

Spring 5-2017

# Perceptions of Secondary Teachers on the Co-Teaching Model: An Examination of the Instructional Practices in Co-Teaching Classrooms in Western Pennsylvania

Phillip K. Woods

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PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY TEACHERS ON THE CO-TEACHING MODEL: AN  
EXAMINATION OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN CO-TEACHING  
CLASSROOMS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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May 2017

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Title: Perceptions of Secondary Teachers on the Co-Teaching Model: An Examination of the Instructional Practices in Co-Teaching Classrooms in Western Pennsylvania

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The purpose of this study is to interview high school teachers of English Language Arts and special educators who are partners in a co-teaching model. It is important to understand the perceptions of teachers using co-teaching models to learn about the strengths of the program, as well as areas for improvement.

In 1975, public education changed with the passing of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act triggering the development of inclusive practices to educate students with special needs. The act includes addressing the special needs of students which may include cognitive, processing, or sensory needs, as well as those children with physical disabilities (Graziano & Navarette, 2012). This critical legislation meant that all student regardless of their ability or disability were entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) as reflected in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Students would no longer receive instruction in a separate school, in a separate wing of the building or in a separate classroom (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). In response, school districts changed practices and procedures to provide appropriate instruction to all students, including those with disabilities.

As districts continue to meet the highly qualified mandates, many schools shifted to co-teaching models and increased the inclusion of students with special needs within the regular education classroom. Co-teaching is one strategy to ensure that special education students have

access to the curriculum and instruction and become viable participants in the classroom (Brinkman & Twiford, 2012) by having a certified special education teacher and a general education content teacher providing instruction to students within the same classroom. While some evidence exists regarding best practices, more information is needed to determine what works and what needs to be improved (Friend & Cook, 2010; Gately & Gately, 2001; Graetz, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2005; Sileo & van Garderen, 2010) less is known about the perspectives of those implementing a co-teaching approach on a daily basis.

This study seeks to investigate co-teaching models and collaborative best practices by exploring the perceptions of teachers implementing co-teaching models in secondary schools in Western Pennsylvania. In addition, by analyzing this topic through the lens of the Cooperative Learning Theory (2009) and Gately and Gately's (2001) effective components of co-teaching, this study will address a current gap in the literature.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my late Uncle Robin Rodrick “Robin” Woods, an Iraq War Veteran who lost his battle to cancer in January 2011. Thank you for encouraging me to always strive for excellence and never accept mediocrity in any aspect of life. You are truly missed and I will always love you.

To my Mother Jolorraine Woods, who as a single parent worked multiple jobs to help provide a loving caring home. My mother always stressed the importance of getting a quality education and respecting all individuals despite their race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or their mental disposition. Thank you for your continuous encouragement and unwavering support throughout this process. I love you Mother, thank you for giving Nicole, Timothy and I your all every day.

To my Grandfather, Wayne O. Woods, who nicknamed me “Bad News” at an early age because of my energetic, inquisitive, and impulsive personality. From childhood to adulthood, you raised me to believe that I could do absolutely anything I put my mind to. Thank you for supporting me and financing all my athletic and academic endeavors to help keep me focused and off of the streets of Aliquippa.

To my children Dmitri, Makyah, Malina, and Raeanna, you all gave me the willpower and encouragement to finish this dissertation. Thank you for being patient and understanding as my studies often times took me away from your activities and events. I appreciate your understanding, love, and support throughout my doctoral journey.

To my older brothers Eric Carlisle and Timothy K. Woods: Thank you for being my personal cheer squad and encouraging me to set high standards in all of my endeavors. Thank you for your never ending support throughout my life.

To my life long mentors, David Gist, Leota Geer, Coach Daniel Short, Coach Frank Morocco, Teacher Robert Castagna, Mentor Mrs. Arnita Stagger, Mr. Daniel Garafalo, Uncle Claude Gilliam, Mrs Catherine Guzzo, Aunt Harriet McKenzie, Uncle Donald McKenzie, Aunt Mattie Lee Woods, Alphonso Crumb, Julian Holland, Jacques L. Moye, Dr. Daniel R. Castagna, and Grandmother Geraldine Morris, thank you for helping me develop a strong sense of character, faith, morals, leadership traits, citizenship, and self-respect. Your love, care, and tutelage over the years has been vital components of my personal, social and professional advances.

To my Fiancé Laura Petcovic and her parents Mary and Raymond Petcovic: Thank you for being my guiding stars on this journey. Thank you so much for supporting me through the doctoral process; you will never know how much I appreciated your understanding, love, and support throughout my doctoral journey. I love you with all my heart and soul. You are true blessings from God above.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I acknowledge God, as the head of my life, thank you for giving me the strength to endure, the courage to stand, and the faith to continue on. I give you all the honor and praise because it is through faith and the love of Christ that all things are possible!

To my committee: Dr. Robert Millward, Dr. Briscoe, and Dr. Marcoline, thank you for your constant encouragement and guidance. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Millward, thank you for giving me the much-needed advice on improving my project by narrowing the focus of my study. Your encouragement, guidance and support provided the inspiration I needed when life's challenges drained me emotionally and threatened my self-motivation. Dr. Briscoe and Dr. Marcoline thank you for all of your encouragement, I say thank you for the time and effort you have invested in guiding and supporting me through the doctoral process.

To Dr. Amy Burch with whom I became acquainted during our doctoral course work. Thank you for encouraging me to continue with my research when life's obstacles challenged my will. Thank you for believing in me during those weak moments, believing in me more than I believed in myself.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

In 1975, public education changed with the passing of P.L. 94-142, the *Education for All Handicapped Children's Act* triggering the development of inclusive practices to educate students with special needs. The act includes addressing the special needs of students which may include cognitive, processing, or sensory needs, as well as those children with physical disabilities (Graziano & Navarette, 2012). This critical legislation meant that all student regardless of their ability or disability were entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) as reflected in Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. Students would no longer receive instruction in a separate school, in a separate wing of the building or in a separate classroom (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). In response, school districts changed practices and procedures to provide appropriate instruction to all students, including those with disabilities.

As districts continue to meet the highly qualified mandates, many schools shifted to co-teaching models and increased the inclusion of students with special needs within the regular education classroom. Co-teaching is one strategy to ensure that special education students have access to the curriculum and instruction and become viable participants in the classroom (Brinkman & Twiford, 2012) by having a certified special education teacher and a general education content teacher providing instruction to students within the same classroom. Cook and Friend (1995) defined co-teaching as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single space” (p. 109). The co-teaching model is often used when a general education teacher and special education teacher work within a classroom to provide instruction for both regular education students and students with special

needs. The combined efforts of both teachers provide additional supports to students needing special attention. Since special education teachers are trained to provide assessment accommodations and effective instructional strategies, the co-teaching model can complement the content knowledge of regular education teachers (Cleaveland, 2015).

Co-teaching can be implemented in a number of ways and is a model that ensures that students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) receive the necessary supports to meet their learning goals. IEPs include the annual goals and objectives for students with disabilities as well as their educational placement (Conderman, 2011). In response to legislation, many IEPs have been developed for students to include some aspect of co-teaching so that students can participate in the regular education setting. Individual student plans may include co-taught classes for one or more subjects throughout the day, depending on the specifications outlined by the IEP team.

There are various co-teaching models that can be implemented within the classroom. Researchers suggest that there are a variety of potential models to consider when implementing a co-teaching classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker, 2001). Sileo & van Garderen (2010) summarized the six commonly agreed upon models: one teach/one drift (sometimes referred to as one teach/one observe), station teaching, alternative teaching, parallel teaching, team teaching, and one teach/one assist. Each of these models will be described in greater detail in chapter two of this study.

Within the last 15 years, additional legislation ensured inclusionary practices within regular education classrooms. The combination of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 and the Re-Authorization of IDEIA of 2004 resulted in continued pressure on teachers to meet the individual needs of students (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005). Legislation through the



Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 reemphasizes the importance of academic achievement for all students. In turn, school districts across the United States have implemented various teaching models in an attempt to meet the needs of all learners.

The restructuring of service delivery models has occurred as a means to increase opportunities for students with special needs to be included with their non-disabled peers (Thousand & Villa, 1989). While full inclusion of students with special needs in the regular education classroom may be a goal, it is one that comes with many challenges (Nickelson, 2010). Co-teaching is one model that meets the requirements set forth by legislative mandates (Friend and Cook, 2010) and is being used in public school districts across the country to support students with special needs. Actions through NCLB and IDEA created more accountability requiring schools to be flexible in the way that they serve students in special education programs. In addition, the expectation was established that students with disabilities would still meet high standards through instructional programs designed to meet special needs via research-based materials and practices (Damore & Murray, 2009).

The NCLB Act of 2002 also required changes to educational assessments, as well as teacher qualifications (Cleaveland, 2015). Districts must ensure that all public school teachers, including special education, bilingual education, and alternative education teachers meet ‘highly qualified’ requirements. The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) also addressed qualifications for special education teachers. In addition to holding a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution, teachers must also obtain certification in a core academic subject area. In Pennsylvania, highly qualified teachers must hold a bachelor’s degree, a valid Pennsylvania teaching certificate, and demonstrate subject matter competency for the core content area in which they teach as measured by Praxis Series Tests. Teachers must meet the

requirements of these tests in order to receive licensure or certification. For special education teachers, this means they must be certified in special education, as well as the content area in which they are teaching or co-teaching.

In order to understand the roles and relationships of co-teaching in the classrooms, more research needs to be conducted (Carson, 2011). This study will take a qualitative approach, investigating the perceptions of teachers who are actively teaching in co-taught classrooms through interviewing. Results from this study will provide teachers, both pre-service and in-service, and principals with information regarding effective practices for co-teaching. This data can also inform superintendents and special education directors as they monitor system effectiveness. This research can also be used to identify instructional practices that may impact academic growth and achievement for students with disabilities.

The relationships between general education and special education teachers are the crux of the co-teaching model (Carson, 2011). Teacher perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs are critical to the co-teaching model as the overall effectiveness can be directly impacted by the teachers involved, which is why a qualitative method was selected to explore this topic. If school leaders want to create models for co-teaching that meet the needs of students, they must ensure that both regular education and special education teachers are willing to collaborate, communicate, and are prepared to enter into this setting. By examining the co-teaching models, classroom practices, and people who implement co-teaching, this study adds to the current research on co-teaching effectiveness, emphasizing its impact through cooperative learning theory and practices that improve co-teaching interactions.

## **Statement of the Problem**

School districts are under immense pressure to meet state and federal mandates while providing a comprehensive educational program to all students. The number of students with disabilities in public schools is increasing each year (Carson, 2011) and it is important to learn what works and what needs to be improved regarding co-teaching. Programs for special education students must consider LRE within a plan for instruction with increasing numbers of students with disabilities being served in general education classrooms (Cleaveland, 2015). As school leaders and teachers explore viable options for educational programming, co-teaching is one model that tries to meet the needs of the students.

Successful co-teaching depends on the success of the co-teaching relationship (Cleaveland, 2015) and the shared responsibilities and agreed upon goals of the teachers involved (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2009). As effective co-teaching strategies are identified, college and university teacher education programs, general and special educators, and school leaders will be able to focus their attention on the most successful practices. While some evidence exists regarding best practices, more information is needed to determine what works and what needs to be improved (Friend & Cook, 2010; Gately & Gately, 2001; Graetz, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2005; Sileo & van Garderen, 2010) less is known about the perspectives of those implementing a co-teaching approach on a daily basis. The vast majority of research on co-teaching focuses on the logistics (Kloo & Zigmund, 2008) rather than on the perspectives of teachers. Cronis and Ellis (2000) explain that “research has not been practitioner oriented” (p. 642). This study seeks to investigate co-teaching models and collaborative best practices by exploring the perceptions of teachers implementing co-teaching models in secondary schools in western Pennsylvania.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to interview high school teachers and special educators who are partners in a co-teaching model. It is important to understand the perceptions of teachers using co-teaching models to learn about the strengths of the program, as well as areas for improvement.

## **Questions to be Researched**

The questions that this study will focus on are:

- (1) What are the perceptions of regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts regarding the implementation of co-teaching models within secondary schools?
- (2) What teaching strategies work best in a co-teaching environment?
- (3) How could co-teaching be improved as perceived by English Language Arts co-teachers?

## **Definition of Terms**

Co-teaching- “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single space.” (Friend & Cook, 2010, p. 109)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)- Public Law 94-142 established that all school age children with disabilities were entitle to a free and appropriate public education under the law. Furthermore, that no individual could be discriminated against, denied the services of any federally funded program due to his or her disability. (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. 794)

Gaskins v. Pennsylvania Department of Education (2005)- a class action lawsuit brought on behalf of Pennsylvania public school students with physical, behavioral and developmental disabilities, which resulted in the requirement that students should be educated in the least restrictive environment possible.

High School- In this study a high school will be defined as a secondary school building serving students in grades 9-12.

Inclusion- Educating students with disabilities in the class the students would generally attend if he or she did not have a disability (Cleaveland, 2015).

Individual Education Plan (IEP)- The legal educational document that describes the services, accommodations, and modifications needed for a student with exceptional learning needs (Petrick, 2015).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)- Students with special needs should be educated to the maximum extent possible with their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)- the 2001 revision to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that required significant changes in the way schools educate and assess children (No Child Left Behind: Resources, 2007).

Regular Education Teacher- Also known as general education teachers, these educators are responsible for providing content area instruction in the general education program and are certified in a core academic subject.

Service Delivery Models- In special education, service delivery models includes the continuum of services available to meet the needs of the student.

Special Education Teacher- Special education teachers are responsible providing specially designed instruction to students who have Individualized Education Plans. These educators are certified to provide special education instruction to students with disabilities.

Students with Disabilities- Under IDEA a student with disabilities is determined to fall within one of the following categories (intellectual disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment, speech or language impairments, serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, deaf-

blindness, traumatic brain injury, specific learning disabilities, multiple-disabilities, or other health impairments) and who requires specially designed instruction and /or related services as a result of those impairments (IDEA,1997).

### **Significance of the Study**

Research on co-teaching is relatively new as the practice has only been implemented over the last twenty years. Research focusing on effective co-teaching has particularly increased over the last 10 years as educators attempt to implement models of instruction to meet the needs of students in special education programs. Studies have revealed that the co-teaching relationship is critical (Blank, 2013, Cleaveland, 2013, Petrick, 2015). While many researchers have attempted to identify best practices in co-teaching, co-teaching at the elementary level is more common than high schools (Morocco & Aguilar, 2002; Rice, Drame, Owen, & Frattura, 2007) which is why more research is needed at the secondary level. This study was designed to add to the research regarding co-teaching practices from the perspective of secondary level regular and special education teachers.

Current mandates exist that are beyond the control of school leaders but with knowledge about teacher perceptions, leaders can put structures and procedures into place to support the teachers and the co-teaching model. In addition, by analyzing this topic through the lens of Johnson and Johnson's (2009) cooperative learning theory and Gately and Gately's (2001) eight components of effective co-teaching, this study addresses a current gap in the literature.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations should be considered with regards to this study. By focusing only on secondary level teachers implementing a co-teaching model, the initial pool was limited to high schools. Weiss and Lloyd (2002) called attention to limitations regarding the study of secondary

schools including scheduling, differences in content knowledge of the teachers, and existing forms of educational tracks which are outside the control of the researcher. This study was further limited to secondary schools in western Pennsylvania whose schools have been implementing a co-teaching model for at least three years. Since co-teaching is not a widespread practice (Nickelson, 2010), a lack of implementation on the part of school districts might also be a potential limitation. Although every attempt will be made to sample a diverse population, it may be difficult to find a balance of gender, race, and culture within the existing pool of teachers currently implementing a co-teaching model.

### **Summary**

All students, including those with disabilities require effective instruction from highly-qualified teachers. Federal mandates have caused school districts to rethink the way students are being instructed. Co-teaching is one way to meet the demands of legislative mandates while also meeting the educational needs of the students (Dieker, 2001; Friend & Cook, 2001). In order for teachers to engage successfully in co-teaching models, it is important for educational research to further explore the effective practices that contribute to positive co-teaching relationships and effective co-teaching environments. By distinguishing the practices that contribute to successful co-teaching, schools, districts, and institutions of higher education can focus their attention on effective practices in all classrooms.

This chapter has provided background on the legislative mandates surrounding the educational of students receiving special education services. Chapter two will provide a review of the literature beginning with the history of special education and including students with disabilities into the general education classroom. The chapter will also present research on existing co-teaching models and essential factors contributing to the effectiveness of the models.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recent research established co-teaching as a critical component to improving teaching and learning for students with disabilities (Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, & Erickson, 2013; Keeley, 2015; Petrick, 2015). Studies highlighted the benefits of co-teaching (Cleaveland, 2015; Johnson, 2012; Feustel, 2015) as well as the various models that are being implemented in schools across the country (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012; Nickelson, 2010). With ongoing legislation adding to the regulations surrounding special education, it is relevant for school districts and educational leaders to understand co-teaching and consider the ways that it may impact schools, teachers, and students.

This study explores the impact of co-teaching implementation in several high school reading classes in western Pennsylvania through the perceptions of the regular education and special education teachers who are carrying out the model in their secondary classrooms. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of co-teaching, it is important to have a background in special education and specifically, the co-teaching model. It is also relevant to consider major legislative changes and historical shifts that have altered the course of special education in public schools.

Within this review of literature, co-teaching research will be presented, as well as a summary of the history of special education over the last 100 years. Various co-teaching models will be defined, including the roles of the co-teachers within each model. The Cooperative Learning Theory (2009) will serve as the theoretical framework for the study, while also incorporating Gately and Gately's (2001) components for effective co-teaching relationships as the conceptual framework. Research on effective co-teaching settings will be shared, including



relevant studies that have attempted to identify critical components within those school systems that contribute to a positive co-teaching environment. Existing limitations to co-teaching models will also be explored.

Students of varying abilities continue to be a part of the public school system. Approaches to meeting the needs of special education students have changed over the last several decades and vary across states and districts (Johnson, 2012). New teaching models have been created to meet the mandates set forth by legislation, resulting in a critical look at special education delivery models. The shifts in special education over the years are important to the foundation of this study and will be chronicled in the following section.

### **History of Special Education**

The education of students with disabilities has changed drastically over the last fifty years from a system of isolation to one moving towards inclusion (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2009). In order to understand the purpose behind co-teaching efforts in education, it is important to understand special education practices over time. In response to legislative mandates, special education models have evolved and will continue to do so.

In the early 1900s, children with disabilities were instructed by educators in separate, specialized settings, some within the public school, and others in separate facilities. Parallel education was common during this time period, which included one educational path for regular education students and another for special education students with the two often functioning as separate entities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). This accepted model contributed to further isolation of students with disabilities from their grade level peers.

Little changed to improve public education throughout the 1950s (Cleaveland, 2015) until late in the decade when the government began to take steps to address teacher training. Public

Law 85-926 provided funding for teachers to receive training to support those with mental disabilities. Several years later, the law expanded to serve all students with disabilities. Over time, additional pieces of legislation began to challenge the assumption that the needs of students with disabilities would be best served in separate settings (Cleaveland, 2015; Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2009).

Mainstreaming began as a practice in the 1960s and referred to the integration of students with special needs into the general education classroom for some part of the school day. While students with special needs could share the physical space, they did not often participate in the same instruction unless they could engage in the same activities with little or no modifications (Hardeman et al., 1993). Educators continued to look for effective models to provide meaningful instruction to students with disabilities.

Throughout the 1970s, education for students in need of special education changed with several actions. In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) filed suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania mandating that children with mental retardation could not be denied access to free public education based on intellectual deficiency. PARC won the case and was followed by others that continued to set a precedent for the education of students with disabilities. In the case of *Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education* No. 08-7127, the courts expanded the previous PARC ruling to include all children with disabilities. This case also established that when it was deemed that a regular public school assignment was not appropriate for a child with a disability, alternative educational services had to be made available by the school entity.

As discussed in chapter one, Public Law 94-142 passed in 1975 and established the right of all school children to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The core of this

mandate meant that citizens could not be denied services or participation in any type of program on the basis of his or her disability. The law applied to any program which received federal funding, including public schools. PL 94-142 also addressed the needs that an individual might require to access their education by establishing that additional special education services were to be available through the public school system at no charge to the student.

During the 1980s, children with disabilities continued to be routinely denied access to public schools with 80 percent placed in separate facilities where they received limited instruction and access to the general curriculum (Schiller & O'Reilly, 2003). Many students in public schools remained in resource rooms with other special education students where they received instruction from a special education teacher. Students in the resource room model did not receive adequate instruction in the content areas and were often provided lower level materials (Byrnes, 2009; Cleaveland, 2015). In 1986, PL 94-142 expanded beyond the needs of individuals with disabilities in the public school system, but extended to include infants, toddlers, pre-school age children, and children who were identified as gifted and talented (Hardman et al., 1993) providing more access to education for many.

During the 1990s, P.L. 94-142 was amended again and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under IDEA, the definition of special education was expanded to include supports and services beyond what is provided in a school setting. This change meant that individuals in training centers or out in the workplace were also entitled to certain rights under IDEA. Additional supports such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and transportation were also to be provided to individuals with disabilities. IDEA also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in developing each child's individualized

education program (IEP) (Hardman et. al., 1993) increasing input from the family in addition to the educational team.

This decade also included one landmark case filed in 1994 which carried on for over ten years before a decision was reached. In *Gaskin v Pennsylvania Department of Education* (2004), the plaintiffs included twelve public school students with disabilities and their parents. In addition, eleven national and state organizations that advocate for the rights of people with disabilities also joined the case (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). They asserted that the Pennsylvania Department of Education failed to offer a continuum of services to support students with special needs within the regular classroom.

