

CO-TEACHING STUDENTS WITH MILD TO MODERATE DISABILITIES USING LITERATURE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

PHILIP SWICEGOOD, MELINDA MILLER

ABSTRACT

Literacy instruction for students with mild to moderate special needs should include authentic literature. Literature-based reading instruction provides time for students to develop new knowledge and strategies in a supportive context. When reading instruction occurs in an inclusion classroom, it also allows time for general education and special education teachers to work together to intensify and individualize instruction for all students within the inclusion classroom. In this article, a systematic process for designing, implementing, and assessing instruction is presented.

Cole, Angela, and Michael (all names are pseudonyms) are fourth grade students with mild to moderate disabilities. They are being served in Mrs. Brown's inclusive language arts classroom, with in-class support from Mrs. Frazier, a special education co-teacher. This classroom uses authentic literature during reading and writing experiences for the class as a whole. These three students need additional support and guidance to be successful, and the co-teachers understand that they face many challenges in assisting them in a literature-based classroom.

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2008), in 2006 more than half of all students served in special education were educated for more than 80% of their school day in the regular classroom. Students with mild to moderate disabilities comprise the majority of the special education population and these students "are the ones that teachers are most likely to serve in inclusive general classrooms" (Leko, Brownell, & Lauterbach, 2010, p. 47).

Inclusion classrooms have become the rule rather than the exception for most students with special needs. However, these students with disabilities need additional support and assistance if they are to be successful. Thus, the co-teaching model with the general education teacher and the special education teacher working together may help these students get the necessary individualized help they need without putting the added burden on the general education teacher. Co-teaching is "an instructional delivery method that has gained favor in recent years and is consistently used to provide educational support to students with disabilities" (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013, p. 89).

The purpose of this article is to describe a set of principles and practices for using high-quality children's literature in an inclusive co-teaching general education classroom for students with mild to moderate special needs. Further, this article identifies professional roles for general and special education co-teachers while highlighting effective instructional practices in language, literacy, and strategy domains.

DESIGNING INSTRUCTION

USING HIGH-QUALITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE. High quality literature enables teachers to provide authentic opportunities for all students to actively participate in the classroom. Using children's literature and literacy activities helps connect learning to daily life (Allington & Cunningham, 2007). This connection is important as "students with mild disabilities are often provided few opportunities to write and read for real audiences and for real purposes" (Mariage & Bouck, 2004, p. 54). Teachers who differentiate instruction in order to provide "for differing abilities and disabilities of students" can use children's literature books and activities (Mandlebaum, Lightbourne & VandenBroek, 1994, p. 134). These instructional arrangements are important through the elementary and secondary years. Therefore, it is important that secondary language arts teachers should "tackle these issues by using literature and literacy teaching" (Walton, 2012, p. 225).

USING CO-TEACHING DURING INSTRUCTION. The co-teaching arrangement revolves around the effective collaboration that is built between the general education and the special education teachers in seeking to serve the educational needs of all students in the inclusion classroom. Factors that are considered in co-teaching include: 1) knowing yourself, 2) knowing your partner, 3) knowing your students, 4) being familiar with the curriculum, 5) being familiar with effective instructional methods and the strategies that go with each for presenting and structuring lessons, 6) co-planning time, and 7) progress monitoring (Gately & Gately, Jr., 2001; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004).

First, knowing yourself and second, knowing your partner are critical factors in co-teaching. "When co-teachers are getting along and working well together, struggling students and students with disabilities are more likely to be successful" (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005, p. 268). When planning instruction, co-teachers need to consider both the students (third item above) and the curriculum (fourth item above) they are teaching in order to use the best instructional methods and strategies (5th item above). Thus, good instructional planning is dependent on knowing students' backgrounds and abilities, as well as knowing the curriculum in order to determine the best teaching strategies to scaffold content learning and identify where learning difficulties will occur (Lenz, Deshler, & Kissam, 2004). Students with mild to moderate disabilities may spend significant amounts of time practicing skills and strategies that have been explicitly taught. These explicit lessons must be followed by sufficient, extended opportunities for applying and using new knowledge, skills, and strategies.

