

# The Role of Co-Teaching in Enhancing Instructional Strategies in Inclusive Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

Co-teaching is an essential collaborative instructional strategy that addresses diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms. This paper explores how co-teaching enhances instructional strategies through the integration of differentiated instruction (DI), adaptive learning, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Drawing from Sharma's (2024a, 2024b, 2024c) research, the paper highlights evidence-based practices and their impact on student achievement, engagement, and equity. Co-teaching models like Station Teaching, Parallel Teaching, and Alternative Teaching are examined for their alignment with inclusive frameworks. Differentiated instruction is emphasized as a strategy that caters to varied student readiness, interests, and learning profiles, while UDL principles provide a proactive framework for removing learning barriers. Adaptive learning technologies are discussed for their role in personalization and accessibility for students with special needs. The discussion also considers the role of administrative support, collaborative planning, and teacher training. This synthesis aims to inform educators, policymakers, and school leaders on implementing effective co-teaching practices to support inclusive education.

**Keywords:** co-teaching, inclusive classrooms, instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all students, regardless of their learning abilities, disabilities, backgrounds, or needs, should be educated together in the same classrooms with appropriate support. This approach presents educators with the responsibility to design instructional practices that accommodate a wide range of learners. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, traditional one-teacher models often fall short in addressing individual learning differences. In response, co-teaching has emerged as an innovative instructional strategy that promotes collaborative teaching practices in inclusive settings (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2019).

Co-teaching is a model where two or more educators share instructional responsibilities for a diverse group of students in the same physical space. Typically involving a general education teacher and a special education teacher, this model facilitates individualized instruction, scaffolding, and targeted interventions. Co-teaching supports differentiated instruction by enabling teachers to adapt content, processes, and assessments to meet students' varied needs (McLeskey, Billingsley, & Peters, 2021). It also aligns closely with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for flexible and inclusive teaching methods (Rose & Meyer, 2017).

This paper explores the role of co-teaching in enhancing instructional strategies within inclusive classrooms. It reviews key co-teaching models, their application in differentiated instruction and UDL, and their impact on student outcomes. The paper also analyzes the critical factors for successful implementation and presents research-based evidence on effective practices. The aim is to provide actionable insights for teachers and school leaders seeking to promote inclusive learning environments through co-teaching.

## Co-Teaching

Co-teaching refers to a collaborative instructional arrangement in which two teachers jointly plan, deliver, and assess instruction for a group of students within the same classroom. This partnership often involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to support all learners, including those with disabilities (Friend & Shaffalo, 2012). The essence of co-teaching lies in shared responsibility, mutual respect, and synchronized efforts to achieve common educational goals.

The primary benefit of co-teaching is its ability to enhance instructional flexibility and responsiveness. By bringing together professionals with different areas of expertise, co-teaching allows for real-time differentiation, personalized support, and diverse instructional strategies. Co-teachers can divide tasks, observe students more closely, and respond promptly to learning needs (Giangreco, Sasso, & Brophy, 2021). It also facilitates formative assessment and individualized interventions within the general education setting.

Furthermore, co-teaching promotes professional collaboration and continuous learning among teachers. It encourages reflective practice, shared decision-making, and joint problem-solving. This dynamic not only improves instructional quality but also promotes a more inclusive and supportive classroom culture. As inclusive education becomes more prevalent, co-teaching offers a viable model for meeting the complex demands of diverse learners.

## Models of Co-Teaching

Co-teaching encompasses a variety of instructional models that differ in structure, purpose, and application. Each model is designed to optimize instructional delivery and accommodate diverse learning needs. The five primary models of co-teaching are One Teach, One Assist; Station Teaching; Parallel Teaching; Alternative Teaching; and Team Teaching.

**1) One Teach, One Assist:** In this model, one teacher leads instruction while the other provides individualized support to students. The assisting teacher roams around the classroom, offering clarification, prompting, or assistance to students needing additional help. This model is particularly effective for supporting struggling learners without interrupting the flow of instruction in the classroom (Sapon-Shevin, McGill, & Chandler-Olcott, 2020).

**2) Station Teaching:** Station Teaching divides the class into smaller groups that rotate among different instructional stations. Each teacher is responsible for specific stations, while others may involve independent work. This model allows for targeted instruction, increased student engagement, and the opportunity to address varied learning styles (Friend & Shaffalo, 2012).

**3) Parallel Teaching:** Parallel Teaching involves both teachers instructing separate groups of students simultaneously. Each group receives the same content, but delivery can be adjusted to accommodate different learning paces or styles. This model reduces student-teacher ratios and promotes active participation (Villa et al., 2019).