In the 2000s, many school systems began to shift instruction towards more inclusive models. Co-teaching is a model to support inclusive practices by including students with special needs with their regular education peers (Scruggs et al., 2007). This option provides students with support from special education teachers combined with the content knowledge of the general educator (Kloo & Zigmund, 2008; Keeley, 2015) and is a viable way to comply with the push for inclusion (Carson, 2011). Co-teaching has grown in popularity over the last several years (Blank, 2013, Feustel, 2015) since it is a teaching model that fosters collaboration while also meeting legal requirements (Petrick, 2015).

Late in 2004, the groups involved in *Gaskin v Pennsylvania Department of Education* agreed to a settlement that impacted school districts and special education programs across the country (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). The agreement stipulated that the Department of Education would redesign the special education process setting standard expectations. They were also required to formalize procedures for data collection and standardized IEP formatting. The agreement also included provisions for parents and IEP teams incorporating procedures for

plan approval and complaint resolution. In light of the Gaskin case and others like it, the current trend is for students to be taught in the least restrictive environment (Friend and Cook, 2010), which often means a co-teaching arrangement.

Now fifteen years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, co-teaching is a service delivery model that continues to be used. Both elementary and secondary schools are implementing co-teaching as a means to serve students with disabilities within the regular education classroom. While co-teaching can be a successful approach, there are multiple models that can be considered. It is important to understand each model including the potential benefits and barriers that may impact the teachers involved and the students in their care. The six co-teaching models are described in the following sections.

### **Co-Teaching Models**

One teach/one drift is one model of co-teaching where one teacher provides instruction to the entire class, while the other teacher “drifts” around the room (Sileo, 2011). Also referred to as one teach/one observe, the drifting teacher is not used to provide direct instruction to the students (Dieker, 2001, Johnson, 2012). Instead, teachers decide ahead of time what needs to occur, determine who will serve in each role, and agree on a system for classroom implementation (Cook & Friend, 1995). This model is beneficial when data needs to be collected or when student behavior needs to be monitored (Sileo & van Garderen, 2010). The teacher can move around the room documenting observations or record pertinent data towards IEP goals. While this model does not utilize both teachers for instruction, it can free up one teacher to collect the necessary data to further support students with special needs in the regular classroom.

Station teaching is similar to a learning center style often found in primary classrooms. Students are divided into small groups and rotate through a series of learning activities (Johnson, 2012) planned by both of the co-teachers. The rotation model allows for a brief review to reinforce concepts, while also receiving some direct instruction from each teacher (Sileo, 2011). Within the station rotations, one group generally works independently, while the other two groups are facilitated by the teachers. The general education teacher provides instruction and discusses concepts with students and the special education facilitates another group of students (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Each teacher then repeats the content to the next group, so all students received the instruction as they move through the rotating schedule. This model allows the students to interact with both teachers and the teachers to provide small group instruction to all students in the class.

Parallel teaching is done with both the general education teacher and special education teacher facilitating the same lesson but the group is divided in two. In this model, both teachers have planned and collaborated on the same lesson, but provide the instruction to only half of the class, as opposed to whole group (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Johnson, 2012). Parallel teaching allows for a smaller teacher to student ratio, but limits the potential benefits of having two teachers cooperating to serve all students in the classroom (Sileo, 2011). While some students may benefit from working directly with the special education teacher, some may never get the opportunity to work with the general education teacher, who may also provide valuable instruction to students in a co-taught classroom (Kloo & Zigmund, 2008; Kelly, 2015). While this is one of many options, the model doesn't maximize the expertise of both teachers to provide instruction to all students.

Alternative teaching is used when one teacher is instructing the majority of the class and the other is providing small group intervention to students (Sileo, 2011). This model provides an opportunity for one teacher to deliver an intervention for a short period of time (Johnson, 2012) and then integrate the students back into the large group lesson. Although the concept behind the model is that both teachers would alternate in providing the formal instruction and the interventions, it is often the special education teacher who provides support to a small group of students during the lesson (Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Johnson, 2012). Special education teachers are often in a position to serve much like an instructional aide would while in a co-teaching setting (Cleaveland, 2015; Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & Mc Ginley, 2011; Friend, 2008). Co-teaching presents the challenge to avoid special education teachers acting in a subordinate role (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2013). It is important for both teachers to contribute to the classroom with a sense of shared responsibility when using the alternative teaching model.

Team teaching occurs when both teachers work side-by-side providing instruction to the entire group. In this approach, both teachers share all aspects of planning and instruction (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). One teacher may model or demonstrate, while the other one explains or leads a discussion, taking turns leading the instruction (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). With both the regular education and special education teacher working together to provide instruction, the teaming approach maximizes the use of both professionals to support all students in the classroom.

The one teach/one assist model (Sileo & van Garderen, 2010) is implemented as one teacher provides instruction to the entire class and the other teacher moves throughout the room providing one-on-one assistance to struggling students. Similar to one teach/one drift however in this case the teacher doesn't just observe but provides direct input to students, offering feedback,

prompting for comprehension or sharing assistance with new material. Cook and Friend (1995) recommend that these actions occur in an unobtrusive way with the teacher circulating the room providing assistance.

Each co-teaching model may meet the needs of educators and students in a variety of settings and situations. Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, and Merhaut (2013) caution educators as they identify appropriate models for instruction as some may be collaborative, while other models may take a “divide and conquer” approach. Co-teaching should work to bridge the divide between the regular education curriculum and the challenges that students with learning disabilities face (Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, and Erickson, 2013) with a result in mind. Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, and Merhaut (2013) suggest that co-teaching in the classroom should result in pre-teaching, re-teaching, remediation, or some type of enrichment for students. Each co-teaching model may also mean varying roles for the teachers, which will be explored in the next section.

### **Role of the Teacher**

With so many options within the realm of co-teaching, effective practices must be identified. While the goal is to provide students with the most appropriate instruction in the LRE for students, it is always important to consider the role of the teacher in a co-teaching setting. . Friend (2008) advocated that co-teaching can be successful when there is a shared philosophy, a collaborative relationship, and clear plans and procedures for instruction. The role of the teachers in the co-teaching environment should be given consideration.

Kloo and Zigmond (2008) identified an acronym that summarizes and specifically defines the role of the special education teacher in a co-teaching model. The acronym TEACH represents five actions that teachers can take to make co-teaching more successful. The letter T



stands for targeting the skills and strategies of the students. The special education teachers can hone in on the skills and strategies that students need to obtain within the regular education classroom. Next, the E is the need to express enthusiasm. Serving as a motivational factor, the special education teacher can encourage the student and model and interest in the topic being studied in class. The letter A is for adapting the instructional environment. Special education teachers in a co-teaching model may need to adjust a number of factors in the classroom environment including student seating or proximity to peers. The C stands for create. The special education teacher creates opportunities for small group and individualized instruction for students. Lastly, the H signifies the help that is required for students to apply the skills being taught in the classroom. The special education teacher often provides the remediation needed for students to acquire the necessary academic skills. These five factors can contribute to a successful co-teaching environment, though each may develop and grow at a different rate. The growth and development of co-teaching has also been considered by researchers in the field and will be presented in the following section.

### **Stages of the Co-Teaching Model**

Gately and Gately (2001) completed ongoing research on co-teaching and emphasized that adopting and implementing a co-teaching model is a process. They suggest that three stages exist in the co-teaching relationship: beginning, compromising, and collaborating. These researchers argue that teachers engaging in co-teaching move through a developmental process, as they create a positive co-teaching environment. Throughout each stage, the teachers demonstrate different degrees of interacting and collaborating. These stages may take varied amounts of time for each co-teaching partnership, but understanding that the stages exist are critical to teachers and administrators working with co-teaching model. Gately and Gately

(2001) reported the stages may develop over a few weeks or even up to a year or longer, depending on the people involved. Understanding these stages can help to provide necessary support to teachers implementing a co-teaching model.

The first stage of the co-teaching process is called the beginning stage. During the initial implementation of the co-teaching model, teachers are getting to know one another, personally and instructionally. Discomfort may exist as boundaries are established and teachers begin to develop their roles and responsibilities. This may be a period of time where teachers interact with caution and discover how best to communicate with one another. While some co-teaching partners may connect quickly and establish rapport, others may take time to develop a working relationship at this beginning stage.

The next stage of the co-teaching process, as determined by Gately and Gately (2001) is the compromising stage. During this stage communication increases as the general education and special education teachers develop a give and take in their relationship. Co-teachers may need to compromise some aspects when working in a co-teaching environment. While each teacher may have preferences regarding the classroom environment, discipline plan, assessments, or communications with parents they must come to an agreement on how to proceed cooperatively. Teachers in a co-teaching model may decide to share these responsibilities or divide them in an equitable manner. During this stage, they may realize that implementing a co-teaching model can be challenging and each participant may need to give up something in order to foster the relationship. It is also during this stage where trust begins to build between the co-teachers.

The last stage in developing an effective co-teaching model is the collaborative stage. During the final stage, open communication and positive interaction solidify the co-teaching

relationship between the regular and special education teachers. There is a high degree of comfort in this stage, as co-teachers interact cohesively. When the co-teaching environment is collaborative and teachers are working together effectively, it is often difficult to determine who the regular educator is and who the special educator is. In the collaborative stage, the co-teachers develop a mutual admiration for one another as they are able to truly collaborate on curriculum, instruction, and assessment that meets the needs of the students in their care. Gately and Gately (2001) explain that reaching this final level in the co-teaching process takes time and effort from those involved. It may take several years before mutual collaboration occurs. Collaboration is the ultimate goal of an effective co-teaching model.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The teachers in the co-teaching classroom have a responsibility to provide effective instruction to their students, but also to work cooperatively with one another. The conceptual understanding needed for this study centers on the work of Gately and Gately (2001) and the essential components that their research identified with regards to co-teaching. The co-teaching relationship is important to consider, as the regular education and special education teachers have the ability to contribute to the overall success of the co-teaching model. Gately and Gately (2001) identify eight specific components to consider within a co-teaching relationship. These components can impact the teachers involved in the co-teaching classroom, as well as the students.

The researchers recommend that educators entering into a co-teaching model, review these components to determine their understanding of the concepts and their readiness to engage in co-teaching experiences. The components include 1) interpersonal interactions; 2) physical workspace; 3) curricular content; 4) goals and objectives for students; 5) instructional planning;

6) instructional presentation; 7) classroom management; and 8) assessment. Each component is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Interpersonal interactions include the verbal and non-verbal interactions between the regular education and special education teacher. Differing social skills and conflicting social cues should be factored when considering the potential effectiveness of co-teaching teams. Interpersonal interactions also includes communication styles, or lack thereof (Gately & Gately, 2001). Body language, tone of voice, and mannerisms are interpersonal actions that can impact the relationship between the co-teachers (Sileo, 2011). As teachers consider entering into a co-teaching partnership or principals assign these co-teaching teams, interpersonal interactions should be taken into account.

The second component to consider is the arrangement of the physical workspace within the classroom. Two teachers will now be working in a space that was likely designed for only one. Teachers in a co-teaching classroom need to consider the physical arrangement of desks and tables, as well as the location of instruction and accessibility of materials. Teacher space should also be considered, as both the general education and special education teacher need to have an area to work, to store their materials, and carry out their instruction. An effective co-teaching model should be planned in advance with time and consideration given to classroom space (Batts, 2014). The physical environment and potential barriers to effective co-teaching should be considered prior to commitment to the co-teaching arrangement.

Familiarity with curriculum content is the third component indicated by Gately and Gately (2001). While special education teachers must consider the accommodations and modifications with the IEPs of their students, they must also possess a knowledge base for the content area. Since teachers are required to be highly qualified, the special educator teaching in

a co-taught math class would also hold a certification in math, thus demonstrating knowledge of math content. In addition to the subject matter, both co-teachers should have a strong knowledge of the content standards, the district-adopted instructional program, and the supplemental resources that support the core content (Johnson, 2012). If both teachers do not have a foundation of curriculum knowledge, this topic may be a point of contention as the co-teaching relationship progresses through each stage.

The fourth component focuses on agreement between the co-teaching partners on goals and student expectations. Since both teachers are working with the same student population, it is important to determine common goals and objectives for the class instruction (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). In addition, the co-teachers need to discuss the expectations that they hold for the students within the class, both students in regular education programs and those with IEPs (Keeley, 2015). If the teachers are not discussing the expectations for what students should know and be able to do, it will be difficult to plan for instruction, design curriculum, or assess students successfully (Batts, 2014; Johnson, 2012). To ensure that teachers do not have different expectations for class goals and objectives, it is important that communication occurs often between the co-teaching team.

The next component emphasizes the importance of instructional planning. Effective co-teaching partnerships include both teachers in the planning process. Planning should be collaborative and cohesive, not done in isolation or otherwise the instruction will be disjointed (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). Each teacher should know and understand the organization of the lesson and the activities that are planned. If one teacher does not know what to anticipate within the lesson because they were not a part of the instructional planning, then that teacher is at a disadvantage (Keeley, 2015). When both teachers plan collaboratively they

can select engaging materials, anticipate student misconceptions, and prepare potential remediation or intervention materials (Sileo, 2011). It is also important for building leaders to understand the need for instructional planning. If this time is not built into the school schedule for co-teachers, it will likely impact the effectiveness of the co-teaching model.

Proper planning leads to the effectiveness of the instructional presentation and facilitation of lessons, which is the sixth of Gately and Gately's (2001) components. As co-teachers enter the classroom, each should know their responsibilities and the jointly determined goals for the class. Effective co-teachers will share the presentation and facilitation in a way that provides the most appropriate learning pathway for the students. Effective co-teaching may mean sharing the instructional responsibilities of leading class discussions, facilitating small group activities, or integrating technology (Sileo, 2011). Facilitation of the lesson may also include determining the students working in each group, the materials or resources that are needed, as well as the homework that will be assigned. If both members within the co-teaching partnership are not completing their agreed upon tasks, the work of the other teacher may suffer (Tran, 2013). As teachers work towards the collaborative stage, the sharing of instructional presentation will become more innate for both co-teachers.

Classroom management is the next critical component to be considered within a co-teaching setting. Both regular education teachers and special education teachers should contribute to the development and management of behavior plans and classroom management systems. The partnership should agree on unacceptable behaviors and how each will be addressed within the classroom prior to working with the students (Sileo, 2011). Inconsistency in behavior management among co-teachers may lead to distrust and confusion during lessons (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). Discussing teacher beliefs about classroom discipline and how to

implement an effective behavior management system is an important step in developing a co-teaching partnership.

The last component focuses on student assessment. Both teachers in a co-taught classroom should have a strong understanding of the assessments that will be used to measure student learning (Gately & Gately 2001). Progress monitoring tools for students with special needs should be available and measurable goals set by both teachers. The types of assessment and the frequency at which they will be administered should be a shared decision in the co-teaching classroom (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). While the special education teacher is ultimately responsible for the reporting of progress towards learning goals for students on their caseload, the assessment plan and procedures should be developed collaboratively with both teachers.

The eight components suggested by Gately and Gately (2001) provide pre-requisites for effective co-teaching models. The relationship between the co-teachers and the consideration of these components are critical to the execution of a co-teaching model in the secondary school setting. These components serve as the conceptual framework for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

With a focus on the co-teaching relationship and exploring the perspectives of teachers, the theoretical framework for this study utilized an educational theory often connected to student learning and apply it to the implementation of co-teaching (Johnson, 2012). The tenets of cooperative learning apply to the co-teaching relationship, as an effective teaching environment requires the same components as a foundation for success. A cooperative learning environment will exist if the five tenets are considered in the planning and implementation of a co-teaching classroom (Tran, 2013). The use of the Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson,

2009) provides a relevant lens to examine the relationship of teachers implementing a co-teaching model at the secondary level.

### **Cooperative Learning Theory**

Johnson and Johnson (1998) cautioned that “placing people in the same room. Seating them together, telling them that they are a cooperative group, and advising them to ‘cooperate’ does not make them a cooperative group” (p.15). It is this concept that will also be applied to the work of educators implementing a co-teaching model. Johnson and Johnson (2009) developed a cooperative learning theory that focuses on five critical features on effective cooperative learning among students. It is this researcher’s intent to connect this theory of cooperative learning to the cooperative work required of general and special educators in a co-teaching environment. The five tenets of the cooperative learning theory align with the work of co-teachers and include; (1) clearly perceived positive interdependence; (2) considerable face-to-face interaction; (3) clearly perceived individual accountability; (4) use of small group skills; and (5) regular group processing of current functioning to improve group effectiveness.

The first component of the Cooperative Learning Theory is positive interdependence, which means that group members are working together to achieve shared goals (Tran, 2013). Just as students in cooperative groups must work together to achieve a task, so must two teachers implementing a co-teaching model. Teachers are required to function as a cohesive team with a goal of achieving their shared objectives (Jensen, Moore & Hatch, 2002; Tran, 2013). While both teachers must develop their own independence and authority as a classroom teacher, they must also depend on their co-teacher in order to achieve the goals of providing effective instruction in the classroom. If one member of the co-teaching team does not fulfill their responsibility, the other team member will likely suffer consequences (Tran, 2013). Establishing



complementary roles in which both teachers contribute to the group's success will enable greater success for the co-teaching environment.

The second tenet that must be present within a cooperative co-teaching environment is face-to-face promotive interaction. This occurs when individuals interact verbally in an effort to accomplish group goals (Tran, 2013). The face-to-face exchange and ongoing communication between co-teachers aligns well to this aspect to cooperative learning. For students, this means working in small groups on projects or discussing a task. Promotive interaction includes sharing opinions, explaining concepts, and presenting understandings (Ballatine & Larres, 2007). For co-teachers, face-to-face interaction is important, as this is the opportunity for teachers to communicate, problem-solve, and plan for effective co-teaching.

Another component of face-to-face promotive interaction is the idea of critical feedback. Giving and receiving quality feedback will be an ongoing feature within a co-teaching classroom (Slavin, 2011). In a co-teaching environment, teachers need to communicate when things go wrong, discuss how to improve the co-teaching model, determine the appropriate teaching strategies, and challenge one another's ideas for the betterment of the students (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Teacher responsibilities shift and classroom practices may need to be adjusted as the co-teaching relationship develops. As the teachers move through the three stages of the co-teaching model, the style of communication and face-to-face interaction may change (Gately & Gately 2001). With cooperative learning in mind, the co-teaching team will need to communicate in an effective manner if the environment is to be conducive to learning.

Within a co-teaching environment, the general education and special education teachers must work collaboratively, while also having individual accountability. Yamarik (2007) argues that defined responsibilities are an important part of a successful cooperative learning group.

The same concept aligns with the responsibilities within the co-teaching relationship. Each teacher is responsible for doing their part to make the co-teaching environment an effective one. When group accountability exists, individual responsibilities depend on all members contributing to the goals of the group (Slavin, 2011). Individual accountability within the co-teaching environment ensures that each teacher fulfills their role, while also contributing to the success of the co-teaching model as a whole.

The fourth tenet of the Cooperative Learning Theory includes interpersonal and social skills. Social and interpersonal skills include active listening, engaging through questioning, and disagreeing respectfully (Killen, 2007; Tran, 2013). Tran (2013) argues that if group members do not possess basic social skills, they will not be able to work together effectively. Working in isolation only requires that you are accountable for your own tasks, but working in a cooperative group is more complex as interactions with others may determine whether the task is completed or not. Johnson and Johnson (2009) recommend that co-teachers and others working in collaborative groups consider four skills within this important tenet: 1) build trust; 2) communicate clearly; 3) accept and support your partner or group; and 4) resolve conflicts efficiently. These skills may not come naturally to all educators and may need to be taught (Tran, 2013) in order for the co-teaching environment to be conducive to student learning and effective cooperative work.

The final element to consider is group processing. Just as students need time to reflect after a cooperative group lesson, teachers in a co-teaching environment also need this time to process. Regular communication is necessary for co-teachers to reflect on what is working, what needs to continue, and what needs to change (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Tran, 2013). Group processing as a communication strategy enables the co-teachers to examine their progress and

provide feedback while also maintaining a positive relationship. Reflecting in this way also allows co-teaching teams to celebrate successes and determine how the successes are communicated with those outside the classroom. The goal of group processing is to determine whether the collective action of the group facilitated instruction in a way that meets the needs of the students in the co-teaching classroom.

The Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) suggests five elements to serve as a foundation for effective learning in the classroom. While we generally consider cooperative learning as a strategy to engage young people in a small group work, the concepts behind cooperative learning can also apply to the co-teaching relationship. As teachers enter into a co-teaching environment, they need to consider the interpersonal and social skills they bring to the relationship, as well as the promotive interactions needed to make the implementation a success. Co-teachers will not only be held individually accountable for their own work in the classroom, but also towards the success of the partnership, thus building positive interdependence. Ongoing reflection and group processing ensure that the co-teaching relationship is continually reviewed and assessed for effectiveness. These tenets combined with Gately and Gately's (2001) eight components for effective co-teaching serve as the foundation for the interview questions for this study.

### **Effectiveness of Co-Teaching Models**

Within the last twenty years, researchers have investigated various aspects of co-teaching in an effort to determine its viability as a teaching model and the success that it can have for students in special education programs. Studies have investigated the planning and implementation of co-teaching models (Dieker & Murawski, 2008; Graetz, Mastropieri, and Scruggs 2005; Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010), the relationships of the co-teachers (McGhie-

Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013; Nickelson, 2010; Sileo, 2011), the impact of co-teachers on student achievement (Johnson, 2012) and a plethora of other topics. Co-teaching is a feasible model to meet the needs of educational mandates while also supporting the instructional needs of the students. This following section will explore pertinent research to serve as a foundation for this study.

**Preparation and implementation.** As previously discussed, there are six models of co-teaching that are commonly referred to in the research. Districts can employ any number of models within their school settings. Selecting a model, preparing for implementing, and executing a co-teaching model requires planning on the part of the school district. Researchers have attempted to identify components relative to planning and implementation that will lead to a more effective co-teaching environment for both teachers and students.