Sixth, for co-teaching to work well, co-planning time is essential. Thus, teachers need to “request common planning time so co-teaching can be planned and purposeful, not just a co-assignment” (Magiera, Smith, Zigmond, & Gebauer, 2005, p. 23). Different co-teaching arrangements might include the general educator delivering instruction while the special educator supports individual students (one teach, one support), the special educator working intensively with a small group while the general educator remains with the larger group (alternative teaching), or each being responsible for designated parts (team teaching) of the whole class lesson (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2007, p. 44; Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013). Murawski (2012) suggests that co-teachers establish a regular planning time, meet in a non-distracting environment, and document their planning for later reference. In order to make sure the lesson and co-teaching are working, progress monitoring is an important component in planning differentiation and scaffolding.

A well-sequenced and carefully designed co-teaching instructional model must include the instructional methods and teaching strategies that fit the content, the learning strategies that students will use to learn content, and the way progress monitoring will occur. Thus, effective instruction rests on three critical features (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2007) described below:

(1) Conspicuous strategies. The co-teachers serve as expert models who demonstrate what good readers and writers do. They are clear and specific about what skills and strategies are being worked on and they ensure that students grasp how the specifics fit into the big ideas of reading for meaning and authorship in writing.

(2) Procedural facilitators. Graphic organizers such as vocabulary charts and history maps are used before, during, and after reading and writing to support the learner's efforts and build expectations of success. Mariage and Bouck (2004, p. 42) suggest introducing students to the use of think sheets for planning and organizing during the writing process.

(3) Mediated scaffolding. A progression from teacher-directed instruction to more student independence takes place within a literature-based reading context.

SELECTING SUPPORT IN SCAFFOLDED INSTRUCTION. Table 1 provides examples of the teachers' decisions about when to take control and when to step back. The shift toward greater student ownership and control is a variable that co-teachers discuss during instructional planning.

SELECTING MANAGEABLE TEXTS. Another important feature of instructional design involves the process of “matching” students with books and texts. Students with mild to moderate special needs will likely require assistance in the process of selecting appropriate books, those which are both interesting and of appropriate difficulty level for individual learners. The readability, vocabulary complexity, interest level, presence of prior knowledge, and the use of text enhancements such as illustrations have to be considered. A number of considerations in this process are summarized in the BOOKMATCH system (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). The acronym for BOOKMATCH can be found in Table 2.

Table 1
Levels of Support in Scaffolded Instruction

Level of Support	Type of Support	Examples
High	Correction, modeling, demonstrations, think-alouds, feedback	Students are supported as the co-teacher leads, explains, and corrects students during oral reading or discussion time; limited participation by students as the teacher(s) encourage effort and understanding
Medium	Guided practice, shared demonstrations, prompts, observations of students' understanding and use of strategies	Students work in small groups while teacher(s) monitors and offers assistance as needed; teacher(s) and peers share and practice together the use of new skills and strategies
Low	Independent practice; students demonstrating mastery, proficiency	Students read "just right" books, self-monitor comprehension, initiate learning, participate appropriately in groups; teacher(s) monitors accuracy and application of new skills and strategies

Table 2
BOOKMATCH and Good Questions

BOOKMATCH Meaning	Asking Good Questions
Book length;	Is this a good length for me?
Ordinary language;	When you read do the sentences sound natural?
Organization;	What do you already know about the subject?
Knowledge prior to book;	Are chapters long or short?"
Manageable text;	Are the words, easy, just right or too hard?
Appeal to genre;	Are you familiar with the format
Topic appropriateness;	Am I ready to read about this topic?
Connection;	Does this book remind me of anything?
High interest.	Am I interested in the book?

Note: More question stems can be found in the article (adapted from Wutz & Wedwick, 2005, p. 17).

BOOKMATCH suggests that a student sample the book for difficulty level and comprehensibility (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005). In the selection of appropriate books, Sanacore (2005) sees support and guidance from a teacher as a means of providing "equity and equality of opportunity" (p. 101) to struggling learners. The special education co-teacher assists students in selecting books that are "just right", such that "the student can confidently read and understand a text he/she finds interesting, with minimal assistance" (Routman, 2003, p. 93). Teachers can engage all students with literature written at wide-ranging levels of readability such that students get used to seeing others in "supported transactions" with different level materials. For instance, teachers provide prompting, guidance, and feedback at different levels of intensity for different students.

