching to be successful.

Literature Review

An extensive study by Brendle, Lock, and Piazza examined two co-taught elementary classrooms (ELA and Math) and documented implementation as well as insights in teachers' perception of co-teaching. According to Brendle et al, "results indicate teachers lack expertise in implementing collaborative co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing to effectively implement co-teaching". Their results and recommendations specifically highlight the lack of training, community, and support for teachers expected to collaboratively teach in a classroom. Brendle et al specifically named administrative support and teacher training as future recommendations.

Revere High School, a public high school with 1709 students in Massachusetts, adapted a team teaching style for their students so Math and ELA classes are inclusion classes taught by a general education and special education teacher. Both the teachers and administrators noted an increase in collaboration between students and students' perspective change as they start to take ownership of their learning. From 2013 to 2014, the graduation rate increased 11 percentage points from 84% to 95%. Students receiving special education services had a 19-percentage point increase in graduation. Math proficiency on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) increased 11 percentage points overall and 8 percentage points for students receiving special education services.

Team teaching is the dominant co-teaching approach used at YES Prep and allows teachers to integrate two subject areas which "results in a deeper understanding of areas." YES Prep has a formula for team teaching which includes daily 50-minute common planning sessions, lesson plans that include both teachers, and professional development specific to team teaching. YES Prep noted several distinct benefits of team teaching including smaller teacher-student ratios, deeper student understanding, and positive examples of successful collaboration. Teachers strengthened interpersonal relationships and students saw the benefits of a positive working environment and relationships. YES Prep administrators set expectations that team teaching is the standard. Also, written expectations and meeting guides were made available for teachers that enforced the expected standard. While there were barriers, YES Prep exemplified a positive team teaching approach successfully implemented in a high-needs, urban environment. YES Prep is a charter school serving 975 students in grades 9-12 in North Central Houston. 98% of the student population are minorities (97% African American and Hispanic) and 90% will be first generation college students. 85% of the student body is considered economically-disadvantaged. The school is ranked in the top 20% of public schools in Texas with a graduation rate of 90% and a student teacher ratio of 15:1. The school is also in the top 20% of all schools in Texas for overall test scores. Math proficiency is in the top 20%, and reading proficiency is in the top 30% for the 2018-19 school year.

The percentage of students achieving proficiency in math is 71%. This statistic is 20 percentage points higher than the Texas state average for math proficiency. The percentage of students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts is 52% which is 5 percentage points higher than the Texas state average. YES Prep is an example of how team teaching can work in a school with factors that have been traditionally considered as barriers to success.

Co-teaching is an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other as well as use, or hone, new instructional practices. In order to do so with student learning outcomes as the goal, both general and special education teachers need to receive adequate training. According to Willard, "co-teaching offers an occasion for colleagues to provide feedback and reflective analysis of teaching practices." This idea bolsters the recommendation of a separate Professional Learning Community for co-teachers where they can practice skills, reflect on existing teaching practices, and develop their craft to meet diverse learning needs. Co-teaching provides an ideal setting for both teachers to reflect on collected student data and draw conclusions based on "student engagement, achievement, and response to instructional practices" (Willard 95).

Methodology

Two surveys were distributed among DCPS co-teachers in middle school ELA and Math classrooms. The first survey asked teachers about how many hours they planned with their co-teacher each week, if they received co-teaching training, their students' present level of comprehension, engagement, and interaction with both teachers. The survey also asked co-teachers to describe their relationships with the

co-teacher, if there was a common planning period, and if the aforementioned planning period was helpful when planning instruction and assessing student needs. Teachers were asked to rank which co-teaching strategies they used in the classroom as well as common barriers to successful co-teaching. The second survey was distributed after one grading period and the opportunity to alter their co-teaching strategy. Teachers completed the anonymous surveys using a Google forms link and were given a specified period of time to respond. The first survey was 26 questions and 11 teachers responded to the survey. 11 teachers were interviewed and the researcher suggested, but did not require, that teachers change to a more involved, active co-teaching strategy. After 8 weeks, the second survey was distributed among 11 teachers via a Google Forms link. Teachers were asked to answer 26 questions and 7 teachers responded to the survey within the specified time frame.

Data Analysis

64% of teachers surveyed were special education and 36% were general education teachers. More than 50% had 10 or more years of experience in the education field as a teacher. Most teachers used one teach, one assist but switched to parallel and station teaching during the subsequent grading period. Teachers noted an increase in student engagement, initiative, responsiveness in small groups, and achievement. 61% of surveyed teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the second, more active, co-teaching model helped them reach instructional goals. 100% of surveyed teachers reported that the second, more active, co-teaching model strengthened the relationship between them and their teaching partner. 100% of surveyed teachers agreed that the second, more active, co-teaching model provided more choice assignments and flexible assessments for students and helped students reach targeted learning objectives. 85.7% of co-teachers reported more engaged students while 57.1% noted an increase in student comprehension. 72% of teachers surveyed admitted that coaching has shown them new ways to build student engagement. 9% were not aware of the co-teaching strategies and 27% did not share a common planning period with their co-teacher. These responses indicate that teachers may not be aware of the resources and best practices before co-teaching in Math and ELA classrooms. Although the numbers show that students favorably responded to a co-teaching environment and co-teachers were overall positive, teachers were relying on their own knowledge and resources to create a successful environment.

Recommendations

Studies show that co-teaching can positively impact student achievement and engagement, specifically in the areas of ELA and Math proficiency. For co-teaching to reach maximum success, several strongly suggested factors need to be present. These factors include administrative support specifically with common planning time and constructive feedback, a professional learning community where co-teachers review ideas and best practices, and constant training to identify and target areas of improvement. Policy recommendations include:

- Administration should provide common planning time for both co-teachers and feedback/support as needed.
- Co-teaching pairs should meet with a separate Professional Learning Community specifically for co-teaching to review ideas for their areas of improvement and share best practices. Training should include explanations of the various co-teaching strategies, common problems, opportunities to practice lessons, and how to structure classes based on student needs.
- Co-teaching seminars should be included in pre-service training and required of all K-12 ELA and Math teachers.

References

Brendle, J., Lock, R., & Piazza, K. (2017). A study of co-teaching identifying effective implementation strategies. *International Journal of Special Education*, 32(3), 538-550.

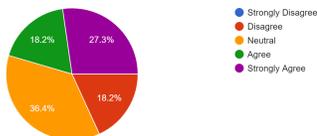
EducationStrategies. (2016, Jan 28). Co-Teaching at Revere High School [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/wb-ax4vyX9U>

Edutopia. (2011, Nov 1). Successful Team Teaching at YES Prep [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/GHIoqDAQ-Fs>

Willard, C. (2019). Four key ideas about co-teaching in high school classrooms. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 15(2), 81-102.

Data

Please rate the following statement: Student comprehension has increased because of my co-teacher and his collaborative teaching style.
11 responses



Coteaching has shown my new ways to build student engagement.
11 responses