Dieker and Murawski (2008) focused on the importance of preparing to co-teach and recommended five action steps: 1) assess the environment; 2) move in slowly; 3) involve administration; 4) get to know your partner; and 5) create a workable environment. When these items are considered prior to the co-teaching arrangement, the likelihood of successful implementation increases. The researchers also suggested questions to consider prior to the co-teaching commitment: 1) What types of collaboration currently exists? and 2) How can we be sure that both teachers in the co-teaching setting aren't over or under-utilized? These questions can also serve as ongoing benchmarks for co-teachers to monitor their progress and development as a co-teaching team.

Nichols, Dowdy, and Nichols (2010) studied 24 school districts to determine the effectiveness of the co-teaching model. They found that teachers were not prepared to implement co-teaching and received little training in order to adopt a model in their districts.

The study also revealed that the perceptions of the teaching staff were that co-teaching was primarily implemented in response to federal mandates and not as a means to provide quality instruction to students with special needs (Cleaveland, 2015).

Graetz, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2005) studied the co-teaching model to determine components that contribute to effective co-teaching settings. They observed classrooms, conducted interviews with teachers and students, and collected work samples from tests and classroom activities. The study found that the success of co-teaching was influenced primarily by three things: academic content knowledge, high stakes testing, and teacher compatibility. The compatibility among co-teachers is something that can be assessed prior to the co-teaching arrangement, and therefore eliminating this factor for school districts.

Keeley (2015) investigated the use of five co-teaching models at the junior high level. She measured the perceptions of both students and teachers using a survey tool to determine the main effects of each model. The study revealed that the balance of power between two co-teachers can have an impact on their teaching. An uneven balance of power was reported to be of concern when using the one teach/one assist model. Both teachers and students indicated that this model was the least effective in providing optimal support to students with disabilities in the regular education classroom. Determining potential models to increase co-teaching effectiveness can also be a part of the preparation and planning prior to districts and school teams implementing a co-teaching model.

Isherwood and Barger-Anderson (2008) conducted qualitative research in Western Pennsylvania to investigate the factors that lead to effective co-teaching the classroom. The study incorporated interviews and observation to explore the co-teaching environment. The researchers revealed the importance of interpersonal relationships, clearly defined

responsibilities, and the need for administrative support and validation, emphasizing the ways these may impact the co-teaching relationship.

**Professional development.** Within planning and preparation, professional development and training are a necessary components within co-teaching implementation. Several studies has investigated the development that teachers receive prior to and throughout the co-teaching implementation. Preparing teachers for co-teaching through training is also addressed in the interview questions for this study.

Austin (2001) conducted a study specific to teacher preparation for co-teaching. The K-12 study explored co-teaching in nine New Jersey school districts. Through surveys, the research revealed that the majority of teachers believed that pre-service training would promote positive co-teaching relationships. Within the same study, only 37 percent of teacher reported though, that training would actually make the existing co-teaching relationships better. This study revealed mixed responses regarding professional development and the way it may potentially impact co-teaching practices and co-teaching relationships.

Batts (2014) investigated the effect that professional development has on the co-teaching relationship. The study focused on an elementary school in Georgia and included pairs of general and special education teachers. The co-teaching pairs completed a pre-test, engaged in focused training, and then completed a post-test. Results showed that the training impacted the dynamics of how the co-teachers interacted with one another in a positive way. Training and relevant professional development should be a consideration when planning and preparing for co-teaching implementation.

**Common planning time.** One prominent theme throughout the research on co-teaching was the need for common planning time among the teachers. Co-teachers need this designated

time to plan and differentiate lessons (Johnson, 2012) and review necessary IEP data. Common planning time aligns with the need for preparation prior to implementation. Several studies indicate that time is an important component when implementing a co-teaching model (Kohler-Evans, 2006). Allotting for this critical time is often easier to achieve at the elementary and middle levels (Feustel, 2015), which makes exploring common planning time at the secondary level and even more important topic.

Kohler-Evans (2006) studied secondary teachers in Seattle to investigate the co-teaching relationship between general education and special education teachers. Structured interviews were used to collect data, which revealed necessary components for a positive co-teaching work relationship. Common planning time was expressed most often as a critical need for co-teaching to be successful.

Murray (2004) conducted a multi-year study with 40 teachers from 1999-2002 with a focus on co-teaching collaboration. The study also highlighted the need for planning at least one time per week. The researcher described the lack of planning time as a source of problems in the co-teaching setting. Since special education teachers may work with multiple general education teachers, the study found that finding time to schedule multiple planning sessions was a challenge for teachers and administrators and was not reported in many study sites. Districts implementing co-teaching should assess the amount of time and planning needed for all co-teaching partnership.

Blank (2013) studied co-teaching at the middle level in southeastern Ohio schools. General education and special education teachers were surveyed to determine teacher perceptions of effective co-teaching. The teachers in the study indicated that administrative support was present in their schools, which facilitated the co-teaching model. The study reported

that the majority of respondents emphasized the need for professional development and planning time. Middle level schools in the study indicated various levels of planning time and preparation prior to the implementation of a co-teaching model.

King-Sears and Bowman-Kruhm (2011) also investigated co-teaching at the middle and high school level. This research focused on reading and English language arts classroom where students received instruction from co-teachers. Surveys revealed that planning and scheduling were areas of concerns for teachers in a co-taught classroom. The study also explored the way that the IEP was used to plan and make accommodations by the co-teachers. The lack of time to plan and collaborate resulted in teachers expressing concerns that students were not receiving the level of instruction that was needed at the secondary level.

These studies represent the importance of planning and preparation when selecting a co-teaching model and implementing this as a service delivery option for special education programs. Proper consideration in this area may influence the success of the co-teaching model. This strand was discussed with the participants in this study and is shared in chapter four.

**Communication.** Effective communication is an integral component of a co-teaching setting (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, 2009; Jones & Harris, 2012; McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013). The general education and special education teachers are working in a collaborative environment which requires active listening, open communication, and collaborative planning. Many studies on co-teaching recommend attention to some aspect of communication in order for the co-teaching model to be successful.

McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart (2013) studied co-teaching in several Canadian elementary schools. Through teacher surveys, they found that communication and teacher attitude towards inclusion improved the co-teaching relationship. It was reported



that some schools within the study had structures in place to educate teachers regarding inclusion. Other schools within the study identified ways to build communication opportunities within the elementary school day. With a lack of communication, the expertise of special education teachers can be underutilized. Underutilization can result in frustration and resentment between teachers, which ultimately has a negative impact on students (Johnson, 2012). The researchers recommended that future studies investigate ways to improve teacher communication.

Leatherman (2009) also investigated communication within the co-teaching environment. This study focused on the ways co-teachers overcome communication barriers with their teaching partners and looked for possible solutions. Results revealed that preparation and training prior to the implementation of the co-teaching model helps to open the lines of communication. In addition, the appointment or selection of co-teaching partners impacts the communication between co-teachers. Ongoing training and time for collaboration were also cited as components that improve communication.

Working in a co-teaching environment places two teachers in one classroom and requires that they co-exist (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013). This assignment means that co-teachers cannot work in isolation but must communicate with one another to plan and implement instruction for a group of students with and without disabilities. Ongoing communication is a key component of an effective co-teaching classroom (Gately & Gately, 2001) and connects closely with the component discussed in the next section.

**Collaboration.** In a co-teaching classroom, the regular education and special education teachers must work together in a setting that was previously led by one adult. Collaboration in a co-teaching environment means the cooperative steps needed to create a shared responsibility of

instructional planning and presentation (Gately & Gately, 2001). Friend (2014) states that collaboration is based on “mutual goals, parity, voluntariness, and shared responsibility” (p. 10). Effective co-teachers share resources and generate ideas together, as opposed to working in isolation. The combined efforts of both teachers aligns the content knowledge of the general education teacher with the specialized training and experience with modifications of the special education teacher. It is this alignment of two educational experts that makes co-teaching a service delivery model to consider. Various studies have focused on the collaborative efforts of co-teachers and the importance of collaboration within the co-teaching model.

Magiera and Zigmond (2005) conducted a qualitative study of inclusive classrooms across western New York. Observations revealed a difference in instructional roles and style between regular and special education teachers. Furthermore, they identified that general education did not provide instructional support to students, while special education provided regular adaptations and modifications based on students instructional and behavioral needs. The lack of collaboration revealed within this studied suggested further research to identify effective collaboration in the school setting.

An exploratory case conducted by Tobin (2005) also investigated co-teaching with a focus on the English language arts classroom. The study highlighted the importance of Gately and Gately’s (2001) stages of co-teaching and the participants’ inability to reach the collaborative stage. While the participants reported using a variety of instructional strategies and worked closely to plan for instruction, the need for more planning time was evident. The researcher also identified the need for administrative support, particularly in providing a school structure to support teacher collaboration within the school day.

Jones and Harris (2012) studied collaborative factors in co-teaching in higher education. They surveyed educators and students and found that years of experience was a positive advantage for collaboration skills. With more experience, teachers were more prepared and willing to collaborate with a co-teaching partner. The study also revealed that teachers with over 15 years of experience maintained a skill set that included increased communication skills, strong problem-solving skills, and the ability to prioritize needs in the classroom.

Collaboration is a critical factor in an effective co-teaching environment. Special education and general education teachers must work cooperatively on aspects of planning, instruction, and assessment. Without time to communicate and collaborate on instructional implementation, the co-teaching relationship may not be effective.

**Parity.** Within the topic of collaboration, several researchers identified parity as a critical component within the co-teaching setting (Petrick, 2015; Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansberry, 2010; Embury & Kroeger, 2012, Sileo, 2011). Parity describes the way that co-teachers take equal responsibility in the teaching and learning process. It means that both parties have a shared understanding of what is required for their teaching team to be successful. This relationship includes setting and meeting mutual goals (Petrick, 2015) and sharing relevant resources

Scheeler, Congdon, and Stansberry (2010) studied the co-teaching relationship and also identified parity as a prerequisite for an effective learning environment. The group investigated co-teaching at both the elementary and middle levels in southeastern Pennsylvania. Through recorded lessons, they observed the instructional practices of co-teaching teams. The study found that when co-teaching teams are compatible, they are more willing to learn new techniques to improve their overall practice.

Embury and Kroeger (2012) explored the topic of parity with regards to the co-teaching classroom. The research team interviewed middle school students in order to determine how parity is perceived by students in co-teaching classrooms. While this study only investigated the co-teaching relationship from the student perspective, they found that students were very aware of the co-teaching roles and responsibilities. Students identified a lack of parity and shared decision-making among their teachers and described the impact that it had on their learning, making parity a relevant topic to explore with co-teaching.

The topic of parity was a common thread throughout recent research on co-teaching. The compatibility and cooperative nature of the teachers implementing a co-teaching will have an impact of the success of the model. Parity was explored in this study through the conversations with co-teachers within secondary ELA classrooms.

### **Benefits to Co-Teaching**

Research on co-teaching includes benefits for both students (Kohler-Evans, 2006; Scruggs et al, 2007) and teachers (McDuffie et al., 2009; Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansberry, 2010). While many districts implement co-teaching as a model to be compliant with regulations, it is important to realize the potential benefits for those involved. The potential positive influence of co-teaching is one reason why school districts and educational researchers are looking into it as a feasible instructional model.

Various service delivery models can be used to meet the needs of students with special needs. In a co-teaching classroom, students are receiving the benefit of instruction from two educational professionals. Studies of academic achievement for those with disabilities in co-taught classes reveal positive effects (McDuffie et al., 2009) with students scoring higher on standardized tests and reaching IEP goals with greater ease. Scaffolding learning and monitoring

student understanding can occur more frequently with two adults in the room (Gerst, 2012). In some cases, student behaviors may also be reduced in co-taught classes (Wilson & Michaels, 2006) as the additional adult is present to intervene. Social benefits are also present, as students in co-taught classes have more interactions with non-disabled peers, which may alleviate feelings of isolation and increase confidence (Feustel, 2015). The ultimate goal of co-teaching is to increase the academic and social growth of all students.

Teachers may also benefit from a co-teaching partnership including professional growth, ability to adapt instruction, and increased positive interactions with teachers and students (Mastropieri et al., 2007; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). The opportunity to learn from colleagues and implement inclusive practices may result from co-teaching (Gerst, 2012). With two professionals in the classroom, there may be more variation in the way that content is presented to students including providing individualized instruction to students in need. Working collaboratively with another teacher may also lead to more peer feedback (Scheeler et al., 2010) and potentially professional growth. Mastropieri et al. (2007) concluded that as co-teachers worked together to adapt lessons and learn new strategies from their co-teaching partner, their overall teaching skills were enhanced.

### **Limitations of Co-teaching**

Co-teaching at the secondary level presents more challenges than implementation at the elementary level (Cleaveland, 2015; Simmons et al., 2012). Simmons et al. (2012) cautioned that the secondary environment may not be conducive to the collaboration needed for quality inclusion of students with disabilities. Kozik et al., (2009) agreed that co-teaching at the middle and high school levels is more difficult due to the content knowledge of the teachers, insufficient collaboration time, and the increased accountability pressures that exist.

One primary limitation is that many pre-service teachers are not prepared to engage in co-teaching partnerships due to lack of hands-on experience with co-teaching models. Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2008) examined the co-teaching model at the university level. Their research found that when professors modeled co-teaching in their classes, student participation increased, as well as collaborative skills. As pre-service teachers were able to observe the model in action, they reported increased knowledge of the practice for future use.

Vogler and Long (2003) also investigated co-teaching at the university level and spoke with undergraduate students about becoming a member of co-teaching team. The study reported that participants expressed mixed feelings about co-teaching and identified various conflicts that could occur. Grading, classroom policies, management, and discipline were identified as areas of concerns when implementing with two teachers. Some districts find it difficult to get teachers who are certified in all specialty areas, particularly in middle and high school where content certification is required (Gerst, 2012). The perceptions of pre-service teachers may also serve as a limitation for co-teaching as a viable model for instruction.

### **Summary**

The review of literature presents the relevance of co-teaching as a service delivery model that meets the needs of students with disabilities. Pennsylvania schools districts are implementing a variety of co-teaching models in order to stay compliant with state and federal mandates. The research shows that effective co-teaching occurs when certain prerequisites are in place including planning and preparation, positive communication, and district support. While research on co-teaching continues to build, few studies have been conducted on the perceptions of secondary teachers who are implementing the model in the classroom. By exploring this

topic, this study fills a gap in the research. Insight into the co-teaching practices of secondary teachers may identify universal strategies for effective implementation.

The exploratory nature of this study suggests the need for a qualitative approach. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) argued that the study of co-teaching includes attitudes, perceptions, interactions, and behaviors which could best be investigated using a qualitative research method. The next chapter will describe the methods and procedures that were used to gather information from the secondary teachers implementing co-teaching in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study explored how secondary teachers perceive their co-teaching relationship in an era of increased academic accountability and ongoing legislative mandates. This qualitative study focused on the effective practices of secondary education teachers in a co-teaching setting. Exploring best practices in co-teaching can lead to increased implementation of effective co-teaching models, as well as instructional strategies in secondary schools. In addition, this study may contribute to the identification of new co-teaching trends and highlight gaps in special education practices that could inform changes to school district implementation. This study focused on the experiences of special education and regular education teachers implementing co-teaching models at the secondary level with a focus on English language arts courses.

#### **Qualitative Research**

This study will explore the perceptions of approximately 20-25 teachers regarding the implementation of co-teaching. Through individual interviews, perceptions of both regular education and special education teachers will be explored. Acquiring teacher perceptions about co-teaching may assist educators in improving co-teaching strategies (Feustel, 2015). Qualitative research focuses on making meaning of individuals' experiences and allows for the discussion of processes and relationships (Edwards & Holland, 2013). By taking a more qualitative approach, it is the intent of the researcher to move beyond only facts and investigate the individual perspectives of co-teachers (Creswell, 2007). Developing an understanding of how secondary teachers are implementing co-teaching can be accomplished through interviewing.



## **Questions to be Researched**

The research questions that this study focused on were:

- (1) What are the perceptions of regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts regarding the implementation of co-teaching models within secondary schools?
- (2) What teaching strategies work best in a co-teaching environment?
- (3) How could co-teaching be improved as perceived by English Language Arts co-teachers?

## **Selecting the Sample Population**

In order to target a particular population of co-teachers, purposive sampling was used for this study. Purposive sampling is appropriate when there is a specific reason to select a sample based on certain characteristics (Nardi, 2006). Criteria was set for the participant schools, as well as the individuals participating in the study. Participant schools needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Potential schools were limited to those in Allegheny County in western Pennsylvania. Since Allegheny County school districts are all supported through the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), the researcher could ensure that the teachers would receive a minimum level of training and support with regards to co-teaching. Since this level of training and support is not provided in all western Pennsylvania counties, the researcher chose to focus only on the schools served by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

2. Participant schools in the study must have implemented a co-teaching program for at least three years.

3. In order to focus on co-teaching practices in English Language Arts that have some evidence of success. The researcher used the most recent School Performance Profile (SPP) (<http://paschoolperformance.org/>) data to identify secondary level schools in Allegheny County

who have succeeded in one indicator that is particularly relevant to the special education population. The SPP is a measure of accountability currently used in Pennsylvania. The system, based on a 100-point scale, includes various academic indicators and performance scores. The scores used for this study are from the 2014-2015 school year, as these are the most recent data available. One SPP academic performance indicator analyzes “Closing the Achievement Gap for Historically Underperforming Students”, which focuses on students with IEPs. In addition, the data set is broken down further into mathematics, English language arts, and science performance. The measures for this indicator of the SPP will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Individual study participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. The participants are secondary general education English Language Arts teachers and special education teachers currently implementing co-teaching for at least one teaching period per day.
2. The participants had to possess at least three years of experience participating in a c-taught classroom. For the purposes of this study, that would mean that at a minimum, participants would have co-taught in the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 school years. By setting a minimum number of years of experience, the intent was to eliminate factors that might impact a novice teacher. New teachers are often going through an induction program and learning the general procedures of the school district, and therefore may not be able to focus their attention on the effective co-teaching practices necessary. In addition, new teachers might not want to participate in a research study, which is why tenured teachers with at least three years of experience was part of the criteria. Large-scale educational changes, like those required in the

transformation from a traditional special education setting to a collaborative co-teaching model, may take a 2 to 3 years (Fullan, 2001).

3. Finally, the secondary teachers participating in the study were limited to those teaching English language arts. Austin's (2001) research showed that this was a common subject area for co-teaching to occur, suggesting that it may be due to the fact that in language arts there is an increased opportunity for discourse and interactions with and among teachers. Tobin (2005) emphasized English language arts as a likely area to co-teach, as 90% of students with learning disabilities have increased needs in reading and writing. In order to uncover the effective practices of co-teaching, the researcher selected an academic area that would have increased dialogue and interactions to explore with the participants. Rich discussions and relevant examples assist students with learning disabilities, which can be supported in co-taught ELA classrooms (Tobin, 2005). While co-teaching can occur in every subject area, this study focused solely on English language arts courses in high school classrooms.

Participants in this study were secondary teachers currently implementing a co-teaching model as either a general education ELA teachers or special education teacher. The participants were teachers of the English language arts at the secondary level, potentially teaching courses including English, Literature, Humanities, Reading Comprehension, or another English related course.

As a first step to determine the sample for this qualitative study, a list of secondary schools was obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) website. The initial search showed 46 public high schools within Allegheny County. Selected high schools were those that implemented co-teaching for at least three years. For the purpose of this study, a high school is defined as a building serving students in grades 9-12. In order to identify which

schools were implementing co-teaching consistently, information was gathered from the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU). This local organization works with school districts in Allegheny County by providing a variety of supports, specifically training and coaching with districts using co-teaching models.

The Pennsylvania School Performance website was used to find additional information about each school. The site provides performance indicators for a variety of educational components with one of them being “Closing the Achievement Gap for Underperforming Students”. This indicator demonstrates a school’s ability to close the performance gap between the actual scores and the expected scores over a period of time. Schools that are making progress towards closing the achievement gap are showing signs of academic growth for students in special education programs, specifically in the area of English language arts.

Schools are rated from 1 to 100 possible points based on their performance. Two shades of blue indicate that districts are exceeding the standards; light blue for exceeding the standards (scores between 80 and 89) and dark blue for far exceeding the standards (scores 90 and above). Green indicates that schools have met the standards (scores between 70 and 79), with yellow showing schools that have not met the standards (scores between 60 and 69). Red indicators are for schools that are far below the expected standards for academic performance in English language arts (scores 59 and below). For the purposes of this study, the indicator for “Closing the Achievement Gap” for “Historically Underperforming Students” was the only component considered. In addition, the indicator was only considered within English language arts in an attempt to isolate the factors that may be attributed to students in special education programs.

Once the inclusion criteria was defined, seven high schools within Allegheny County that met the criteria. Within those schools, 68 teachers would qualify to participate in this study. It is

the intent of the researcher to attempt to get at least three teachers from each of the seven buildings to participate, to try to ensure that a diverse population is represented. Both regular education and special education co-teachers were interviewed. Since the study focuses solely on teacher perceptions, the researcher does not intend to interview principals or other administrators.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted within a minimum of 7 different school districts in western Pennsylvania. Each district was located within a one hour drive from Pittsburgh. The exploration of co-teaching practices took place in locations preferable to the participants, in an effort to increase their comfort level and provide optimal interviewing conditions. In order to accommodate the participants, the researcher made every effort to interview the participants within their own school building or some other agreed upon location. The individual school settings and specific building descriptions were provided once all participants have been confirmed.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

A semi-structured interview was developed by the researcher with the goal to advance the understanding of teacher perceptions of the strengths and areas for improvement of the co-teaching model. The interview began with basic background and demographic information including years of experience and years as a co-teacher. Initial interview questions asked participants to describe their co-teaching model and the way it has influenced their educational practice. Additional questions focused on the planning, implementing, assessing, partnering, and training in each individual school district. While the focus of this study is to identify effective practices as perceived by the teachers, the guiding questions also asked participants to identify

what can be strengthened within the co-teaching model, so that other educators may benefit from their experiences.