IMPLEMENTING CO-TEACHING INSTRUCTION

Instructional objectives for Cole, Angela, and Michael (all names are pseudonyms) are aligned with their educational needs in literacy and the general education curriculum. The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for each student addresses his/her participation in the general education curriculum. Co-teachers work together to implement learning objectives through the use of effective teaching practices while fostering access and active participation in the life of the classroom for the three students.

Curriculum alignment with the state's knowledge and skill standards combines the general education teacher's expertise with the student-centered orientation of the special education professional. Special educators in collaborative roles are becoming proficient in matching students' IEP goals with the general education curriculum, as directed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The general curriculum in language arts emphasizes students' progress in domains including responding to literature, fluency, identifying character traits, using knowledge of word order (syntax) and context to support word identification and confirm word meaning. Table 3 provides examples of the alignment process in the domains of reading, writing and oral language, and process and strategy.

Table 3
Examples of Alignment between Curricular Standards and IEP Objectives

Curricular Domain	Texas 4 th Grade Reading/Language Arts	Sample of Short-term Objectives for a Student's IEP
Reading	Reading Comprehension of Literacy Text, Theme and Genre. Students are expected to: A) summarize and explain and B) compare and contrast	Given a 300-400 word selection at grade 3 readability level, Marvin will read the selection and answer five comprehension questions with 80% accuracy
Writing and Oral Language	Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text. Students are expected to: A) plan a first draft by selecting a genre B) develop drafts	Given a self-selected character from her literature book, Shanna will write a character sketch meeting the following criteria: 200 words minimum; second draft contains reorganization and editing corrections; 90% correct spelling; three-paragraph minimum
Process and Strategies	Research/Research Plan. Students ask open-ended research questions and develop a plan for answering them. Students are expected to: generate research topics from personal interests or by brainstorming with others	Given a literature discussion group, Ted will work with classmates to brainstorm important questions and discuss aspects of the book involving plot, characters, and settings

Note: Curriculum standards have been shortened into essential knowledge and skills.

THE LESSON PLAN. The co-teachers are prepared to put their instructional plans into action. Cole, Angela, and Michael will participate in daily classroom instruction, perhaps literature circles. Accommodations include additional modeling, extended time, and peer assistance.

Creating the instructional plan involves many decisions between the co-teachers, such as determining appropriate objectives, teaching methods, and grouping arrangements in the classroom. As seen below, each of the objectives is matched with evidence-based instruction and appropriate levels of learner support.

A LESSON WITH LITERATURE. The Ransom of Red Chief is a simple, humorous story offering many opportunities for both content and process objectives. The format follows a data-based instructional cycle, matching instructional objectives with teaching strategies and using continuous assessment to evaluate progress.

The three fourth grade students mentioned at the top of the plan are students with mild disabilities who are receiving accommodations and support. The division of instructional responsibilities between the two fictional co-teachers (Mrs. Brown, a general educator, and Mrs. Frazier, a special educator) reflects their goal of providing additional support and assistance to the three students.

The plan illustrates that there are intervals in which these three students are receiving some instruction while integrated with the whole class and that other times they are separated to receive more intensive and individualized instruction and support (see Figure 1). For these periods of separate instruction, the rest of the class stay with the general education teacher and engage in silent reading, author study, sharing writing pieces in small groups, etc.

In the co-taught classroom, teachers try to build a sense of community that leads to peer support and social acceptance for diverse learners. Pressley (1998) discussed studies that show “converging evidence that when classroom life is rich in literature and authentic reading experiences, students are more motivated than when instruction is more consistent with traditional skills and drills” (p. 249). Students can be encouraged to talk about books through a range of teacher scaffolds such as restating what the student said, modeling appropriate questions, and valuing student ideas (McIntyre, 2007). In literature circles, it may be useful to have students initially follow a set of prescribed routines or scripts designed to illustrate the roles of questioner, summarizer, coach, etc. Blum, Lipsett, and Yocum (2002) used literature circles to promote self-determination for middle school students with special needs in an inclusive classroom. Peers do need direct training and practice in effective interactive behavior involving literature-based reading – being able to model effectively, offering meaningful feedback, etc. Again, the support teacher monitors peer assistance and offers guidance as needed.