**4) Alternative Teaching:** One teacher works with a small group of students for enrichment or remediation, while the other teaches the majority of the class. Alternative Teaching is beneficial for providing intensive support to students with specific learning needs or extending learning for advanced students (Masterson, Harrison, & McDougall, 2023).

**5) Team Teaching:** In Team Teaching, both teachers share equal responsibility for delivering instruction. They co-present lessons, facilitate discussions, and guide learning activities together. This model demonstrates strong collaboration and is effective when both teachers are equally familiar with the content and pedagogy (Villa et al., 2019).

Each model has distinct advantages and is best selected based on instructional objectives, student needs, and teacher expertise. Often, effective co-teachers combine multiple models within a single lesson to optimize learning outcomes.

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## Co-Teaching Models and Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction (DI) is a pedagogical approach that adapts teaching methods, content, and assessments to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Sharma (2024a) emphasizes that DI supports inclusive education by promoting equity and engagement through tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and personalized content delivery. Co-teaching facilitates differentiated instruction by allowing teachers to implement varied strategies simultaneously. Through collaborative planning and shared execution, teachers can modify instruction to suit different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (McLeskey et al., 2021).

For example, in Station Teaching, teachers can design stations based on skill levels, enabling students to engage with materials that match their individual needs. In the One Teach, One Assist model, the assisting teacher can offer additional scaffolding, rephrased explanations, or alternate resources. Parallel and Alternative Teaching models allow for grouping students based on learning styles or progress, ensuring targeted instruction. Co-teaching thus enhances the reach and effectiveness of differentiated instruction in inclusive settings.

## Co-Teaching Models and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes accessibility by offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Sharma (2024c) outlines how co-teachers effectively implement UDL strategies by providing flexible assessments, visual and auditory aids, and collaborative activities. The Station and Team Teaching models enable integration of UDL principles in co-taught classrooms. By diversifying instructional methods, co-teaching enhances motivation, participation, and academic success for all students, particularly those with disabilities (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2017; Sharma, 2024c).

Research indicates that co-teachers are more likely to implement UDL strategies than solo educators. For instance, Hitchcock, Hughes, and Masterson (2020) found that co-taught classrooms demonstrated greater flexibility in lesson delivery and assessment. Co-teaching supports the UDL framework by providing students with multiple access points to the curriculum and ensuring equitable participation. As such, it is a key strategy for promoting inclusive learning environments.

## Impact on Student Outcomes

Co-teaching has a measurable impact on student outcomes in inclusive classrooms. Academically, co-teaching improves access to curriculum, increases instructional time, and enables differentiated support. Giangreco et al. (2021) found that students with learning disabilities performed better in co-taught settings due to increased individual attention and scaffolding. Wang, Lv, and Han (2023) reported significant gains in mathematics achievement among students with disabilities in co-teaching classrooms.

Socially and emotionally, co-teaching promotes a positive classroom climate. Students benefit from observing collaborative adult relationships and feel more supported in seeking help (Masterson et al., 2023). The presence of two teachers creates a sense of safety and community, enhancing student confidence and participation. Additionally, co-teaching promotes peer interaction, cooperation, and respect for diversity.

Student engagement also improves, as co-teaching allows for varied instructional formats, interactive activities, and ongoing feedback. Appleton, Flood, and Breuer (2022) emphasized that co-teaching contributes to sustained attention, motivation, and involvement in learning. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate the holistic benefits of co-teaching in inclusive education.

## Factors Influencing Successful Co-Teaching

Co-teaching success depends on several interrelated factors, including collaboration, communication, professional development, and administrative support.

**1) Collaborative Planning and Shared Vision:** Effective co-teaching begins with a shared understanding of instructional goals and mutual commitment to student success. Co-teachers must engage in regular collaborative planning to align on lesson objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment methods (Friend & Shaffalo, 2012). Recognizing each teacher's strengths and responsibilities promotes equity in the partnership and maximizes instructional impact.

**2) Communication and Conflict Resolution:** Open and honest communication is vital for a productive co-teaching relationship. Teachers must discuss expectations, provide feedback, and resolve conflicts constructively. Regular check-ins and planning meetings help address emerging challenges and maintain a cohesive instructional approach (Villa et al., 2019).

**3) Professional Development:** Ongoing training is essential for building co-teaching competencies. Teachers need support in collaborative teaching strategies, inclusive practices, and differentiation techniques. Workshops, peer coaching, and mentoring can enhance teachers' skills and confidence in co-teaching (Masterson et al., 2023).

**4) Administrative Support and Resources:** School leaders play a critical role in facilitating successful co-teaching. They must provide dedicated planning time, allocate appropriate resources, and recognize the contributions of co-teaching teams. A supportive school culture encourages risk-taking, innovation, and continuous improvement (McLeskey et al., 2021).