### **Pilot Interviews**

In order to ensure the quality of the guiding questions, a pilot interview was conducted. Kvale (2007) argued that pilot tests can be used to determine strengths and weaknesses of the interview questions. A pilot interview was conducted with at least four teachers who are currently co-teaching. The teachers were two sets of co-teaching pairs with one regular education teacher and one special education teacher in the pair. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately 45 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, the participants provided feedback on the interview process and the quality and clarity of the questions. The researcher asked for their input into the perception of the interview statements, what needed to be added or adjusted, and duration of the interview. In addition, the pilot interview were transcribed and coded to determine how to code and analyze the data.

Interview questions were modified based on the responses from the pilot with a goal to improve question structure and to generate in-depth information regarding the art and science of co-teaching. The inclusion of pilot interviews helped to prepare the researcher with pertinent follow-up questions or prompts to enhance the understanding of co-teaching. Content analysis from the pilot interviews allowed the researcher to generate more targeted questions that may also relate to the applicable theories associated with this study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) recommend following eight steps to conduct a qualitative content analysis. During the first step, the data is prepared, transferring the recorded interviews into written transcripts. This is literally, rather than through summarizing to ensure that nothing is overlooked. Step two requires the researcher to define a unit of analysis. Zhang and

Wildemuth (2009) suggest that themes be used in qualitative studies, as opposed to analyzing individual linguistic units at the word or sentence level. During step three, the researcher develops categories. These are derived from the deductively from the existing theories supporting the framework for this study. In addition, during this step, the researcher identifies trends in the interview data. As concepts are noted multiple times by participants, the researcher clusters ideas into a theme. In contrast, the researcher includes singular concepts that are noted that may become outliers within the research. Step four, testing the coding scheme on a sample text, is accomplished through the implementation of the pilot test. While no other researchers conduct the coding, this step will allow the researcher to gain consistency in the coding process. Step five is to code all of the text. This ongoing process continues until all interviews have been conducted and transcribed. During this step additional themes and concepts may emerge and are added to the coding process. Once the data has been coded, step six allows the coding consistency to be assessed for accuracy. A critical phase occurs as the researcher draws conclusions from the coded data in step seven. This step includes the exploration of relationships between categories and the development of inferences on the part of the researcher. During this step, the researcher attempts to triangulate the data by connecting the existing SPP data with the participant responses. Throughout the interview process, participants may also share other documents relevant to the co-teaching classroom. These documents are analyzed and used to ensure that the research is thorough and robust, in an effort to achieve method triangulation. Lastly, in step eight, the researcher reports the methods and findings. The uncovering of patterns, themes, and categories are an important part of presenting the findings. The researcher uses quotations to articulate relevant conclusions, striving to present a balance of description and interpretation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

In developing the interview statements, current research on co-teaching was explored. The researcher aligned the statements with supporting literature from the field, as well as with the research questions for this study. Each interview statement relates to at least one research question. In addition, the interview statements also align with the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study. The alignment of these four integral components are organized below in Figure 1.

Guiding questions	Research question	Johnson and Johnson's Cooperative Learning Theory	Gately and Gately's Components of Effective Co-Teaching
1. Describe how you and your co-teacher initially designed how to implement co-teaching within your class. a. Describe the process in determining the best teaching strategy to be used in your classroom.	RQ 1	Positive interdependence, Face-to-face promotive interaction, Individual accountability, interpersonal and social skills, group processing	Goals and objectives
2. Describe the strengths and areas for improvement for co-teaching strategies. What seems to work and what needs to be improved in helping students to read and write in the English Language Arts classroom?	RQ 2	Positive interdependence	Interpersonal interactions, goals and objectives
3. Describe how teaching strategies differ between your regular reading class and an inclusive reading class.	RQ 1	Individual accountability	Instructional planning and presentation
4. What are the essential elements needed in your English Language Arts class to ensure that co-teaching is successful?	RQ 2 and RQ 3	Positive interdependence; individual accountability	Interpersonal interactions
5. Describe the approach to planning and implementation of co-teaching taken by your school/district.	RQ 1	Face-to-face promotive interaction	Instructional planning, goals and objectives



6. How would you characterize the planning and collaboration between you and your co-teaching partner? a. How could the process be enhanced?	RQ 2	Face-to-face promotive interaction; Interpersonal and social skills	Interpersonal interactions
7. How do you decide on the responsibilities with your co-teacher in regards to: a. classroom management b. student discipline c. parent communication d. assessment/grading e. presenting materials/instruction f. special education paperwork and documentation g. other areas	RQ 2 and RQ 3	Positive interdependence, Face-to-face promotive interaction, Individual accountability, interpersonal and social skills, group processing	Classroom management, assessment, instructional planning, instructional presentation
8. Describe the level of support you receive from the building level leaders and/or district administration regarding the co-teaching model.	RQ 1	Face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing	Interpersonal interactions, goals and objectives
9. Describe the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of training/professional development you received regarding co-teaching.	RQ 1	Face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing	Curricular content, goals and objectives, assessment
10. In what ways has the implementation of co-teaching impacted the students in your classroom?	RQ 1	Group processing	Physical workspace, instructional presentation, assessment
11. Describe any additional barriers encountered when implementing a more inclusive approach to serving students with special needs.	RQ 1 and RQ 3	Interpersonal and social skills, individual accountability	Interpersonal interactions, physical workspace, curricular content, goals and objectives, instructional planning, instructional presentation, classroom management, assessment

Figure 1. Alignment of guiding and research questions.

## **Procedures**

In the fall of 2015, an initial review of existing school data was conducted and a list of high schools was obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) website. This began the process of participant selection as described earlier in this chapter. The pool of schools was narrowed by school size and SPP scores for “Historically Low Performing Students in English language arts. The potential pool of individual participants was further condensed as only co-teachers with at least three years of co-teaching experience were considered for this study.

The protocol for this study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in April 2016. Upon approval from the IRB, superintendents and then the principals from the seven potential school districts were contacted in order to gain permission to contact their high school teachers. Upon approval from the superintendents and principals, potential teachers were contacted by phone. During these calls, the purpose of the study and the research methods was explained. Participants were then be sent a formal letter describing the study as well as the informed consent form (Appendix A). Upon receipt of the signed consent forms, individual participants were contacted to schedule a face-to-face interview. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by the researcher. Once the transcripts were completed, each was provided to the participants for their review.

Content analysis procedures were used to analyze the narrative data gathered through participant interviews. The content analysis process allowed the researcher to move beyond counting words and to examine themes and patterns within the data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In following directed content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), initial data was coded

through the lens of Gately and Gately's (2001) eight components of effective co-teaching and the tenets of the Cooperative Learning Theory (2009) discussed in chapter two. The use of multiple theoretical perspectives to examine and interpret the data also provides perspective triangulation. Once the data was condensed into categories, it was further analyzed according to the research questions, determining whether participant responses relate to overall teacher perceptions, collaboration and the co-teaching environment, or ways to increase the effectiveness of the co-teaching model.

### **Data Collection**

The goal of the data collection is to gather information about co-teaching in Western Pennsylvania and learn how secondary teachers perceives co-teaching practices within English language arts classrooms. The data collection phase was conducted over several months during the summer of 2016, when teachers were available to be interviewed. Each interview was conducted in a location that is preferable to the participant and will be recorded to ensure accuracy. Each recording was transcribed by the researcher and shared with each individual to ensure accuracy and allow for changes to be made by participants.

All interview transcripts was then be analyzed manually by the researcher. The goal of this step is first code the answers and begin looking for trends and potential themes, as well as best practices that may be associated with the co-teaching classroom. The researcher noted relevant quotes and highlighted potential categories within the data. Themes should began to emerge after several interviews were conducted. The coding categories were generated by examining the themes found within the interview transcripts and reported in Chapter Four.

For the purpose of this study, existing data was also collected from individual school district websites including demographic information and school size. Additional information

was collected on the schools through other public data bases and clearinghouses, including the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania School Performance Profile site.

## **Interviews**

Face-to-face interviews served as the primary method of data collection method for this study. Individual interviews were scheduled with each potential participants for approximately 60 minutes. The researcher reviewed the purpose of the study with each participant and answered any remaining questions prior to the interview. All informed consent forms were signed and collected before the interviews were conducted. All interviews were carried out in a location selected by the participant to increase their level of comfort and openness with the researcher.

Interviews are the preferred method of data collection for this study, as they serve as a means to building trust and rapport with the participants (Turner, 2010). Interviews allow researchers to obtain information from participants that might not be revealed through other methods (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 2003). The interviews with secondary teachers implementing co-teaching models in their classrooms allowed the researcher to explore the topic through the perceptions of the participants. By selecting interviews as the research method, the researcher had the ability to response to participants, ask follow up questions and obtain additional information (Turner, 2010), clarifying vague answers and ensuring thorough responses to the questions.

The guiding questions were used for all interviews, as this approach enabled the researcher to collect the same information from all participants (McNamara, 2009). The conversations from each interview were recorded by the researcher. The researcher took extensive notes throughout the interview, documenting key ideas. All recorded interviews were

transcribed by the researcher and typed into word documents. The researcher emailed the transcripts to each participant for review within seven days of the initial interview. In order to verify the accuracy of the documentation, all participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions. The researcher gave the participants two weeks to review the information and make any necessary clarifications.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, an overview of the methodology was reviewed and a rationale for the research design was provided. This chapter described the qualitative research approach to explore co-teaching models within secondary schools. Participants, setting, and interview procedures were also presented. By analyzing the data from participant interviews, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the effective co-teaching practices occurring in secondary schools. Chapter Four will present a detailed report of these results.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Despite the push for integration of students with special needs into classes with their regular education peers, many students still remain in self-contained classrooms and receive primary instruction from special education teachers (Winzer, 2009). In some cases, students are instructed with supplemental resources or a separate curriculum altogether. While this is an instructional option, it does not meet the requirement for education within the least restrictive environment (LRE). The concept of LRE has evolved over the years as districts have implemented various service delivery models including the inclusion of students in the regular education classroom (Kvale, 2002; Nickelson, 2010) to create an appropriate educational environment for students with disabilities.

IDEA (2004) requires that children with disabilities are educated with children who are non-disabled to the greatest extent possible, the least restrictive environment. Under this Act, students with disabilities are guaranteed supplementary aids and services to support them in school. In addition, students should not be placed in special classes or different schools unless the nature or severity of the disability prevents them from obtaining an education in regular classes [20 USC 1412 Section 612 (a) (5)]. Several legal cases have pushed the concept of LRE to the forefront, particularly through a case from Pennsylvania, where this research is also being conducted. *Gaskins v. Pennsylvania Department of Education* (2005) mandated that students with special needs be educated in inclusive classroom setting or LRE (Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia, 2014). With case law grounded in this state, it was pertinent to explore the co-teaching models in Pennsylvania and identify ways that inclusive practices like co-teaching are being implemented in schools.

This chapter presents data from the individual interviews with regular and special education English language arts teachers. The interviews with teachers revealed various themes and demonstrated how Johnson and Johnson's (2009) Cooperative Learning Theory and Gately and Gately's (2001) essential components for co-teaching impact co-teaching strategies. The interviews also showed how these theories contribute to the practices of teachers working in co-teaching classrooms in western Pennsylvania high schools. In addition, there are implications that planning, professional development, and school leadership may impact effective co-teaching practices in English language arts classrooms.

### **Data Analysis**

This study included 18 high school English Language Arts teachers and special education teachers who were working in a co-teaching classroom, in addition to four teachers for the pilot test. Teachers were interviewed to collect data pertaining to current co-teaching practices in public high schools. The researcher used school district websites to identify demographic information about each school, school district, and school community in an effort to better understand the perspective of each teacher.

### **Pilot Test**

In order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the potential interview prompts, a pilot test was conducted prior to interviewing the teachers. Two regular education teachers and two special education teachers engaged in co-teaching were interviewed individually using the guiding questions designed by the researcher. All pilot teachers had at least 3 years of teaching experience in a co-teaching classroom. Each pilot interview was conducted within the teachers' school district and lasted between 35-50 minutes. Teachers in the pilot test asked for clarification regarding a few questions. By pausing and reflecting on the questions from the pilot

teachers, the researcher was able to make various modifications to the questions prior to the interviews with study participants.

The first question was planned to identify the co-teaching model that the teachers were using and how they determined that as the most effective. The prompt as listed: *Describe how you and your co-teacher designed how to implement co-teaching within your class*, was not clear to the pilot teachers and was therefore adjusted. Pilot teachers were unsure if this question referred to the year-to-year set-up of co-teaching or the decision-making process involved. In addition, the pilot interviews revealed overlap between questions 2 and 4, causing teachers to either repeat their answers or express a desire to move onto the next question. In turn, the researcher decided to reword the fourth prompt to emphasize the strengths and needs when implementing ELA instructional strategies in a co-teaching classroom, not the general strengths and needs of the co-teaching system. The final prompt focused on the perceived barriers when implementing an inclusive teaching model. At this point in all of the pilot interviews, the barriers and areas of need were made clear to the researcher, so this question was reworded to allow the teacher to add any additional comments regarding the implementation of co-teaching.

The pilot interview process allowed the researcher to consider areas of need based on feedback from the pilot teachers. While the researcher did not originally include a question focused specifically on class size or caseload, the pilot interviews revealed a need for gathering that information. Pilot teachers discussed their class sizes and schedules as barriers that would need to be discussed. General class-size was asked of each teacher and is represented later in this chapter. This information was gather from each teacher prior to beginning the guided questions.



The pilot interview also uncovered some inconsistencies regarding who is considered to be district administration as discussed in prompt 8. Clarification was requested from pilot teachers regarding support from administration. While some stated that principals were supportive, others explained that support was provided from a central office special education director. The prompt was adjusted to specify the difference between building level support and district level support within the question.

In addition, pilot teachers were asked if there were any documents that might be supportive to the study of co-teaching models. This was an attempt to triangulate the interview data with another source of information. The pilot teachers struggled to consider an item that might be relevant. Some teachers suggested sharing their schedules which provided a snapshot of their daily work. Others stated that with the confidentiality of special education, it would be difficult to share IEPs or other related documentation around their work with co-teaching. The researcher reviewed the sample schedules provided and determined that the information would not enhance the existing interview data, thus the documents were not used.

Once all pilot interviews were completed, the researcher was able to revise the interview guide in preparation for interviewing teachers. Ultimately, the inclusion of the pilot test clarified the question set and allowed the researcher to improve the structure of several questions with a goal of obtaining targeted responses from the teachers. The pilot process also provided the researcher with the ability to plan for appropriate follow-up questions as well as anticipate potential concerns throughout the interview.

As a part of the pilot, the researcher also gained experience in analyzing and coding the data prior to the actual study interviews. This process helped the researcher to embrace the suggestions from Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) and develop a routine for data analysis. Content

analysis was used to examine the interview data. As the transcripts were reviewed and dissected, themes began to emerge around such concepts as planning time, preparation, professional development and communication. The researcher developed categories from the existing theories supporting the framework for this study and identified trends in the interview data. As concepts were noted multiple times by teachers, the researcher clustered ideas into formal themes. As suggested by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), the themes become a focus for analyzing the data.

Next, the researcher tested the coding themes on the sample text transcripts from the pilot test. By implementing this step, the researcher to gained consistency in the coding process. After acquiring consistency with the pilot test transcripts, the same coding was used for the primary interview transcripts. The researcher drew conclusions from the coded data including the exploration of relationships between categories and the development of inferences on the part of the researcher. The researcher also attempted to triangulate the data by connecting existing School Performance Profile (SPP) data with the teacher responses. From these analyses, several categories emerged, many of which were also found within the literature review. Each category will be explained later in this chapter.

### **Data Sites**

This study focused on the perceptions of co-teaching in secondary English Language Arts class in nine Western Pennsylvania high schools. It was important to consider the general information about each school and the background information pertaining to each teacher. The following sections present information regarding district size, number of schools in the district, student demographics, and economic information. Information regarding student enrollment information, special education population, and graduation rate also serve as a foundation for this

analysis considering the focus on special education models at the high school level. All of the names used in this study have been changed in an effort to maintain the confidentiality of the schools involved.

Adams High School sits in a small suburban area within a one square mile area just south of Pittsburgh. Due to its size, all students can walk to the district’s four neighborhood school buildings. The 1,200 students in the district attend either of two elementary schools, a middle school, and the high school. Adams is a high school building serving students in grades 9-12 with 49% percent of the student population considered economically disadvantaged and qualified for free and reduced lunch. The community is predominantly Caucasian with student demographics reflecting 85% Caucasian, 12% African American, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Multi-Racial. The high school graduation rate for Adams averages around 94% which is well above the state average of 85%. A compilation of this data for all participant schools is also represented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

*School Information*

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<u>Schools</u>	<u>School Configuration</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>	<u>Economically Disadvantaged</u>
Adams	9-12	434	49%
Bradford	9-12	1484	37%
Carter	6-12	224	90%
Denton	9-12	1300	69 %
Emerson	9-12	1378	23%
Fairfield	9-12	1470	34%
Green	9-12	1187	50%
Harrison	9-12	1685	12%
Independence	9-12	1100	11%

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Table 2

*Student Demographics*


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<u>Schools</u>	<u>African American</u>	<u>Asian/ Pacific Islander</u>	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Multi-Racial</u>
Adams	12	1	85	1	1
Bradford	22	9	61	6	2
Carter	74	0	17	1	1
Denton	43	0	49	1	1
Emerson	5	1	91	1	2
Fairfield	6	7	82	1	4
Green	25	0	66	2	7
Harrison	2	2	92	0	2
Independence	1	3	93	0	2

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Note: all values are presented as percentages

While the population of students receiving special education services at Adams is approximately 12%, overall the district has observed an increase in special education needs over the last 5 years, especially in the area of Autism. Though the district has some pull-out classrooms, they are making an increased effort to include all students in the regular education program to the fullest extent. The teachers are working with two co-teaching models as a means to meet the needs of the students in their schools. Consistency in the school and in the vision for special education services has allowed their co-teaching program to experience success for students and through the School Performance Profile (SPP). Not only has Adams earned a 74.3 on their SPP (Table 4), they scored similarly in their efforts to close the achievement gap for historically low performing ELA students. The regular education and special education teachers from Adams High School reported an effective co-teaching experience with an emphasis on meeting the needs of the students.

With an increasingly diverse student population, Bradford High School is in a large, suburban district serving two communities east of Pittsburgh with over 3500 students in total. The district maintains four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The school boasts high achievement, which includes the population of students receiving special education. With a SPP close to 90, Bradford High School strives to close the achievement gap in all areas. Their 91% graduation rate far exceeds the state average making Bradford an organization worth investigating.

Predominantly middle-class, the school serves students in grades 9-12 with 37% of the population at Bradford considered economically disadvantaged and qualify for free or reduced lunch. Student demographics include 61% Caucasian, 22% African American, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic and 2% Multi-Racial. Bradford offers a variety of inclusive and specialized services for student with IEPs, affording them the opportunity to meet the individualized needs of the students. Both teachers in this study provided positive perspectives regarding the co-teaching happening in the secondary ELA classrooms at Bradford High School.

Table 3

*Overall School Performance Profile (SPP) Score*

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<u>Schools</u>	<u>2014-2015</u>
Adams	74.3
Bradford	89.7
Carter	51.9
Denton	60.0
Emerson	81.2
Fairfield	93.4
Green	57.2
Harrison	82.8
Independence	87.9

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In the struggling Carter High School community, over 90% of the student population are considered economically disadvantaged, creating a socio-economic deficit that is difficult for students to overcome, especially those in special education programs. Carter is in a district serving one small city just outside of Pittsburgh. With less than 7,000 residents, the population has continued to decline over the last 5 years creating an adverse impact on its school system. Current district enrollment is approximately 700 students in grades K-12, which has also declined in previous years. Many of the 224 students in the high school are struggling to meet academic benchmarks with over 22% of students receiving special education services. This statistic is far above the state average for special education populations and is also the largest in this study. Students in the district are served by two buildings located on one campus in a one square-mile radius. Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are educated in one building and the secondary students in an adjacent building. With demographics that reflect the community, 74% of the students are African American. The remaining population include 17% Caucasian, 1% Hispanic, and 8% Multi-Racial students.

The high school currently serves students in grades 6-12, a unique configuration created to meet the declining school enrollment. While the school has experienced a decreasing SPP score, currently at 51.9, their attempt to close the achievement gap for historically low-performing students in ELA has been narrowing during the last two years. The progress towards closing the gap for students is promising, however it doesn't translate into an increase in successful graduates, as the average graduation rate (67%) is well below the national average. The district developed a formal plan in place to improve graduation rates for both regular and special education students. But since the plan is just being implemented, it is difficult to

determine its effectiveness. However Carter's strides towards closing the achievement gap should be explored to find the sources of special education growth.

Denton High School is in a mid-sized, suburban school district serving five communities in a seven mile area. The district currently maintains six school buildings, including two primary schools, two intermediate schools, a middle school, and a high school. Similar to the Carter High School community, the resident population as well as student population has declined over the last 5 years. District enrollment is approximately 3600 students in grades K-12 with over 1300 enrolled in Denton High School. Twenty percent of the students at the secondary level receive special education services, thus exceeding the state average of 13% which makes this school the highest in this study. The student demographics in the school include 49% Caucasian, 43% African American, 1% Hispanic, and 7% Multi-Racial. Economically disadvantaged students make up approximately 69% of the total student population at Denton, which has shown a slight decrease compared to recent years.