Lesson Plan: Cole, Angela, Michael General Ed. Teacher: Mrs. Brown Read story <i>"Ransom of Red Chief"</i>		DOMAIN: <u>English-Language Arts -3rd -4th Period</u> Special Ed. Teacher: Mrs. Frazier Week Of: <u>10/8 – 10/12</u>
CONTENT/LITERACY OBJECTIVES— Skills and Knowledge to be Learned	INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES— Methods, Strategies, Supports	ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION— Progress and Skill Attainment
-Reads orally four selected paragraphs with 80% accuracy -Retells story events with 90% accuracy -Fluency: Progress on Correct Words Per Minute	Guided Questioning Model Think Alouds [Brown + Frazier] Assisted Reading [Small Group w/Frazier] Repeated Reading [Every Tuesday w/Frazier]	Observation Reading Checklist Error Monitoring Exam Fluency Check
-Orally explains and defines selected vocabulary words related to story: <i>crisis, ransom, kidnapping</i>	Direct Instruction [Brown] Concept Diagram [Support—Frazier]	Quick Checks for Understanding
Writes two-page composition on topic of <i>Bratty People</i> -Divides into at least five paragraphs -Capitalization, punctuation of 70%. -Spells with 75% accuracy	Review Writing Process Peer Editing/Revision [Brown + Frazier] Pre-Writing Conference [Brown + Frazier] Correction and feedback. [Support - Frazier] Word Study [Frazier]	Conference Notes Progress Chart Writing Rubrics
PROCESS OBJECTIVES - Learning Strategies, Study Skills		
-Makes Predictions during reading -Self-Corrects oral reading errors -Questions and discussions with teachers/peers	Model Think Alouds [Brown + Frazier] Explicit Strategy Instruction [Support - Frazier] Small Group Work [Frazier]	Observing Performance over time - Anecdotal Record

Figure 1. A weekly co-teaching plan using *The Ransom of Red Chief*.

OBJECTIVES IN READING. Support in word recognition and fluency can be part of a guided program of *reading to* and *reading with* students with special needs. The special education co-teacher can look at reading selections and passages ahead of time and compile lists of words or phrases with which students will likely experience difficulty. These can be previewed with students and looked at structurally for spelling patterns or “windowed” in context. Running records of critical vocabulary can track student growth in mastery of new words. Strategies of using context clues and word study methods such as word – making and word sorting (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004) can build students’ skill levels.

Comprehension objectives address literal and inferential content from the selection. These are based on characters, themes, settings and other text structure elements. Students with mild to moderate disabilities are supported in the comprehension process by teachers and peers who provide a range of demonstrations and models when using literature selections. Walker (2005) described the use of self-questioning to model predictions (“How do I begin?”), model sources of

information (“How do I check predictions?”), and model monitoring of comprehension (“Does my prediction make sense?”).

Some comprehension objectives, taken from well-regarded literature selections, might include:

Charlotte’s Web by E. B. White describes the friendship between Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider:

- (a) Identify Fern’s special talent.
- (b) Describe Charlotte’s plan to save Wilbur, stating three specific aspects of the plan.

Ender’s Game by Orson Scott Card tells of a future inter-planetary war.

- (a) Why did Dink Meeker not want to become a commander?
- (b) In the war games, what was the name of Ender’s army?
- (c) Explain the quote dealing with the war against the “buggers”: “Murder’s no big deal to them. Only queen-killing, really, is murder because only queen-killing closes off a genetic path.”

OBJECTIVES IN WRITING AND ORAL LANGUAGE. Beyond reading, lessons using authentic literature can be expanded to include instruction in oral expression, language comprehension, and written communication. In the co-teaching classroom, a special education teacher provides small group instruction for struggling writers when needed. Instructional goals for writing and receptive/expressive language can include specific criteria for writing samples and verbal presentations, as shown in the following objectives.

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett is about two children tending a special garden in post-war England. Write a five-to-seven sentence paragraph explaining why Mary has asked Mr. Craven for a “bit of earth.”

Criteria:

- Complete sentences,
- Sentences correctly sequenced,
- All sentences relate to topic,
- % correct spelling

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L’Engle is a time-travel fantasy novel. Early on Mrs. Who tells Meg “If you want to help your father, then you must learn patience.” Write a one-two page essay on why patience is importance and give an example of a situation in which patience is important.