**5) Relationship and Trust Building** Co-teaching thrives on trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Building a strong interpersonal relationship enables co-teachers to collaborate effectively, adapt to challenges, and model positive social behaviors for students. Trust supports an inclusive and productive learning environment for all stakeholders.

In addition to professional collaboration and administrative support, Sharma (2024a) identifies critical factors that support differentiated instruction and co-teaching in inclusive settings. Time constraints and student resistance can hinder effective implementation. However, structured professional development, shared responsibilities, and adaptive technologies can ease these challenges. Sharma (2024b) highlights how adaptive learning systems provide real-time support for students with ADHD or dyslexia, and how collaborative lesson planning enhances engagement. Building trust among co-teachers and involving learners in the instructional design process further contribute to success.

### Effective Co-Teaching Models in Practice

Empirical research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of co-teaching in enhancing instructional strategies. Different models have demonstrated success across academic disciplines and student populations.

Appleton et al. (2022) studied co-teaching in secondary science classrooms and found that the Station Teaching model increased differentiated assessment opportunities and student engagement. Teachers were able to provide varied learning experiences adapted to individual needs, resulting in higher student motivation and performance.

Giangreco et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of co-teaching for students with learning disabilities. Their findings highlighted that the One Teach, One Assist model effectively supported students by offering real-time scaffolding and supporting classroom inclusion. Students exhibited improved academic outcomes and greater classroom participation.

Wang et al. (2023) examined co-teaching in inclusive mathematics classrooms. They found that Parallel Teaching enhanced content mastery by allowing smaller group instruction and targeted feedback. Students reported increased confidence and understanding, particularly in complex problem-solving tasks.

Masterson et al. (2023) explored co-teaching partnerships in inclusive classrooms. They emphasized that Team Teaching led to a more cohesive and engaging learning environment. Co-teachers in their study shared

responsibilities equally and demonstrated mutual respect, which positively influenced student attitudes and learning behaviors.

Hitchcock et al. (2020) investigated the implementation of UDL principles in co-taught classrooms. Their research revealed that co-teachers were more likely to use multimodal instruction, alternative assessments, and technology to support diverse learners. The integration of UDL resulted in greater student access to curriculum and increased engagement.

Friend and Shaffalo (2012) outlined practical strategies for effective co-teaching, including clear role definition, shared planning time, and ongoing reflection. Their guidance has been widely adopted in professional development programs and school improvement initiatives.

Sharma (2024a, 2024b, 2024c) presents practical evidence of how differentiated instruction, adaptive learning technologies, and UDL impact inclusive education. For example, adaptive learning tools offer real-time feedback and personalized learning paths that support students with autism or learning disabilities (Sharma, 2024b). In Sharma's (2024a) analysis of DI, strategies like content-tiering and multimodal representation demonstrated improved achievement and motivation. Similarly, Sharma (2024c) found that UDL-based instruction led to higher engagement and academic performance, especially when implemented in co-taught classrooms. These findings align with broader research on inclusive education and support the integration of co-teaching with evidence-based frameworks.

Collectively, these studies confirm that co-teaching, when implemented effectively, improves instructional quality, supports diverse learners, and promote inclusive educational practices.

## DISCUSSION

The review of literature and research findings highlights the transformative potential of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. By leveraging the complementary skills of teachers, co-teaching creates a dynamic instructional environment that accommodates diverse learners. The ability to differentiate instruction, apply UDL principles, and provide individualized support makes co-teaching a cornerstone of inclusive education.

However, successful implementation requires deliberate planning, sustained collaboration, and institutional support. Challenges such as scheduling conflicts, unclear roles, and lack of professional training can undermine the effectiveness of co-teaching. Addressing these barriers through structured professional development and strong administrative backing is essential.

Teachers must also remain flexible, reflective, and committed to continuous improvement. Co-teaching is not a one-size-fits-all solution; it requires adaptation to specific contexts, student needs, and teaching styles. With the right conditions, co-teaching can significantly enhance instructional practices and student outcomes.

## Implications

The implications of this review are far-reaching for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. Teachers should adopt co-teaching as a strategy for meeting the demands of inclusive education, ensuring equity and access for all students. Schools must invest in professional development and provide structural support for co-teaching teams.

Administrators play a crucial role in facilitating co-teaching by allocating time, resources, and recognition. Collaborative teaching should be included in school culture as a norm rather than an exception. Policymakers should consider co-teaching in frameworks for inclusive education, funding, and teacher training programs.

## CONCLUSION

Co-teaching is a powerful instructional approach that enhances teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. Through collaborative planning, differentiated instruction, and UDL integration, co-teaching addresses the



varied needs of students. When supported by professional development and leadership, co-teaching can transform classrooms into inclusive, engaging, and equitable learning environments.

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