With students struggling academically in a community with a low socio-economic population, it was not surprising that the SPP score for the school is in the low average range at 60.0. In addition, the average graduation rate (80%) is below the national average. Similar to Carter, Denton is taking proactive steps to increase graduation rates and has developed a plan to address the needs of their high school students. Teachers from Denton reported many difficulties in the implementation of co-teaching. Their district faces numerous barriers that school leaders and teachers continue to resolve in order to meet the needs of the students with special needs.

Emerson High School is in a district comprised of one borough over a 28 square mile area located east of Pittsburgh. The district currently manages six school buildings, including four elementary buildings, one middle school, and one high school. Of the 4000 students in the

district 1378 are high school students attending Emerson. Student demographics include 91% Caucasian, 5% African American, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, and 2% Multi-Racial. Twenty-three percent of the student population are considered economically disadvantaged and qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

The district has experienced a high rate of administrative turnover in the last two years, with several central office positions changing, as well as building leadership shifts at the high school, making systemic change in the district and in the special education department a challenge, which is reflected in the feedback from the teachers. Across the district approximately 11% percent of the student population receives special education services. The district has implemented co-teaching for several years and limits the amount of pull-out services for students. In turn, Emerson meets the needs of individual students in the least restrictive environment and has maintained a high graduation rate at 93%. Their SPP score of 81.2 reflects academic achievement and increases towards closing achievement gaps for students who have historically performed below expectations.

South of Pittsburgh, Fairfield High School is part of a large suburban school district serving two boroughs. The district's five school buildings serve approximately 4000 students, with a primary center, two elementary schools, a middle and high school. Enrollment at the high school is 1470 with only 9% of students receiving special education support. Thirty-four percent of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged and qualifying for free and reduced lunch, a statistic that has increased each year over the past five years, as the community continues to grow in diversity.

Student demographics include within the district include 82% Caucasian, 6% African American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, and 4% Multi-Racial. While these statistics



do not represent the level of diversity that some of the other districts do, a changing demographics exists as a large increase of students whose first language is not English continue to enroll in the district. English as a Second Language programs, once known as ESL, help to facilitate English language acquisition and skills for students. Students in Fairfield High School speak approximately 20 different languages, creating an increased need for student services across the district.

Despite these challenges, Fairfield High School continues to achieve at high levels, while also narrowing the achievement gap for students. The school has maintained an SPP score above 90 for the last several years, with the most recent score at 93 and the graduation rate is also well above the national average at 95%. The success of this school provides a clear reason why programs that support struggling students need to be examined more closely.

Green High School is in a district made up of two boroughs serving approximately 3000 students within the district's five school buildings. The district includes three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. With declining economics in the district, over fifty percent of the student population is considered low income and qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The student demographics included 66% Caucasian, 25% African American, 2% Hispanic, and 7% Multi-Racial. An increasingly diverse student population has changed over the last five years with the enrollment of students from another local school district. This shift has increased overall high school enrollment to approximately 1187 students while also increasing the number of students requiring special education services to almost 18%, above the state average. Despite these challenges, high school graduation rates continue to be above the national average at 89%.

A changing population and an increase in special education numbers, Green High School made strides to close the achievement gap for all students, but especially those who have underperformed on previous assessments. While the SPP is at the lower end of the average range at 57.2, the school continues to pursue options to meet the needs of their struggling students through intervention and special education services, including the implementation of co-teaching and the increase of inclusion classes at the high school level.

In another suburban school district south of Pittsburgh, Harrison High School is a part of a large, stable district with consistent leadership and evidence of effective educational programs. The district's eight school buildings serve over 4000 students. Currently the district maintains five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district lacks diversity with its student demographics including a population made up of primarily Caucasian students. In addition, the study body includes 2% African American, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Multi-Racial. These numbers have remained stable for the last 5-10 years providing consistent enrollment for the district.

The district enjoys a positive reputation based on years of strong academic performance in an upper middle class community. Harrison High School reported 12% percent of the student population considered low income and qualifying for free and reduced lunch, which is the lowest of those in this study. High school graduation rates are high and reach over 96% annually. Current enrollment at Harrison is approximately 1865 students, of which 14% require special education services. The school has implemented co-teaching for over ten years, working through various barriers over time. With the majority of students receiving special education services through co-teaching, a small fraction of the students do require pull-out services. The school's

SPP has decreased in the last two years, but maintains an above average score of 82.8, in part due to their efforts to address the achievement gap for traditionally underperforming students.

In an affluent suburban school district north of Pittsburgh, Independence High School is a flourishing school. With over 3200 students, the district is growing by approximately 80 students each year. Their high achievement and growing community make Independence part of a successful school district. The high school is one of five schools in the district, with three elementary buildings and one middle school. The student population includes 11% who are identified as economically disadvantaged. Lacking diversity, the student demographics in the district include 93% Caucasian, 1% African American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Multi-Racial.

Student enrollment at Independence High School is approximately 1100 with only 9% receiving special education services, which is the smallest population of special education students in this study. The district is decreasing its use of co-teaching due to contractual constraints posed by the teacher's union, however most of their students continue to meet and exceed academic expectations. The school had a SPP of 87.9, which is the lowest score that the school has achieved in the last several years. The shifts in SPP haven't affected graduation rates with Independence maintaining a strong 95% over the last several years.

The schools and districts described in this section represent a diverse group of educational systems. Despite the differences in these districts, they all have one thing in common which is the implementation of co-teaching models for students in special education. The variety in this sample enabled the researcher to gather a rich perspective of information from experienced educators in each school.

School and district data was collected by reviewing school district websites and other public data sources. The researcher reaffirmed the information during the teacher interviews. In addition to the collection of general school and district information, the researcher also gathered demographic information from each teacher.

### **Demographic Information**

Demographic information for teachers included (1) gender, (2) highest level of education obtained, (3) number of years as an educator, and (4) number of years implementing co-teaching. The majority of the teachers were female (n=16) along with males. All of the teachers earned their Bachelor's Degree, while many earned Master's Degrees. While the years of experience of the teachers varied, all taught within the range of 8-27 years, with an average of almost 15 years. These 18 teachers had an average of 5 years co-teaching experience. This information is represented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Teacher Demographics*

<u>Schools</u>	<u>Level of Education</u>	<u>Total Years of Experience</u>	<u>Total Years of Co-Teaching</u>
<b>Adams</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	8	6
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	14	6
<b>Bradford</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	18	4
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	16	5
<b>Carter</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	12	3
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	17	5
<b>Denton</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	10	3
Special Education Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	8	3
<b>Emerson</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	19	4
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	23	8
<b>Fairfield</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	15	5
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	7	3
<b>Green</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	18	4
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	16	4
<b>Harrison</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	13	3
Special Education Teacher	Bachelor's Degree	9	5
<b>Independence</b>			
Regular Education Teacher	Master's Degree	27	10
Special Education Teacher	Master's Degree	16	6

## **Findings**

This study explored how ELA teachers perceived co-teaching models in secondary schools. The interviews helped to support the relevance of both Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and the essential components of effective co-teaching (Gately & Gately, 2001). In addition, the teachers' remarks supported the importance of four primary categories: communication, planning, professional development, and leadership. The following sections will describe the impact co-teaching has on students and teaching, detailing the positive aspects and areas for improvement revealed through teacher interviews.

### **Research Question 1**

In this section, overarching views on co-teaching will be shared. The first research question for this study focused on the general perceptions of regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts implementing co-teaching models within high schools in Western Pennsylvania. The teachers communicated their overall perceptions of co-teaching in terms of how it impacts students and teachers. They also reported on co-teaching factors that occur at the classroom level, as well as the school level. While the majority of the teachers stated various benefits to students, they reported few benefits for the teacher and the school principal. Teachers did not view co-teaching as an instructional method that was easy to implement. They expressed concerns with the necessary coordination with other teachers including co-planning and the sharing of classroom responsibilities. Teachers also stated concerns with a lack of support from school leaders to make the necessary changes to ensure a positive implementation of co-teaching models. Teachers reported a lack administrative structures focused on consistency and scheduling so that co-teaching can be implemented with fidelity.

**Impact on students.** At the heart of the co-teaching model is the intent to best serve the students in the classroom. Considering the requirements of least restrictive environment (LRE), reading teachers and special education teachers who implemented co-teaching models were interviewed. While these teachers reported using various co-teaching models, the overwhelming majority reported using the procedure: one teach/one assist most often. The teachers explained that the procedure allowed students to receive more individualized attention when two teachers were working in the classroom. A few teachers discussed using the station model, with students rotating through a series of teacher-led and independent work stations. The station model utilizes both teachers who facilitate work stations and provide more individualized instruction to students. However, all co-teachers that were interviewed relied mainly on one teach/one assist as the primary model for co-teaching in their secondary ELA classrooms. Within that preferred model, the teachers described how they implemented co-teaching strategies and the model works to meet the needs of the students.

**Increased student support.** The regular education teacher at Independence High School felt that, “Co-teaching works for our kids because it’s giving them the opportunity to achieve more than they would if they only had one teacher. When you have two different people in the room, you might explain things in different ways.” The teachers said that having multiple adults in the room who provided different perspectives to the instruction. They explained that one teacher might teach a specific concept that was confusing to some students. The co-teacher might teach the same concept using a different set of examples that helped these students also understand the material. “With instruction, it works well when we read together and have guided questions. Students seem to understand the content better when we stop and explain what’s happening in the text. That’s a lot easier to do with two people,” explained the regular education

teacher from Bradford High School. Another teacher stated, “Anytime you can lower the student/teacher ratio and properly staff a co-teaching environment, I think it benefits students.” Overall, teachers described the additional teacher in the room as a positive aspect that co-teaching models offered to students.

Conversely, one teacher explained that, “When you have very different teaching styles”, the co-teaching model is not really helpful. He went on to say, “Does it really benefit anyone to have two cooks in the kitchen? Sometimes it’s actually harder on the kids. They don’t know who’s in charge.” This teacher further explained that an additional teacher in the room may not be helpful and at times may even create more work for the regular education teacher. The coordination and cooperation needed to have two teachers in the classroom may not provide additional benefits to students.

One teacher focused on the need to implement a model of instruction that ensures positive assistance to students. “In our school (Fairfield), the teachers are very interested in seeking help for their IEP students. They are looking for ways to give all the students extra help in their class, so they see it as a positive to have another person in their class.” The majority of teachers found co-teaching in ELA classrooms particularly beneficial to students, since both reading and writing requires a great deal of teaching in order for students to begin to achieve success in these two critical skills. Many teachers described the benefit of co-teaching when conducting reading and writing conferences with students. Both regular and special education ELA teachers felt that student writing improved with more access to teacher feedback as well as feedback from multiple editors.

The regular education teacher from Denton remarked, “In terms of reading and writing, co-teaching allows the ability to have more one-on-one instruction. Writing is really subjective



so you need to go around to each student and give them feedback one-on-one.” He went on to describe how co-teaching facilitates instruction in reading, as well. “We split the class into two groups with kids who wanted to read silently and others who want to read in pairs. Having two adults, you can facilitate differentiated groups and give better feedback to smaller groups.” The special education teacher from Independence also discussed the value of co-teaching within her classes that require written responses from students. She explained the benefits;

In writing the students are able to get more one-on-one time with a teacher. If you’re by yourself as a teacher and you have twenty-some kids in your room, it’s a lot harder to work one-on-one with kids and keep the rest of the class on task. But when you have someone who is able to walk around and monitor while kids are working, the kids just get better feedback. I also think they’re validated more. We empower them to find success in an area where they’ve been unsuccessful for years. They feel like they can actually do it. I really do think that having two people in the room makes the students think that they are really not going to be left behind

***Interpersonal and social factors.*** Teachers also reported interpersonal benefits as the students tended to interact more positively with one another and with both teachers. Many teachers shared that students communicated more and made connections with both teachers, regardless of their status as a regular education or special education teacher. It is important to engage high school students in classroom discussions and try to build relationships with them. The co-teaching model seems to nurture those student and teacher relationships.

The special education teacher from Bradford summarized the positive impact co-teaching can have at the student level. “I do think one of the positives is the way that the regular education kids are more accepting of the learning support kids. It becomes less of a stigma. It

also gets special education kids exposed to things that they wouldn't normally be exposed to within the curriculum." The teacher went on to describe her observations, "My students work collaboratively with the other students. The regular education kids choose my students to be in their groups. It's a positive classroom community." While teachers reported this student perspective, it is the student voice that is often overlooked. However, one special education teacher went so far as to ask her students about the success of co-taught classes as opposed to pull-out courses that are offered at Bradford High School. "I've asked students when they've switched from pullout to co-taught classes and a lot of them said they wished they were in a smaller class with me. Others said it didn't matter to them." Regretfully, she stated, "Isn't it sad that we don't usually check with the kids about what they think is best." With so many models of special education service, perhaps educators need to gain a stronger input from the students who are experiencing the classes for themselves. Other teachers who were interviewed did not express this view, however it was a powerful point of view that the researcher felt should be included in this description.

Perceptions about the ways co-teaching models impact students were not all positive. Teachers also shared negative perceptions around co-teaching classrooms. At Green High School, one special education teacher reported, "I do see behavior problems in the co-taught classes. You have kids in there who have no problems, no disabilities. I see them bothering my students, harassing, bullying, making comments, making them uncomfortable." She said, "Yes, it's good when you see kids who are accepting, but that is not always the case. I really work with my co-teacher around classroom expectations so we eliminate that stuff right away." Her response reinforced the need for early and ongoing communication between co-teachers, as well as the cooperation needed to manage classroom behaviors in a co-teaching environment. The

teachers at Green reported an ongoing struggle in their school to shift the culture toward a more positive environment that supports all learners. While other teachers in this study discussed the environment in their schools, none described a negative impact on students

Overall, teachers reported benefits to the students when implementing co-teaching. Teachers perceived that students were able to receive more support and frequent assistance in co-teaching classrooms, as well as exposure to important grade level content. Perceptions were mixed with teachers regarding the impact, benefits, and some obstacles to success, which will be addressed in the next section.

**Impact on teachers.** Various perspectives were shared that extended beyond the impact that co-teaching had on students and focused more on the teachers. The teachers focused on the effective or ineffective implementation of co-teaching at the classroom level as well as the roles and responsibilities of teachers within various models. The teacher-level perceptions also included broad opinions on co-teaching as a teaching practice as well as providing examples regarding communication and relationships within a co-teaching environment. Teacher responses aligned to themes including interdependence and accountability, social and interpersonal skills, and communication and group processing skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

***Positive interdependence and accountability.*** To further investigate this research question, teachers were asked about the responsibilities within a co-teaching classroom. When two educators are working in one classroom, responsibilities need to be shared among the professionals creating positive interdependence among the educators while also maintaining individual accountability. Co-teachers discussed personal accountability regarding classroom instruction, as well as special education paperwork and data collection. They also provided insight into shared responsibilities around student discipline, grading, and parent communication.

Each co-teacher shared their perspectives on the way cooperation is accomplished within a co-teaching environment. About half of the schools reported shared responsibilities and a high sense of interdependence and accountability, including Adams, Bradford, Emerson, Fairfield, and Green High Schools. Other schools reported difficulty in this area which impacted the overall success of the co-teaching model. In addition, schools that exclusively used the one teach/one assist model reported more difficulty sharing responsibilities within a co-teaching environment.

Within the discussion of responsibilities, teachers were asked to talk about the model of co-teaching that was selected and the way it was used in their classroom. The special education teacher from Carter High School was the only teacher that articulated all of the possible models for co-teaching, demonstrating a strong understanding of the options. She also described her process for implementing co-teaching with the teachers that she works with,

Of the seven different strategies for co-teaching, I think the one that is utilized too often is one teach/one assist. It does have its strengths when we pull groups. I like having the ability to rotate the students through groups, it keeps the pace moving. One model that we need more of is literal co-teaching where we actually teach together, but without a lot of co-planning that is a challenge.

One Bradford educator explained how she and her co-teacher designed the implementation of co-teaching in the classroom. She reported that in the beginning of the year, the co-teachers discussed the needs of the special education students and the adaptations needed for the curriculum. She pointed out, “We try to work from our strengths. Anything dealing with writing, I take the lead. My partner does much of the review for tests. She makes sure that she is in the front of the room teaching as much as I am.” This effort to include both teachers as the

lead instructor represents a proactive approach to co-teaching and planning that was not standard across all teachers and reflected tenets of positive interdependence and shared accountability.

The special education teacher at Harrison also spoke about using individual teaching strengths within a co-teaching partnership, though this perspective signaled a sense of individual accountability and a lack of positive interdependence with his co-teaching partner. While he explained that both teachers would ask questions while discussing novels, he expressed,

I'm huge into history, so whenever we are talking about historical events or things that happened during different times in the novels, I would take more of the lead. I can go into more detail than my co-teacher could. I have a minor in history, so I enjoy using that. If there was something that my co-teacher was an expert at, they would certainly jump in and take the lead, too.

Another teacher expressed a similar opinion when it comes to expertise in a certain area. He conveyed the need to plan and execute the instruction when one person has the content knowledge and the other one does not,

When we talk about Shakespeare. . . I've been to the Globe Theater. I have the knowledge. So when kids are asking questions, I can speak from real experience. I share pictures and tell stories. What am I going to do? I can't share that instruction just to make the co-teacher feel better. It would make her look bad and it wouldn't be fair to me.

While efforts to provide insight from personal strengths can support engaging instruction, in a co-teaching relationship, the shared responsibility between teachers is critical to the success of the co-teaching model.

Taking a positive approach to shared responsibilities, the regular education teacher at Adams stated, “We just divide things up. OK, I’ll take this part and you do that.” She expressed that it is natural for her to work collaboratively with her co-teaching partner and share tasks. She went on to describe the way co-teaching was communicated to parents and families. “At Open House, we introduced ourselves to the parents to make sure they understood there were two teachers in the class. We gave them both of our contact information so they knew that we did it together.” Conveying this important message to parents set the tone for co-teaching expectations within their school, while also building positive interdependence within the co-teaching relationship.

When it comes to providing instruction in the classroom, teachers shared a wide range of approaches for sharing responsibilities. One special education teacher explained, “The regular education teacher is responsible for presenting most of the instruction. I jump in and add things that she may have forgotten or maybe clarify things for the students.” When asked how “jumping in” to the instruction might be perceived, she stated, “We know each other so well, that I often know what she’s going to say before it even comes out of her mouth. We work together to get the point across.” Working cooperatively and building a partnership in a co-teaching classroom support the development of positive interdependence.

Teachers also expressed the need to “spend equal amounts of time teaching so students look at us as partners, not one teacher and one assistant,” explained the special education teacher from Bradford. When asked to describe the model used, both teachers describes the one teach/one assist model despite claims that they did not function in that way. While acknowledging that in a perfect world that doesn’t always happen, she explained, “If my partner feels that I am monopolizing the teaching, she must feel comfortable discussing it with me.”

When asked if this generally occurs, she stated, “We interject positively in each other’s teaching. If she is in front of the class and I feel I need to add something, I jump in and vice versa.” She repeated that, “The students need to see the two teachers as partners working together.” While a shared responsibility among co-teachers is optimal, for many schools an even share is not possible.

The co-teaching ELA classroom at Carter follows the one teach/one assist model and is managed primarily by the regular education teacher. The co-teacher explained, “She discussed with me the way she runs her class. She has been doing it that way for like 15 years. It works well. She has the students grouped in fours. They choose their groups as long as their behavior is OK.” She went on to state that if the classroom system is working, she doesn’t have the need to argue for any changes. This response demonstrates the flexible perspective often needed in a co-teaching relationship, but does not build perceived positive interdependence (Johnson and Johnson, 2009) found within current research on co-teaching.

At Fairfield, the special education teacher explained, “We split the grading, but it’s not even. The regular education teacher does way more than I do. I’d say it’s probably like 70/30.” She went on to describe an example involving a shared responsibility around grading. “If there’s a question or a big project, we might grade it together. When we did speeches, we split the class and graded them separately. Since that was a lot we both took on some of the responsibility.” While these teachers made efforts to share clerical and managerial tasks, the instruction was presented primarily by the regular education teacher using the one teach/one assist model. Setting aside time to review these responsibilities was not a common practice across all teachers. Successful co-teaching partnerships demonstrated perceived individual accountability, also recommended within Johnson and Johnson Cooperative Learning Theory (2009). Co-teachers

who presented a positive outlook on co-teaching, also shared proactive steps that they took to make that happen.

The educators at Bradford High School both expressed a proactive approach to sharing responsibilities with regards to parents. The regular education teacher explained, “We keep in touch with each other prior to making phone calls to parents. If a situation arises in which a parent needs contacted, we communicate about who should make the call.” The special education co-teacher described a logical way to handle responsibilities when it comes to parent concerns. “As the special education teacher, I call if the student has dropping or failing grades. If it’s about misconduct, we would decide who was more involved in the situation and they’ll call.” The teachers took time to establish these norms at the beginning of the school year, creating easier decision-making and sharing of tasks throughout the school year. This type of goal setting and establishing student expectations represents a tenet from Gately and Gately’s (2001) components of effective co-teaching.

Both teachers at Emerson explained that responsibilities are shared with regards to classroom management, student discipline, and parent communication. Classroom instruction and assessment responsibilities fell mostly to the regular education teacher, as was the case in the majority of the other schools represented in the study. “In our school we set guidelines at the beginning of the year for who does what. I’m the primary English teacher, so I’m responsible for most of the planning and teaching. The co-teacher moves around the room and assists the struggling students.” The use of the one teach/one assist model was evident as the selected co-teaching model at Emerson, as with the majority of other schools.

The responsibilities of co-teaching pairs are not always easily determined. One teacher from Harrison struggles with the concept of co-teaching and sharing the responsibility with a co-



teacher. As a special education teacher she stated, “I personally regard it as subordinate to the regular teacher. They are the teacher of record, so they have the final say about what happens in their classroom. That makes it hard.” She went on to state that, “My role is really as a support. I am not the lead teacher in the classroom, so when it comes to making the decisions, I usually fall back on the classroom teacher.” At Harrison, one teach/one assist was also reported as the co-teaching model use most often. The special education teacher explained that she would prefer pull-out classes, but that her administration has limited those in recent years.