OBJECTIVES IN PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES. Allington (2002) described “exemplary” teachers as those who modeled “useful strategies – decoding strategies, composing strategies, self-regulating strategies – as separate lessons to the whole class, to targeted small groups, and to individual

students in side-by-side instruction” (p. 774). Students with mild to moderate special needs require assistance and practice in the metacognitive domain such as using strategies and self-monitoring.

An example of a popular comprehension strategy, POSSE, was described by Englert and Mariage (1991) and later endorsed by Mariage and Bouck (2004). This reading comprehension strategy includes pre-reading, during reading, and after reading engagement through the steps of Predict, Organize, Search, Summarize, Evaluate.

In a co-teaching classroom, a support teacher might bring a small group of students aside to explain, discuss, identify relevance, and model the POSSE strategy steps. Conderman and Hedin (2013) suggested that the special education co-teacher assume the role of “strategy leader,” entailing researching applicable strategies, sharing these with the general educator, and working to connect the strategies with the curriculum. The following are sample objectives related to processes and strategies.

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH by Robert C. O’Brien tells the story of a growing relationship between a mouse family and a group of rats. Teachers might:

- (a) *ask questions* about plot and characters,
- (b) *point out vocabulary words* that they would like to learn to read, write, or define,
- (c) *construct a story map* with major ideas, events, character sketches.

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson tells of two friends and their special meeting place. Teachers might:

- (a) *engage in peer and teacher conferences* about content and mechanics of writing,
- (b) *predict* upcoming events during a story.

EVALUATION, ASSESSMENT, AND PROGRESS MONITORING

Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Frazier see their instruction for Cole, Angela, and Michael as being guided and informed by continuous assessment. They collect informal assessment data on the students’ progress and meet frequently to make decisions about adjusting instruction, providing additional support, grouping arrangements, etc.

The co-taught classroom contains a range of informal assessments for monitoring progress and adjusting instruction (as shown in Figure 1). Observations, curriculum-based assessments, and anecdotal notes of how a student reads across a range of texts and print mediums can be used to build a profile of learner strengths and needs. Periodic oral reading assessments lead to an analysis of students’ strategies for attacking unknown words, including using letter sounds, syntactic correctness (Does it sound like language?), and preservation of meaning (Does it make sense?).

Literacy conferences between co-teachers and students can be brief and focused. The support teacher, typically the special educator, can conduct these at the students' desks, moving about the room during independent reading and writing time. The emphasis in such conferences should generally be on the quality of content – the message, the ideas, the meaning – that the reader constructs and the writer seeks to communicate. Literacy conferencing with a student allows both teachers to gain insight into the strategies, beliefs, and anchoring knowledge that the student possesses. Brief exchanges with students should yield information about the student's understanding of the selection or strategies they use, as exemplified in these questions:

Let's read this passage together. Why do you think Jake is angry?

What were the sisters looking for in the kitchen?

So at this point, Crusoe is shipwrecked on an island. What do you think will happen next?

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Another advantage of using high-quality literature is to promote increased awareness and understanding of disabilities while fostering reflection and self-determination for students. Students are able to identify with characters, encounter different ways to handle complex social situations, and gain insight into experiences. Mandlebaum, Lightbourne, and VandenBroek (1994) provide numerous examples of instructional objectives from literature, including “disposition objectives” dealing with emotions, values, and attitudes. Self-determination components such as goal-setting and self-advocacy can also be “embedded” into literature-based reading activities through judicious selection of books that “feature characters with disabilities” (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 65).

Ultimately, the cooperation and shared commitment of two teachers is crucial to this focus on student needs in literacy. The use of literature-based reading brings educators to a collaborative stance requiring planning and implementation of new, supportive classroom schemes and directions. Wide reading of self-selected books allows students with mild to moderate disabilities to put their repertoire of reading skills and strategies to habitual use and is a must if long term retention, maintenance, and generalization are to occur. In essence, these students will become better readers and writers when they confidently read and write daily. The co-teachers act as agents to accomplish these goals.

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AUTHORS

Philip Swicegood, Sam Houston State University, edu_prs@shsu.edu

Melinda Miller, Sam Houston State University