At Denton, co-taught classes are prevalent with only a few pull-out classes. Denton teachers would prefer teaching on their own, but understand the regulations are in place to better assist students. “Both the regular education and special education teachers should have experience in teaching the subject. In English, you have different focuses for each grade. Both teachers need to understand the content and the expectations.” When pushed for a specific example, he stated, “If you have an American Literature class, which is our 11th grade course, the person they put in the room should already be well-versed in American Literature. You need to know the texts.” His frustration around this lack of knowledge was further expressed, “the regular education teacher should not have to educate the special education teacher. That might sound rough, but it does happen.” In probing further, the teacher expressed, “We have several teachers in our building who don’t know the content. If that is the co-teacher you are assigned to, then your year is going to be pretty difficult.” The teacher explained that while this hasn’t occurred in his room every year, he has experienced this situation on two different occasions, setting an uncomfortable tone for co-teaching for this classroom teacher.

Co-teaching can be a delicate arrangement for some educators, creating potentially uncomfortable scenarios. At Carter High School, one teacher reported,

One teacher I worked with was a veteran who had much more experience than I did. She gave me a list of the curriculum that she used so I could familiarize myself with it. She told me to use it in my pull-out classes too. Honestly, I don't know if it was the best for our students. We use the one teach/one assist model, so I just assist. I wouldn't step on her toes. I don't want to make things uncomfortable.

Sharing responsibilities in a co-teaching environment means that both teachers need to voice their opinions in how the class should run. When two different people come together sharing a classroom space, problems may arise. Sharing responsibilities around student behavior and classroom management were identified as an area of concern for some teachers, although most reported that they deferred to the regular education teacher. At Denton, shared responsibilities were described as a challenge, especially when it came to behavior management,

The special education teacher that I was working with had a very different way of looking at behaviors. I am more laid back and would try to work with the students, not always discipline them for everything. I had to explain to the kids that we have different styles and ways to address things, but that makes it really awkward.

When asked to define some of these specific areas, he explained, "The special education teacher wanted to be stricter with what we call Level One behaviors, more minor kinds of things. Calling out in class or missing one assignment were things that I wouldn't go crazy over." In a co-teaching classroom, these are topics that need to be considered in order for teachers to work effectively within one space. Without a proactive conversation prior to the start of the school year, it's difficult to establish common classroom expectations. A lack of positive interdependence and individual accountability at Carter and Denton have contributed to greater challenges among the teachers and within a co-teaching model in general.

Shared assessment and grade reporting was also a difficult area to navigate explained most co-teachers. While some co-teaching pairs were able to establish a procedure for grading assignments, many struggled to find a balance when it came to grading. This struggle was clearly articulated at Denton High School,

With regards to grading, the tests that I give in English class are not multiple choice.

There are subjective answers and I know what I'm looking for. We don't have enough time for me to explain to the co-teacher, 'this is what I am looking for this question' in order for us to share that responsibility. That puts more work on me, but that is how I'm comfortable handling the tests.

Gately and Gately (2001) suggested that both co-teachers be involved in student assessment, as one of their components of effective co-teaching. Shared assessment practices requires time and communication for both teachers to be involved in the decision-making. All teachers expressed similar concerns around finding time to meet to create or grade student assessments.

Sharing responsibilities regarding paperwork was also discussed with the teachers, as a component of individual accountability. Most teachers in this study perceived paperwork to be the responsibility of the special education teacher. It was described as a common practice that the regular education teachers had very little responsibility for special education paperwork. One teacher explained,

As the learning support teacher, I am responsible for all of the paperwork. I do not ask my co-teacher to fill our progress reports or notes on my students. Since I am in the classroom, I know how they are doing. She has enough responsibilities that I do not need to burden her with special education paperwork.

The only aspect of paperwork that was shared in any manner was some data collection and reporting. One teacher stated, “Some of the regular education teachers I work with are able to provide me with data about my students. They don’t have time to collect all of the data I need, but sometimes they will help with progress monitoring.” While documentation like goal setting, IEP writing, and re-evaluation reports fell to the special education teachers, special education teachers expressed that they felt it was their sole responsibility and any assistance from regular education teachers was appreciated but not expected.

Some co-teaching teams perceived a responsibility to share the instruction and planning for units of study. At Emerson, shared responsibilities were demonstrated through instructional planning,

We did a short story unit and she would plan and teach one story and I would do the next to break up the workload. And we did poetry the same way. She would do one or two poems and then I would teach the next one. With the novel, it didn’t quite work so well but we would take parts and share the responsibility.

While the sharing of instructional planning and lesson implementation is ideal in a co-teaching setting, it was not a common practice shared by all teachers. In most cases, the special education teacher served in an assisting role, which limited their role as a classroom instructor. The limitations were created, in part by the personalities of the teachers involved, as well as the co-teaching models that the schools selected.

*Shared responsibilities versus the division of tasks.* A majority of the teachers reported the use on the one teach/one assist model of co-teaching, the responsibilities of each teacher became clear through the interviews. Rather than sharing responsibilities, some teachers reported a more of a division of responsibilities. When teachers reported shared responsibilities

they conveyed a sense of partnership and thoughtful cooperation which reflect the concepts within Johnson and Johnson's (2009) cooperative learning theory. Schools that relied on solely on the one teach/one assist model presented information that often marginalized the special education teacher at times and put an increased responsibility on the regular education teacher. Rather than sharing the responsibility, teachers spoke more in terms of a division of jobs tasks.

The regular education teacher from Fairfield explained, "The primary teacher instructs mostly the entire period where the co-teacher will help distribute things and walk around the room. She supports somebody if they need extra help; but mostly I just present the material and instruct the class." She added, "The inclusion teacher helps to facilitate the rules and student behavior, but it's my primary responsibility of the regular education teacher." Many of the regular education teachers in this study expressed a large responsibility for general classroom management with the instruction happening within their classroom, as opposed to within the special educator's classroom.

A similar outlook was presented by the Green High School regular education teacher, "I think she (special education co-teacher) better assists the struggling students and breaks down the content. They know they can ask her questions that they can't ask me if I'm busy with something else." The division of responsibilities also was evident at Independence High School, as the regular education teacher commented on the division of procedural tasks, "It saves a lot of time because she helps me distribute the materials and pass back papers throughout the class period. Students receive help in a quick and timely manner with two teachers." The special education teacher also remarked,

Some teachers are so organized that they have everything completely detailed, down to the minutes, as far as how they are going to teach and what they are going to do. And

when that's the case, I really just assist them and back them up when it comes to the kids. I don't usually teach in those classrooms. I play a support role and the regular teacher does everything else.

Some teachers expressed an acceptance of their role to assist in the classroom. Other teachers stated that they felt undervalued and underused in the classroom. The special education teachers stated concerns that their regular education co-teachers didn't fully understand the co-teaching model, nor did they have a desire to implement it with fidelity. In addition to concerns from the co-teachers, concerns about responsibilities were also pointed out from parents, community members, and administrators.

Some teachers expressed concerns when all stakeholders did not value to use of co-teaching. One teacher at Green High School explained, "If I can't get the regular education teacher to 'buy-in' and see the value of what needs to happen in a co-teaching classroom, then it's not going to be effective." One Harrison teacher remarked, "In my experience, co-teaching has kind of been demonstrative of the separation between the reality of what goes on in schools and the kind of grad school philosophy of how things operate. There's a huge disconnect."

When teachers working in a co-teaching environment are able to develop positive interdependence while maintaining individual accountability, effective implementation of co-teaching was reported. Other teachers reporting a "disconnect" were unable to create a sense of shared responsibilities that are essential to co-teaching models. In addition to a sense of positive interdependence and accountability, successful co-teaching partners acknowledged the need for strong communication and ongoing interactions in a co-teaching environment, which will be discussed in the next section.

***Promotive interactions and communication.*** While in every conversation about co-teaching, the teachers mentioned the importance of communication, they did not necessarily report that communication actually occurred in meaningful ways. Regular face to face promotive interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and effective communication skills were evident among co-teaching partners that presented positive experiences with co-teaching models. Many teachers expressed frustration around the lack of time provided to them by administration for ongoing communication and proactive face to face interactions with their co-teaching partners. Additionally, few teachers discussed their personal efforts to carve out time and make communication a priority. Several teachers mentioned talking in passing, while only one team discussed taking time outside of their school day to proactively plan and collaborate. Similarly, teachers who reported shared responsibilities in the previous section (Adams, Bradford, Emerson, and Green) also shared a positive perspective with regards to promotive interaction and communication, thus strengthening the implementation of their co-teaching model. While teachers from Carter did not describe positive attributes around positive interdependence and accountability, they did perceive communication as high within their school.

A teacher from Bradford explained, “I think for the process to work, there needs to be a lot of communication between the two of us as far as what we want to see and our overall expectations. That is ideal, but it doesn’t always occur.” The regular education teacher at Green expressed similar ideas, “The number one thing would be communication between the teachers. The second thing I would say is just having respect for one another and establishing a routine on how the classroom will be run.” Communicating expectations early on and establishing a foundation of respect builds trust while also reinforcing the importance of the interpersonal

interactions (Gately & Gately, 2001) and the positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) defined as critical through this research.

Communication between the Adams teachers was reported as very positive, although the special education teacher warned, “I’ve observed in classrooms where the regular and special education co-teachers didn’t agree and it seemed like everything was a negotiation. That makes things really uncomfortable.” When asked if she ever experienced something like that she explained, “With my partner, it’s seamless. If she’s not sure how to handle things, she’ll come to me and say, ‘What do you think?’ and vice versa.” The combination of regular communication between co-teachers, as well as with the building principal has improved the perceptions of co-teaching at Adams High School.

At Harrison, communication at the teacher level is often a result of lack of communication at the school leadership level, as reported by the special education teacher, “Basically, we sat down right before school started. That’s when we were told we were co-teaching. So it was literally 3 or 4 days until the kids were coming, so we went through the class lists and talked about the kids. We reviewed their strengths and weaknesses so we could try and get a game plan going. You know, we reviewed the curriculum materials. We didn’t have a choice, so we just ran with it!”

Overall, the teachers expressed their efforts to communicate with one another within the existing time limitations. “We try and communicate before each lesson via email, text, or in person. We discuss who will take the lead in the lesson, but sometimes we just aren’t able to connect,” explained one Bradford educator. At Emerson, the teachers have worked together for several years in a co-teaching model. They report spending time at the beginning of the year to



discuss roles and responsibilities in the classroom. As the year progresses, they make revisions to their plans as needed. The regular education teacher stated,

Having a good communication and a strong rapport with your co-teacher is extremely important. I have worked with two of my co-teachers for several years and after time, our routines become very natural. We talk about making adjustments and getting our goals accomplished. Having a good relationship and experience with an individual is a vital part of our success.

The special education teacher at Carter perceived a positive relationship with her co-teacher which included regular communication. She explained that the district used EdInsight (a web-based instructional management system) which includes teacher lesson plans. “I’m a resource room teacher too and I need to use the same things she is using in her classroom. If she does something different than what’s in the system, she tells me in advance.” She described co-teaching communication as, “nowhere close to an exact science”, as the style of communication can be formal through an online system or more informal among the teachers. She explained the way she’s communicated with teachers this year,

We text one another. She will email me or we’ll call each other and she’ll let me know what she’s doing in the classroom. Sometimes it’s during class. When the students are working independently and I’m going around assisting them, she’ll say, ‘Next week we are starting research projects’ or ‘Tomorrow we’ll be in the computer lab doing Study Island’ (an online test preparation tool).

Communication between co-teachers is a necessary component of effective cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Promotive interaction is one of the necessary tenets of the theory, which was evident in some of the conversations with teachers. It is important to point out

that the communication also extends beyond the classroom to the principals and district administrators as well. When teachers were asked about planning and implementation within their districts, few had positive responses. Most teachers expressed frustration over the perceived lack of support from school leadership to ensure the successful planning and implementation of co-teaching models in their districts.

**Systems thinking and school leadership.** While school leadership and administrative support for co-teaching was a challenging subject to discuss, some teachers did speak with appreciation for the support given to them by their building-level or district-level supervisors. Other teachers expressed a need for a more systems thinking approach when it comes to the administration and supervision of special education. In order for co-teaching to work effectively, the school system should be aligned so that all of the component parts work together. The alignment and leadership to oversee these connections should be led by building principals, yet over half of the teachers in this study perceived a lack of systems thinking with regards to co-teaching. The special education teacher at Adams shared how she works closely with her administration to try and increase the effectiveness of the implementation of co-teaching in her school,

My principal and I have conversations about where I am needed most, but sometimes I feel like we do triage. I just go wherever I'm needed most. He gives us a lot of input on the schedule as far as the inclusion periods. Ultimately, we know our kids the best and what their needs are, so he shares those decisions with us. Obviously, he has the right to overrule our suggestions, but he usually doesn't.

When asked to provide a more specific example of what this looks like, she shared,

If I see I have four kids in one English class but none of them might have ELA goals, then maybe the schedule needs adjusted. The students all might be math kids and they might be OK, but my principal doesn't know that, so I might change the schedule to go into another class that has more needs.

Group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) requires time to reflect on cooperative practices and the ability to communicate changes. This act of processing benefits co-teachers within the classrooms, but it also beneficial when it comes to communicating needs and changes with building leaders. Communication and problem-solving with the principal provides support to teachers, while also allowing school leaders to identify improvements that can be made to the school system to sustain effective co-teaching practices.

At Carter, the special education teacher reported supportive system-wide structures provided by her supervisor. "We get a bi-weekly special education checklist. All of the regular education teachers fill it out. It's returned to the case manager, copied, and mailed home to the parents every two weeks." When asked how this is helpful within the co-teaching environment she explained, "It's a way for us to document that the regular education teacher is communicating with the special education teacher. It's an accountability structure that the supervisor included because we asked for her assistance." The teacher provided a further description of the checklist and stated,

On the front it has the student's current grade, behavior, missed work, and general areas that they need to improve upon. On the back is the SDI that the teacher uses in their classroom which could be chunking materials, tests read aloud, the use of graphic organizers. It helps me to know what the student is getting when I'm not with them. It really is a good communication tool.

This example represents a structured way to ensure regular communication to a variety of stakeholders. The implementation of a checklist is a proactive strategy for districts to consider, as it promotes shared responsibilities, the documentation of instructional expectations and accommodations, as well as a systems thinking approach to co-teaching implementation.

In other schools, the decision-making around co-teaching is not often shared. Several teachers reported that their principal does not have much involvement in the planning or implementation of co-teaching. Some teachers explained that it is teacher-driven, while others received minimal direction from district-level supervisors. One teacher explained, “Co-teaching at Fairfield is more led by the supervisor of special education than the principal, but she’s actually been cutting back on co-teaching lately.” When asked to explain why the co-teaching would be reduced, she reported, “The reason they gave us was that we weren’t doing it correctly. They say it’s not going away all together, but that they are going to retrain us to do it the right way. Meanwhile, I’ve been doing this for over ten years!” She communicated concerns that district leadership does not always value the work or experience of classroom teachers, which compacts the pressure when implementing mandated structures like co-teaching models in the classroom. She also expressed the lack of a systematic approach to co-teaching in her district, causing additional stress on the teachers implementing it.

At Harrison, teachers also reported struggling with school leadership, or lack thereof, “We do not receive any support from administration. Teachers are disgruntled because they may not get along with their co-teacher or don’t have the ability to plan on the weekends. They get frustrated because when they ask for time, they don’t get it.” This claim was echoed by several teachers as many described feeling like they are expected to implement a co-teaching model with little or no support from school leaders. They continue to try and implement co-teaching models

in their classrooms, but expressed a lack of follow through from those who expect that the models are implemented with fidelity and demonstrate positive results. Both teachers at Emerson expressed concerns regarding school leadership, with the regular education teacher stating, “we have voiced concerns about the co-teaching has been implemented in our district and very little has been done about it. We keep doing co-teaching because we have to, not because it works.” This negative outlook was presented by several teachers in this study, as they conveyed concerns that co-teaching models are not being effectively implemented in the classrooms.

In some cases, co-teaching resulted from a mandates from school leaders as a response to state assessments, not from a need or willingness to institute a new method. “When the Keystones came, the district (Fairfield) had to talk about co-teaching and how we were preparing the students in special education for this test. They shared different models of co-teaching with us, but gave us the latitude to pick what worked for us.” When pushed to determine the ongoing support that the teachers received, one stated, “We do co-teaching because it’s a mandate, not because it’s an effective method.” While districts may be effectively closing the achievement gap, as measured by their SPP scores, many teachers in the study did perceive co-teaching as an effective method.

With ongoing concerns about support from school leadership, teachers voiced frustration that focused on professional development. Many teachers expressed that they did not feel prepared to implement co-teaching, nor did they feel that school leaders were responsive to the need for more professional development and the ongoing training and support required to implement co-teaching effectively.

**Professional learning.** Professional learning was a critical point of discussion for many of the teachers in the study. Despite the amount of professional development provided, the majority of teachers wanted additional training, more in-depth and ongoing training opportunities, and the ability to access coaches or consultants to continue to improve the co-teaching model. There was a general lack of consistency in training across districts, coupled with a lack of communication about the training that could be provided to teachers, which could be attributed to a lack of systems thinking. Some teachers did express satisfaction in what their districts offered, particularly when provided by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Others reported district embedded professional learning opportunities that were valued by the teachers. Responses regarding professional learning fell into two categories; ongoing training and school structures to support sustained development.

**Ongoing training.** Ongoing training for teachers in the field of special education requires job-specific updates with regards to new regulations and procedures. Job-embedded training may also include other special education topics that are intended to improve the performance of the teachers. When districts provided ongoing consistent exposure to special education training, teachers reported positive feedback on professional learning. However, less than half of the teachers reported satisfaction with the ongoing training that they received.

Both teachers at Adams High School explained that training is consistent in their district, “I’ve gone through a formal training twice for multiple days, but every year we do get something like a refresher.” The multiple day training offered at Adams was the largest amount of professional development reported by all teachers, with an overall range from zero to 3 days per school year.

Independence High School schedules one full in-service day at the beginning of each school year that is devoted to the needs of special education teachers. This time is allocated for teachers to align their instruction and communicate with colleagues. “We learned strategies to use in our classes. We also learned ways to co-teach and use another human resource in the room.” While teaching strategies are critical to build with all co-teachers, teachers at Independence were the only ones to speak about the co-teaching model as a “human resource” to access. The trainings at Independence were planned and facilitated by the pupil services director. “She also had the IU consultants provide training. They came back a couple times to observe us and give us feedback. We had the opportunity in a non-evaluation way to ask questions and to voice our own concerns and they would help us to problem solve.” Both teachers spoke about the value of this component of professional development and the need for ongoing support that allowed for brainstorming and trouble-shooting.

Effective co-teaching models require communication. Gately and Gately (2001) described this as interpersonal interactions, while Johnson and Johnson (2009) defined it as face-to-face promotive interactions. Both recommended that teachers have time to talk about what they are doing in order to make a co-teaching environment a successful one. The teachers at Carter High School described professional learning in their district including the opportunities to network with other teachers,

The effective part (of the professional development) was being able to look at all of the co-teaching models and realize that it wasn't a one size fits all thing. There are a lot of ways to going about doing this. We were also given time to talk to each other, figure out how we wanted to work together, and what each one of us brought to the table, which was doesn't happen a lot.

When asked why this made the development effective, the teacher remarked, “We could have an honest conversation. If you are going to work in the same room with someone every day and share responsibilities, then you need to be able to be honest.” The honesty uncovered with this teacher contributes to the development of interpersonal skills needed to implement co-teaching as suggested in the fourth tenet of the Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). If co-teachers do not have the opportunity to communicate openly, build trust, and resolve potential conflicts, implementation will not be successful.

*Need for school structures to promote sustained development.* The teachers from Carter also described a structure within their district that promotes communication and professional learning. Teachers meet twice a week, as per their contract, in professional learning communities (PLCs). Forty-minute time slots are set aside for teacher teams to meet. Since the Carter campus is in one location, teachers across grade levels, departments, or interest groups can meet. “I’m getting time every week to meet with my co-teachers. Sometimes there’s an agenda from our admin, but otherwise we can work together. I’m fortunate because my co-teacher is also in the English department, so we are in the same PLC.” The use of PLCs has increased in recent years as a means for teachers to communicate regularly with a supportive network of educators. Carter High School was the only one that reported utilizing this structure to support co-teaching partners.

Some schools expressed very little to no support about the professional development required to successfully implement co-teaching. This lack of structure to promote sustained development was an area of concerns for several districts. A Harrison teacher explained, “The administration had one in-service day with us all together, just going over the co-teaching models. And then that was it. Otherwise, you’re on your own.” Similarly at Denton, the special



education teacher expressed a lack of professional development to support co-teaching in the classroom. “In-service instruction on how to perform team-teaching? I think we had a couple days where we went over the process a couple years ago when we started this.” He described the planning and preparation at the district level as, “they threw it up against the board and hope it stuck.” When teachers perceived a lack of planning and systematic approach for sustained support for co-teaching, frustration was more readily expressed throughout the interview process.

The regular education teacher from Denton remarked, “Training was provided once, approximately five years ago with no follow up since then.” This lack of follow up impacts effective co-teaching, as it directly relates to the group processing suggested in Johnson and Johnson’s (2009) Cooperative Learning Theory. Reflecting on what is working and what needs to change are critical discussions that co-teachers need, but were rarely reported by teachers. When structures existed to allow group processing, teachers perceived more support from school leadership.

Emerson High School shared both positive and negative aspects of professional development surrounding co-teaching in their district,

We did have some training on co-teaching, about 5 years ago. It was for about a day or two. And since then, it’s been kind of, we just do whatever works best. I wouldn’t say that we have a lot of direction. The administration did offer for us to go to another school district’s training over the summer, but the timing just didn’t work out for a lot of us. We want to make time to talk about what’s working, but we just don’t have the opportunity in our schedules.

The need for a comprehensive plan for job-embedded training and professional learning time is perceived as a critical need by teachers implementing co-teaching. Several teachers in this study

expressed that they knew what was needed to improve the co-teaching environment in their school, but lacked the authority to make the necessary changes. Facing similar concerns about at Green High School, some teachers have taken it upon themselves to try and make the co-teaching model work in their school,

While the district provides training, they (administration) refuse to properly implement it. They don't give us what we need to make it work, so we figure it out for ourselves. Since we've been friends for ten years, we meet, plan, and discuss on our own time. We do it on the weekends and in the summer because we want our classes to be successful. No one really has time, but we find it somehow!

When facing a lack of direction from leadership teachers at Green attempted to drive the implementation of the co-teaching model. Their ability to be proactive was evident throughout the interviews.

Emerson teachers also reported that the administration has provided some opportunities for teachers to build skills to better equip them in co-teaching classrooms. "We have had a few co-teaching trainings this school year, however they were never followed up on. I think that these trainings would be more beneficial if they were taken more seriously and made a priority for teachers." The teacher went on to state that the trainings are often "squeezed into the schedule, whenever they (administration) doesn't know what to put in place." This was perceived by the teacher as "setting a tone that co-teaching, and special education in general, is just not a priority in the district." Frustration grew for this teacher as she is interested in more training and in bettering her teaching practices, but expressed that she did not feel supported by her school district to implement effective co-teaching.

In another district, planning for professional development does not include input from teachers. At Harrison High School, the special education teacher reported getting no professional development at all. “I guess they assumed since I had a Master’s Degree in special education I would know what to do. It was the first time I ever did any co-teaching before, so we were kind of on our own.” As a relatively new teacher, this was reported as a challenge to overcome. “I literally just talked to other teachers and said ‘What did you do? How does this work in your room?’ They were honest and helpful, but that was it.” While pursuing the knowledge of colleagues was helpful, this teacher expressed a need for more formalized trainings to meet his needs.

A teacher from Bradford also explained how training could be improved from her perspective, “It would be nice if the district would offer time in the summer for us to meet prior to school. All of our in-services are for state-mandated items. We hardly ever have time to meet with special education staff. That would help.” With time during the school year planned for mandatory trainings, teachers reported that carving out additional time focused on special education needs was lacking in most districts.

Some teachers reported the professional development on co-teaching was presented as a mandate, a topic that was required to be compliant. Teachers reported that this approach made co-teaching seem as a non-negotiable as opposed to a best practice. Other districts presented co-teaching as an opportunity to meet the needs of students. Very few districts implemented plans for professional learning that were ongoing, comprehensive, and grounded in relevant research, as reported by the teachers in this study.

Professional development at Emerson was the only program that focused on research and was based on special education literature. “Our initial training was based on Marilyn Friend’s co-

teaching handbook. It was just presenting different models.” When asked about the effectiveness of the training, the regular education teacher responded, “I think if we would’ve had time to talk to each other and decide how it would work in each class it would have been more effective. Or maybe if we would’ve had practice with that model then we could incorporate it more often.” The lack of group processing and face to face promotive interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) make implementation a challenge for co-teaching educators.

*Access to educational support organizations.* Districts in this study were selected, in part, due to their work with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU). Co-teaching in the region was initially rolled out through this organization in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Education. At Bradford, training was coordinated in this manner. “We received training at the AIU. Teaching professionals also came out to our district to give us materials on how to work with the co-teachers.” She went on to explain that the professional development was not a singular event, but scheduled as multiple training sessions. “They came twice during the school year. They gave us helpful procedures that can be implemented to help the classroom run better. The follow-up was helpful because we knew there was someone else there to provide support.” The follow-up reported at Bradford was also reported as useful by other teachers in this study. The ongoing support through the AIU coaching opportunities provided regular feedback to teachers and often provided communication that was not existent with building or school district leadership.

Adams teachers also worked with the AIU to support co-teaching in their high school. “The IU worked with co-teaching partners, talked about roles and responsibilities, observed in the classroom, and provided feedback to the teams. They helped with recommending a model, like we use the station model or one teach/one assist.” Another Adams teacher spoke positively

about the support from the intermediate unit, “We received a really fabulous training from the AIU. It has been consistent and helpful. If everyone implements what we have learned at these trainings, it would be invaluable to our students.” When asked to clarify about the last portion of her statement, the teacher elaborated that, “When there is follow-through on initiatives then they happen. If no one checks to see what is being implemented, then people close their doors and do whatever they want.” When asked about additional trainings, outside of the intermediate unit, one Bradford teacher explained, “Two years ago, several teachers attended another district’s workshop. They were also using co-teaching. Unfortunately, with so many schedules to align, there were a lot of teachers who couldn’t get coverage to go.” Time and coordination continues to be reported as obstacles to getting effective professional development in place for co-teachers in this study.

Districts in this study who accessed educational organizations like local intermediate units, shared positive perspectives on professional learning and special education trainings. The ongoing nature of the training and the coaching available to teachers was a benefit to those struggling to implement co-teaching. Organizations outside of the school district may be better equipped to look at school structures and teacher personalities and serve as a facilitator throughout the implementation. Teachers in this study perceived to have more support and encouragement from outside organizations providing training and coaching as opposed to district leaders.

As identified in the literature review, professional development is a major component when considering effective co-teaching practices. Throughout the conversations with the teachers, it became clear that while professional learning and training were provided to teachers, it occurred through various means and at different depths. Sessions at the beginning of the year

allowed for planning with co-teachers and the setting up of yearly expectations, but did not provide the follow through needed to sustain effective co-teaching models over time. While some schools reported having multi-day trainings, this was not standard among all schools. The coaching that was reported by some teachers was well-received and provided them with ongoing contact with the trainers as well as other educators implementing co-teaching. As schools analyze their professional development plans, they should consider the ongoing needs of the special education department and those that work directly with them. As teachers are placed in co-teaching classrooms, school leaders should pay careful attention to the support that those teachers need to be successful within the co-teaching model.

The regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts perceive co-teaching as a challenge to design and implement, but beneficial for students. Co-teaching within secondary schools requires an understanding of co-teaching models and the skill and support to implement it effectively. Teachers perceived a strong need for communication and clear expectations for roles and responsibilities. Professional development was perceived as a high need in most schools in order for co-teaching models to be successful.

## **Research Question 2**

Research question 2 explored the perceptions of regular and special education teachers on the strategies that work best in a co-teaching environment. Teachers were asked to describe the strengths and areas for improvement in co-teaching regarding instructional strengths, structural strengths, and strengths in effective implementation. Most teachers discussed the importance of communication as a foundation for making co-teaching work in the classroom. Teachers explained the essential elements needed to ensure that co-teaching was effective in the secondary setting.

As educators working for a number of years in public education, most spoke in positive terms of what they needed to do to make the co-teaching model work, while others presented a case that co-teaching was not a viable instructional model with many areas for improvement. Some teachers questioned what was truly best for their students and how they could provide the most support to them in the least restrictive environment. Their overall perceptions were such that, co-teaching was mandated and that they were obligated to follow this model.

**ELA strategies to support student learning.** The co-teachers in this study reported their efforts to maximize the use of two teachers within their ELA classrooms. Some co-teaching teams shared perspectives regarding effective teaching routines, instructional strategies, and effective lessons for all students. Teachers reported the ability to maximize small group instruction to better meet the needs of the students. Teachers also discussed specific instructional strategies used within the ELA classes that are perceived as effective when developing reading and language arts skills with high school students.

Many teachers tried to provide a glimpse into their classrooms, conveying a general outline for lesson structure and how each teacher contributed to the effectiveness of the lesson. “My partner and I teach together in a large group setting and then we judge who might need additional small group instruction. Some students are ready to move ahead in the lesson and others just aren’t,” reported a Bradford teacher. When asked to detail the logistics of how this occurs, she stated, “Small group is usually done in another room to pose less of a distraction, but usually only lasts 15-20 minutes, so those students can jump right back in with the rest of the class and not fall behind.” The strategy of small group instruction was shared by several teachers as a meaningful way to provide smaller chunks of content to students in a more focused group.

Within small group instruction time, teachers provide students with specific strategies that can be used to improve their reading skills. The goal is for students to learn the strategy within the smaller group so that they are able to practice it with support and then use it when they return to the larger class group. At Independence, both teachers shared detailed strategies about how this type of instruction is working in their co-teaching ELA classrooms,

We taught our students how to annotate text and how to make meaning while you are reading. We would stop and use think-aloud strategies, where the students actually had to think about what we just read. For many of our students, they don't do that naturally. We would teach them how to circle words they don't know, take notes off to the side, ideas about the main idea and details.

The use of specific reading strategies with students was perceived to be effective in co-teaching classrooms. The teachers reported feeling better able to reach all students and to provide them with proven strategies to help them improve their reading skills.

Similarly, the co-teacher at Independence stated, "It really helped all of the kids participate more when we were reading. I've been in really passive classrooms and it just doesn't help them. This strategy improved reading, for sure." As reported by several teachers in this study, reading aloud was often used in ELA classrooms. The teachers at Independence described close reading that pushes students to focus on the text and use active thinking strategies to process the content. While the teachers at Independence did not report a lot of professional development around co-teaching in particular, they both expressed that the district emphasized training to improve all teachers' abilities to provide quality reading instruction. Both teachers were well-versed in a variety of instructional strategies that were used to reach all learners in their classes. One explained,



Within ELA, we do a lot of writing. We set up the classroom in different circles and we would move the kids around every few minutes. The students need that constant movement. I think it keeps their minds more focused on what they're doing. It eliminates the chance for them to get distracted when they are rotating through different activities. When they came to me, I was working on the content in their writing. When they met with the co-teacher, she would work on conventions, spelling, mechanics, and things like that. It works out when we work together using a station rotation, then we can both be involved in the instruction.

The instructional strategies described at Independence reflect the positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) discussed earlier. When the teachers are both working on a component of the instruction that will improve the overall model, teachers perceived that they were more effective and felt more positive about the co-teaching model.

Sharing the responsibilities of classroom instruction was described as a challenge by several teachers. The teachers at Bradford High School found benefits to developing an instructional approach that would allow both teachers to serve as the instructor, as one teacher described the instructional strategies used during a double block of ELA,

It worked so well. One teacher would work on pre-reading activities, another would reinforce vocabulary. We created Power Points to accompany the text and had time to do reading activities to reinforce comprehension. We did little quizzes and presentations.

The students had time to digest the stories and were really able to get a lot out of it.

**Differences with pull-out classes.** Formal instructional programs varied among the teachers. Some of the teachers discussed using prescriptive programs for their pull-out ELA classes, but not utilizing a formal program in their co-taught classes. Teachers emphasized the

important components of an ELA program. The regular education teacher at Adams explained, “Co-teaching works really well when half the class is given a choice. Like you can listen to a book on tape or read silently. I can pull a small group and work on comprehension and my partner can take another group.” The special education co-teacher also discussed building student choice and ownership in the classroom,

We try to do a lot to build independence. We do short checks in where they are with their reading skills. Whether it’s like short paragraphs where they have to answer a couple questions or write in a journal. Sometimes, I’m not sure they’re getting it, so I need to make sure they are getting to the deeper meaning of things. That is easier to do when we are both in the classroom facilitating.

While the reading strategies discussed by the teachers could be implemented in classes that were not co-taught, an additional teacher was perceived as helpful in meeting the varying academic levels present in some co-taught classes.

In talking with teachers, they detailed differences in instructional strategies taught in co-taught classes, when compared to pull-out or resource classes. Some reported that pull-out classes were often for specific populations of students including students in life skills programs and those that require emotional support. Others explained that students might receive pull-out support for a specialized curricular program. All teachers provided clear differences between the prescriptive programs used in some pull-out classes compared to the integrated approach in the inclusion classes.

The special education teacher at Adams expressed her perspectives when comparing co-teaching classes with pull-out or resource room classes. “When you take a piece of literature and we do it in my resource room, you’re not getting the same level of discussion and understanding

that you do when my special education students are included in the regular classroom.” When encouraged to say more about describing the level of discussion and understanding that she meant, the teacher offered, “When my kids (special education) are in a regular English class with kids (regular education) that really grasp it, they point out things that my kids wouldn’t have gotten and make connections that help my kids to figure things out.” With a goal to provide as much relevant grade level content as possible, teachers reported that co-taught classes use grade level texts, materials, and standards.

In the ELA classes at Harrison, the teachers explained that they are “really working on teaching them to comprehend, analyze, synthesize, all those things with the literature.” When asked to explain what comprehension, analysis, and synthesis look like in the classroom, she shared, “Students have to understand why the author wrote this and what his purpose was. Sometimes we get the audio for the novels. We would play little segments and then stop and have a discussion.” The teacher also explained that novels are not the only source of content in co-taught classrooms, “We have to prepare them for the Keystones too, so we are using those books to guide students towards the deeper meaning. When their understanding is at the surface level, which makes it difficult.” At the secondary level, students are responsible for learning the course content, as well as taking the Keystone exams at the end of the course.

At Fairfield, the teachers are also looking to maximize student understanding, “We do more comprehension skills than just decoding and fluency which happens in the pullout classes. They kids pay more attention because they don’t want to look any less than their peers.” The teacher went on to discuss the difference between co-taught and pull-out classes in her building, “In the co-taught classes, the goal is to give the students grade level materials with support. Pull-

out classes can be taught at a much lower level. They focus on more basic skills.” Since she has taught both co-taught classes and pull-out in the past, she explained,

It’s very different in my pull-out classes. There, I do Wilson Reading. It’s a scripted reading program for kids who are substantially below grade level. They wouldn’t be able to manage in the co-taught classes. A more heterogeneous group can have benefits for students with special needs, but sometimes they need more than those classes can offer them.

The regular education teacher at Independence pointed out, “Teaching them to work while they were reading and pay attention, that metacognition piece is huge. That really helped our kids to have a better sense of what their job was as a reader in our class.” Demonstrating an understanding of reading content and strong pedagogy were reflected in some of the discussion with teachers. This factor was also indicated as a barrier when teachers do not have the prerequisite knowledge to provide quality instruction in the co-teaching classroom.

At Fairfield, the regular education teacher detailed classroom strategies that are implemented in her co-taught classes. “So, if it’s a difficult reading piece, we might read the text or play the audio. If it’s a piece they can read then we’ll read around the room. We do most things out loud.” She also expressed strategies to get students to improve in their writing. “In all of my classes, we do structured outlines to start them out and get them on the right foot, even in regular classes. It helps the students to give them a framework so they understand the expectations.” While different strategies were described by each teacher, clear expectations for learning were conveyed.

Teachers described a variety of instructional strategies used in co-taught classrooms. Effective classrooms maximized the use of two teachers to meet the instructional needs of

students and move them towards grade level reading standards. In order for effective instruction to occur in the classroom, lessons need to be planned for students. Instructional planning for co-teaching is a necessary component recommended by Gately and Gately (2001) in order to present organized, cohesive instruction to students in co-taught classrooms.

**Increased planning time.** Within each interview, the need for regularly scheduled planning time was described at both the classroom and district level. Teachers focused primarily on the planning needed to effectively implement co-teaching in the classroom, with all teachers expressing a need for increased planning time. The guiding questions also asked teachers to reflect on the planning and support at the administrative level, which will be reviewed in a later section.

When Independence High School began implementing co-teaching several years ago, the administration reduced the teaching schedules for both regular education and special education teachers to ensure that everyone was provided with one period to collaborate and plan with their co-teacher. “With a common plan period every day, we’d meet and look at the objectives for our lessons. We try and figure out the best way to meet the kids’ needs and help them reach their targets.” The special education teacher reported, “They wanted this done with fidelity so they made changes within the system to make it work. Now with budget cuts, staffing is getting cut and you don’t have the time in the schedule to do those things anymore.” When asked to elaborate on this change, the teacher explained, “We’ve had to cut teachers, which means there’s not enough time let in the schedule to free up two teachers at once.” She expressed concerns that during initial implementation this support was offered, however the need still exists for co-teachers trying to plan with their colleagues.

Another Independence teacher provided a description of what planning looks like at the classroom level,

When I planned with my co-teacher, we would both get our packets and go over our text annotations so we could play off of each other in the lesson. One of us would usually walk the room and the other would do the reading part of the lesson. Sometimes the co-teacher would stop and say, ‘Ms. B. we need to talk about what’s going on in this paragraph’, because she might seem some misunderstandings with the students.

The relationship between the two teachers at Independence allowed them to co-teach in a manner that utilized both of the skills to meet the needs of the students. The ability to plan together helped to develop their partnership and create a more effective model of instruction in the classroom.

Conversely, an existing structure for planning did not exist at Harrison High School. “The expectations for co-teaching in our district is rather unattainable, as we never have common planning time.” When asked if daily communication occurred in the classroom, the teacher responded, “The special education teacher frequently leaves the class due to meetings or emergencies with other students. We have no time to talk so a common plan would be a major improvement.” The special education teacher at Harrison reinforced the importance of time, “One of the biggest problems is time. I have like 5 preps this year. I teach classes at all four grade levels (9, 10, 11, and 12) plus a life skills class.” Her schedule includes five different courses or levels that require different preparation on her part, as well as coordinating four of the classes with a regular education teacher. She elaborated on this planning dilemma, “I’m with three different teachers and that is really hard because there is no way to have common planning with all of them.” In an ideal situation, the special education teacher would be provided planning

time with each of the four teachers that she works with. With a nine-period day, it would be impossible to allot that amount of time, considering the teacher also requires a lunch period in addition to her existing teaching periods. The lack of planning time decreases the collaboration and communication among co-teaching and creates a barrier to effective instruction in the classroom.

Co-planning at Carter is a challenge as well. The teachers make sure that, at a minimum, they are able to review some basic items together,

We go over the specially designed instruction (SDIs) and talk about the accommodations. You have to be on the same page with that especially when you are sitting in an IEP meeting with a parent. We also figure out, what do they (students) need extra assistance in? What are their strengths and weaknesses? How did they do in the previous year's English class?

While these informational components are critical to meeting the requirements in a student's IEP, this level of communication does little for the building of relationships or setting classroom expectations with a co-teacher. Increased time to plan strategically would serve several purposes, as teachers could develop the trust necessary to work collaboratively in a co-teaching setting, but also provide them with the time to design effective lessons and prepare materials and assessments for their students.

At Emerson, the teachers communicated a flexible approach to planning, "Our district does not provide common planning time for co-teachers. They try to be consistent with pairing the teachers up but that is not always possible." The special education teacher went on stating, "Sometimes you have to work in a subject area that you are not familiar with and that's very difficult." The regular education teacher described a common planning practice at Emerson, "In

between classes, if something comes up, we'll grab each other. We co-teach 8<sup>th</sup> period, so if we need to regroup for the next day, we would make time at the end of the day." The special education teacher explained how she was able to coordinate conversations with a co-teacher in previous years, "We did have a morning duty together and our rooms were right across the hall, but sometimes that's not enough. We tried to talk and plan as much as we could." While the teachers at Emerson conveyed that grabbing quick moments to talk and plan was helpful, other teachers felt that if a systematic approach to co-teaching were evident, then dedicated time should be provided by the school leadership.

The regular education teacher at Fairfield expressed, "The administration say that they support us 100%, but there's no time for us to plan together. The follow through would allow us to plan strategically and use our resources better." When asked what is done to accomplish all the planning that is needed, she remarked, "I really do all the planning for the class. We have no time to collaborate with each other. We update each other at the end of class about what's going on that day or the next, but that's kind of how we communicate." Her special education co-teacher agreed, "There's not much time to plan in Fairfield. I try to be flexible and respectful, but it depends on the individuals you are working with. Are they open to collaborating or not? I can't say that for all of my co-workers." The flexibility mentioned at Fairfield was also reiterated in interviews with other teachers.

At Green, one teacher mentioned, "As far as planning with some teachers, it's really on the fly. It is like, 'Do you need me today? What are you guys doing?' which is not the best approach to planning." While brief interactions in the hallway are not ideal for co-planning a class together, time is not easily found by other teachers.



Denton teachers described an overall lack of existing planning time for all teachers. “Because of a lack of planning time in general, there is certainly no time allotted for co-planning. The schedule doesn’t allow for it.” When asked to explain how the work gets done, he stated, “I plan everything myself. The co-teachers just goes with the flow. There is no difference in the way I teach when there’s a paraprofessional in there or whether it’s a co-teacher.” Due to time constraints within the school day, it is challenge for co-teachers to engage in the face to face interactions that are needed for effective cooperative work.

A similar struggle was echoed at Bradford High School. “My co-teacher last year had two classes of his own and co-taught in three other classrooms, one with me and two other ELA teachers.” When asked how this would impact planning, she reported, “Due to his schedule, he couldn’t meet and plan with anyone! When he came to my class he’d support students with proximity, help keep kids on task, and maybe support a small group.” She explained that the tasks he performed were helpful but that she knew that was “not real co-teaching.”

Time between co-teachers for the purpose of instructional planning was reported to vary among teacher s in this study. Some shared that time was allotted for planning purposes, but most teacher s were not afforded planning time with their co-teachers. Research shows that time to plan is a necessary component for effective co-teaching, yet many teachers do not receive scheduled planning time.

The need for more time was reiterated in every interview with teachers. A need exists for regularly scheduled time for teachers working in the same classroom to review their lesson objectives, find necessary resources, and design instruction that will engage all students in the class. While some teachers reported flexible ways that they have communicated with their co-teachers, none were satisfied with the amount of planning time provided by their school districts.

In addition, teachers perceived that their role as a co-teacher was not valued by school leadership when time was not allocated for the planning needed to effectively implement co-teaching in their classroom.

### **“We” versus “I” mindset**

One theme that emerged during the exploration of Research Question 2 was the concept of a “we” versus “I” mindset. In discussions with several teachers this thread appeared in the way that the educators answered questions about shared responsibility and the tenets within the Cooperative Learning Theory. When individuals are engaged in effective cooperative learning, all stakeholders are contributing to the task. In co-teaching, the success or failure of the model depend on the work of both individuals, the regular educator and the special educator. In schools where co-teaching was reported as a positive approach, one where the environment is supported student learning in reading and writing, teachers often spoke with the pronoun “we”.

In schools where the teachers did not speak in favor of co-teaching as an effective practice, they were more likely to speak using the pronoun “I”. Fairfield High School represented this concept with examples of the use of “we” versus “I”. As the teachers spoke about their experiences with co-teaching, the discussion centered on what each individual teacher did, as opposed to what the co-teaching pair accomplished together. “I planned the lesson. I collected papers. I worked with that student.” A similar theme was present in talking with a Denton High School teacher about roles and responsibilities regarding classroom management and communicating with parents, “I decide about classroom management in my room . . . I would require that I be included in conversations with the parent.” In other schools, the co-teachers perspective was more of a shared voice. “This is how we respond to parents. We plan

our lessons together.” A culture of “we” is established through the communication and practices among teachers in a co-teaching environment.

At Carter, a similar culture was conveyed through the communication with the special education teacher. She spoke about student discipline and explained, “If we feel as a team that a student needs to have a cool down, then we’ll take them to the resource room. We try to make those decisions together, so that the students see us as a united force.” When teachers described their roles and responsibilities using the pronoun we, they also demonstrated a more positive response towards co-teaching, in general. Teachers that spoke using primarily the pronoun “I” were generally negative when discussing co-teaching and shared more concerns about co-teaching as a model.

Interviews with Bradford teachers also revealed differences in language as they discussed co-teaching in their school. “We reviewed the classroom rules and discuss areas that need adjusted. We discipline together. We share the grading of tests and quizzes. That’s what makes this work for us.” She went on to say, “We both present instruction, although I tend to take the lead at times. We’ve basically figured out what works.” While the use of language was not intentionally sought out in this study, differing perspectives were shared by teachers. A culture of we within the co-teaching relationship may or may not contribute to effective instruction.

### **Research Question 3**

Teachers in this study reported many areas for improvement within the co-teaching models implemented in their school districts. They offered a variety of areas that could be improved in order to enhance co-teaching and included many barriers that they perceive are preventing effective co-teaching practices from occurring. Co-teaching models are implemented at the classroom level, yet teachers viewed many of the barriers and areas for improvements as

factors that could not be controlled at the teacher level. In their discussions of ways to improve co-teaching, many leadership-level improvements including scheduling challenges and maintaining a consistent co-teaching partner were conveyed repeatedly by the teachers. Teachers did recognize factors that were directly impacting success at the classroom level including ways to building relationships with trust with a co-teacher. Through the exploration of this research question, additional themes emerged that included teacher attitude and the mindset that teachers' held with regards to co-teaching.

**Barriers to Effective Co-Teaching.** Interviews with experienced regular and special education teachers in co-taught classrooms revealed many ways that co-teaching can be improved. Teachers identified barriers, that when eliminated, would improve the implementation of co-teaching models at the high school level. While both regular and special education teachers perceived areas for improvement, more regular education teachers were able to point out areas for improvement, whereas special education co-teachers were not as vocal in this area.

**Teacher staffing.** Staffing concerns presented as a perceived barrier to effective co-teaching. At Independence co-teaching has almost dissolved due to the teaching contract. The special education teacher explained, "The teacher's union changed the contract so that you have to have a planning period and a co-planning period, which is great but administrators don't have time in the schedule to give all of those periods so that just eliminate it." Staffing, and ultimately funding, are barriers to the effective implementation of co-teaching.

An area of improvement described by several teachers was regarding the skill level of the co-teacher. Regular education teachers reported that their co-teachers often did not have the content knowledge or skills needed to co-teach effectively in the ELA classroom. Others

responded that interpersonal issues prevented their co-teaching partnership to be as effective as it needed to be. One teacher expressed a concern with regards to her co-teaching partner. While they worked together for three years consecutively, there were areas within the relationship that were still lacking.

It was hard because sometimes she would give feedback to the students and I would recognize that it was inaccurate. Or maybe it wasn't presented exactly how it should be to the student. But you know, I had to make sure I just navigated that territory without burning the bridge or being disrespectful. She did bring value to the classroom, it was just hard for her without being a content specialist.

This was also expressed at Adams High School by the regular education teacher. She relayed concerns about the certifications of co-teachers that work in her classroom. "Sometimes when you have an inclusion teacher that's not in your subject area, they don't necessarily understand the material or where you're going with a lesson. The fact that my teaching partner and I are both English certified really helps." The problem with lack of certification in a specific subject area was shared by several regular education teachers.

At Fairfield, a similar barrier was identified by teachers, "I did have a co-teacher in my academic English course once. She felt very uncomfortable co-teaching because she didn't have the skills to actually do the work. It was much more of the 'teach and assist' model." This practice also occurred at Denton High School. "I've had math-certified teachers try and co-teach in my English classes, so they don't even have a knowledge base." Teachers facing this barrier demonstrated increased frustration, as they explained that building principals could adjust the schedule and move appropriately certified teachers into the right classrooms with little difficulty.

Certification and co-planning time were reiterated throughout both interviews with the teachers in Emerson High School. The special education teacher described her current schedule explaining, “I am in four different inclusion classrooms throughout the day with three different teachers. It is very difficult to work in subject areas that I am not certified in. At times, I am re-learning information along with the students, effecting the level of help I am able to give my students.” The reality is that, teachers who aren’t certified to teach in a subject area are being placed in classrooms for co-teaching purposes. Without equipping these teachers with the necessary skills and content knowledge, effective co-teaching will continue to be a challenge for school district.

***Teacher mindset.*** Another potential barrier revealed through the interviews was that of teacher attitude and willingness to use the co-teaching model as a positive tool to meet the needs of the learners. A teacher from Green explained her concerns about the attitude of some colleagues,

I think it’s a cop-out when teachers say that they can’t include kids in the regular classroom. You have to differentiate and meet the kids where they are. You have to make it feel like they can be a part of the class. Figure out how to bring in different readings, how to ask questions so they can actually answer them, and start to feel good about what they are doing.

Other teachers also expressed uncertainty in how co-teaching is working and whether it is a practice that should be continued. When teachers experienced a perceived ineffective co-teaching model, they were reluctant to make adjustments to make the situation improve. As one Harrison teacher stated, “It’s hard because part of me thinks that co-teaching is a complete waste of time.” The teacher went on to explain the levels of classes within her school and the tracks for

students in special education. With the amount of remediation that she believes is necessary to help these students, she perceives that can only be accomplished in a small group, intensive setting as opposed to a large group class with a mix of student abilities.

Throughout the conversation with the special education teacher from Harrison, there was an ongoing sense of tension and difficulty. Her responses focused on the struggles of co-teaching and rarely highlighted the positive components of the models. It was clear that the relationship component, professional development, and leadership needed for successful co-teaching was not present, which resulted in a dissatisfied teacher. She reported that the level of support from others beyond her classroom was “zero to none” and “very, very little”. She went on to report no professional development at all over the course of the last 1-2 years. From her perspective, co-teaching is “not the answer.” She expressed that the lack of support has contributed to numerous problems preventing co-teaching from being a viable model to help students with special needs.

At Denton, an overall mindset existed within the responses of the teachers that the perception of co-teaching is not always the same as the reality. The special education teacher stated, “It’s easy to get disillusioned with the idea of team teaching. We’re all aware that it’s a good thing for kids. When it’s implemented correctly, it becomes something that can actually help.” He expounded further that barriers often exist that are out of the control of the classroom teachers stating, “The willingness of the district to do what it takes in order to allow that to happen is another question. It’s not happening in the classroom the way they think it is.” He went on to convey this metaphor, “The parents, the people out in the community, they are the people looking at the shiny car. They’re not lifting the hood to see if the motor is running.” A

similar perspective was shared by several teachers, pointing to a lack of oversight and administrative follow through.

The regular education teacher from Denton also expressed ongoing concerns about the co-teaching model in the school district. “We don’t have time to design instruction. The implementation is quite honestly . . . it’s just two bodies in the classroom instead of one.” The teacher went on to explain, “The co-teacher was placed in my room about half way through the year because she needed another class to fill her schedule. So it was just something done by the administration to fulfill whatever obligation.” When asked to expand on the administrative obligation, the teacher explained that when principals create the schedules the need to be equitable. “If a regular education teacher has 6 teaching periods, then so should a special education teacher. The principals just fill up the special education teachers’ schedules so that it looks like they’re busy.” Concerns with equity and school leadership caused some teachers to reflect on whether co-teaching was optimal for them.

Some teachers in this study were scheduled only in co-taught classes, while others experienced a mixture of co-teaching and pull-out classes. In a pull-out class or resource room class, the special education teachers works as the sole teacher with a small group of students. One teacher expressed her preference, reflecting her mindset around the perceptions of co-teaching,

Personally, I prefer my pullout classes to co-teaching. I’ve seen kids go into team teaching classes and the parents have this idea that because they’re in a regular class that they are going to do college level work and that’s not always the case. I think its building false hope for the parent and the kid. I just don’t think it’s the best option.



Frustration at schools like Denton and Harrison can be summed up by this teacher, “The way we are operating co-teaching right now is doing more harm than good. It’s missing the key components in regards to instruction, common planning time, feedback, and trusting relationships. With those elements it could be useful and productive, but right now, it’s just not.” Improving co-teaching for many co-teachers means improving relationships with their co-teachers. Without time and consistency in multi-year partnerships, it is difficult to build the trust required to be in an effective co-teaching environment.

***Trust.*** Trust is a critical component in the relationship between co-teachers, as revealed through the interviews in this study. When two teachers are assigned to work in a classroom together for a period of time, a relationship exists. While this relationship may not be one of choice, it is a necessary component within the field of special education.

You need to get along with your co-teachers. I think that’s the first thing if you’re trying to improve co-teaching. There needs to be a level of trust that the regular education teacher will trust the special education teacher to be able to teach and know the curriculum in a way that is up to their standards. Sharing the responsibility of teaching with another person requires that we trust each other to do the right thing to make this work for our kids.

A teacher at Green described the co-teaching partnership as “a relationship between the two professionals that has to be mutual common ground, consideration, and understanding. Basically, it needs to be a good pair.” The teacher described that improving co-teaching means that work needs to be done at the building level to initially select appropriate co-teaching pairs, support the pairs throughout co-teaching, and make sure that the relationship is working for both teachers.

One teacher from Carter High School summarizes the topic of trust succinctly, It's difficult being in someone's classroom. It's almost like being in their home. You have to be considerate of space and classroom environment. It's all about communicating with the teacher about what you feel comfortable with and what they feel comfortable with, but there's no exact recipe for success. I think when you develop a relationship with the teacher, the trust builds from there.

The teacher went onto describe the important things needed in order for a co-teaching relationship to be effective,

Communication, trust, mutual respect, and consideration are critical. It is also important to have the same goals for the experience and for the students. In regards to academics and behavior, you really have to be on the same page. It's important that the students know that they're going to get the same response from both of us because we are on the same team. I'm always going to back up my co-teacher.

With the need to collaborate and communicate with your co-teacher, building trust in that partnership is important.

At Independence, one teacher explained, "You definitely need to be able to collaborate with the other teacher. A lot of communication is good, although it's incredibly hard to do." When asked to speak more about the relationship within co-teaching classes she stated, "Having personalities that match up or people that are willing and volunteering to work with each other, and be productive, that is an asset. When you work well together, the trust is just there."

At Green High School, the both regular education and special education teachers identified the longevity of their relationships as the primary reason for the success of their co-teaching model. While they identified system issues that impacted their roles as effective co-

teachers, they remained positive about the way that co-teaching has allowed them to meet the needs of their students.

The main reason we have been able to be successful for such a long period of time is because we have been working together for so many years. We have been able to quickly assess and adapt to a variety of learning levels of our students. Some years, the scaffolding takes more steps than other years, but we work together to make it work.

The teachers contribute this success to being assigned to work together for multiple years. One teacher described how other co-teaching teams change every year and the turmoil that is often created unnecessarily by switching partners. “When you switch people every year, just out of scheduling conveniences, that’s not fair to the teachers. You need time together to develop trust and get comfortable with the other person.” Few teachers indicated having the opportunity to work for multiple years with their co-teaching partners, further compacting the relationship concerns that exist.

***Consistency.*** Special education scheduling and the assignment of co-teachers happens differently in many schools. The teachers in this study reported that this was done almost solely by the building principals or special education supervisor. Some teachers reported that teacher input was taken, at times. The inconsistency that comes with challenging schedules and multiple co-teaching partners creates additional barriers for the educators attempting to implement the co-teaching models.

At Independence High School, the special education teacher has been teaching for over sixteen years, but has only worked with the same co-teaching partner one time. As reported by other teachers this inconsistency is part of the concern around co-teaching models in high schools. “Only twice have I worked with the same teacher two years in a row. So, we start off

each year trying to see what works best with not a lot of pre-planning involved. Later in the year, it evolves and we get to know each other better”, explained the special education teacher from Fairfield. One teacher from Independence generalized, “One of the biggest barriers I see in schools is ensuring that you have a co-teaching partner for an extended period of time, not just one year.”

Similar concerns were expressed at Harrison High School. “Not only do I change co-teachers every year, but curriculum usually changes too!” When asked about the curriculum changes, the teacher stated, “Last year, I taught 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and this year it’s 11<sup>th</sup>. Totally different, so I have to learn new materials, new texts, as well as learning a new teacher.”

Another Harrison teacher responded, “If you know a system is set up in a way that is unpredictable and inconsistent, you don’t want to put a lot of energy into doing all of this work with this other person, when you know it’s going to be completely different next year.” When asked what would be an ideal plan to address the consistency in co-teaching partners, he explained, “If we knew there was a three year commitment or rotated every three years, then it would be worth the time to sit down and plan with this person.” Teachers perceived that a multiple year partnership ensured by building leadership would help to eliminate some of the inconsistencies that create obstacles for effective co-teaching classrooms.

From their perspective, teachers felt that this barrier to effective implementation could be changed relatively easily. Many explained that building principals could create schedules to support co-teaching and assign the same co-teachers every year, which would allow for increased communication and the ongoing relationship building that cooperative work requires. While scheduling at the secondary level is a complex process, maintaining consistent co-teaching assignments were perceived as a high priority by teachers.

Some schools have taken steps towards changing schedules to meet the needs of the co-teaching partners in their buildings. “Another strength we have at Adams is we’ve worked together for so many years. We know how the classroom is set up. It’s not like starting over every year.” This consistency has created a positive response to co-teaching as evident through the responses from both teachers at Adams. The teachers at Green High School have also enjoyed multiple years working with the same co-teacher. Their response regarding relationship development and trust in the previous section help to explain why co-teaching has been successful in their school. The regular education teacher at Carter also explained, “I’ve been working with the same co-teacher for the last few years, which has helped. We know the procedures, the materials, and how my classrooms runs.” She went onto to explain that time is saved at the beginning of each year since they don’t need to take time to get to know someone new. It helps them to start off the year focusing on their students instead of handling interpersonal issues with another adult.

Within the topic of consistency, concerns were also expressed regarding teacher turnover as a barrier to long term consistency. One Bradford teacher stated,

Special education is a major department where consistency is needed but due to furloughs and cuts, we get a lot of turnover. People can bump other people out of positions and move out of special education. When you get a new person each year, you have to teach them from scratch. It becomes really tiring when it’s every year. The district has to make this a priority in order for co-teaching to be effective.

Teachers also conveyed numerous barriers to effective co-teaching design and implementation. These barriers were shared across many districts. Some teachers shared potential sources of the barriers, as well as possible solutions. By removing these barriers,

teachers felt that co-teaching could improve and be a more effective model for students and teachers.

Barriers to implementation exist in many educational models not just within co-teaching. Obstacles within co-teaching exist and were readily identified by the teachers in this study, although primarily by the regular education teachers. Some barriers represent classroom level concerns that can be solved with input from the teachers, but many of the barriers are system level obstacles that need to be addressed with school leadership.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 reported on the findings from this study of English Language Arts teachers implementing co-teaching models in secondary schools. Each teacher shared an individualized perception of their co-teaching experience. Many similarities were identified regarding the need for open and collaborative communication, increased planning time, ongoing professional learning, and systematic and supportive school leadership. In addition, themes of trust, consistency, teacher mindset, and a “we vs. I” mentality were also revealed. These themes can provide insight into the successful implementation of co-teaching models in other schools. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings and implications for future practice and research.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to legislation over the last 15 years, school districts have created inclusive teaching models to better meet the needs of students with special needs. With a mandate to meet the needs of students within the least restrictive environment, models of co-teaching have been implemented in school districts and include both a regular education and special education teacher in the general classroom. Since co-teaching has become a common practice, it was worthwhile to explore the perceptions of English Language Arts teachers implementing co-teaching. A qualitative approach was used to investigate teacher insight into the implementation of co-teaching models, as well as explore possible connections to Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and the effective components of co-teaching, as recommended by Gately and Gately (2001). This chapter begins with a summary of the purpose of the study, followed by findings, conclusions, and recommendation for further study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to interview high school teachers who co-teach and obtain their perceptions regarding the overall strengths of the program, as well as areas for improvement. Co-teaching classrooms have been formed in many public high schools. General and special education teachers are working together to implement co-teaching, which is why their perspectives were critical to this study.

This study employed interviews to explore how regular and special education English Language Arts teachers perceived co-teaching in secondary schools. While there are many aspects of special education, this study focused solely on co-teaching models and the perceptions of secondary English Language Arts teachers. Knowledge gained from the experiences of

general and special educators implementing co-teaching can lead to increased implementation of effective practices in other schools and districts. In addition, this study may contribute to the identification of effective co-teaching models and the organizational supports that increase their effectiveness, as well as insights gained from overcoming potential obstacles in the implementation of co-teaching in secondary schools. The following questions guided this research:

- (1) What are the perceptions of regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts regarding the implementation of co-teaching models within secondary schools?
- (2) What teaching strategies work best in a co-teaching environment?
- (3) How could co-teaching be improved as perceived by English Language Arts co-teachers?

In order to answer these research questions, the following procedures were used to collect data. Eighteen interviews were conducted with educators across western Pennsylvania who were implementing co-teaching in their ELA classrooms. The same protocol was used for each interview, with interviews prompts and guided questions. Individual interviews were conducted with teachers, with each speaking honestly about their perceptions related to co-teaching. Detailed responses were provided to all interview questions, giving a comprehensive look at co-teaching in secondary setting. The researcher conducted multiple readings of the interview transcripts to identify overarching themes. By rereading the transcripts, the researcher was able to highlight common themes within the data, with the recurring topics of communication, professional development, instructional strategies, and school leadership. Within those concepts, the researcher was able to further synthesize the data and identify trends including systems thinking from school leaders, promotive interactions within teacher communication, and school structures to support collaboration and professional learning. In addition, areas perceived by



teachers that require attention in order to increase the effectiveness of co-teaching models include staffing, teacher attitude, trust, and consistency.

This study contributes to the literature regarding effective co-teaching implementation, instructional practices in ELA classrooms, and special education models at the secondary level. With a focus on the perceptions of co-teachers from Western Pennsylvania, the findings may not be generalizable to other states, but do provide insight into both the benefits of co-teaching as well as the potential barriers. The interviews revealed how co-teaching was implemented, the potential impacts on students and teachers, and the areas where co-teaching implementation can be improved. The findings were consistent with existing research, as described in the next section.

### **Findings**

Findings from this study add to the existing research on co-teaching (Cleaveland, 2015; Johnson, 2012; Feustel, 2015; Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Graziano & Navarette, 2012). With limited research at the secondary level specifically, this study provides insight into the implementation of co-teaching in high school English Language Arts classrooms. The emerging themes of professional learning, communication, instructional planning, and school leadership were also consistent with existing research (Carson, 2011; Cleaveland, 2015; Isherwood, Barger-Anderson, & Erickson, 2013; Keeley, 2015; Petrick, 2015), while also revealing the additional topics of trust, consistency, and mindsets that support co-teaching implementation.

It is important for educators to understand effective components of co-teaching and factors that may impact a positive co-teaching environment. By using relevant theories to guide this research, the Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and the effective

components of co-teaching (Gately & Gately, 2001) provided a foundation for co-teaching implementation. As a framework, these theories can support school districts as they build understanding about effective co-teaching practices. While some of the components of effective teaching were evident within the conversations with teachers in this study, the factors suggested by Johnson and Johnson (2009) were not as evident. The tenets within these theories should be considered as other educators move forward with models of co-teaching within their school districts.

### **Research Question 1**

What are the perceptions of regular education and special education teachers of English Language Arts regarding the implementation of co-teaching models within secondary schools?

The reality of special education mandates were evident in speaking with all teachers. They described the importance of educating students in the least restrictive environment and the ways that co-teaching can support the needs of the students. While teachers identified positive impacts for students when it came to increased academic support and interpersonal and social gains, they did not report a positive impact on teachers. Struggles with positive interdependence and accountability were revealed, as well as conflict between shared responsibilities and division of tasks. Teachers identified factors that contribute to effective co-teaching relationships including communication and co-planning. They shared practices to enhance communication, as well as barriers to positive communication among co-teachers.

The effective implementation of co-teaching requires administrative support. Teachers perceived a general lack of support from principals and district administration when it comes to the successful implementation of co-teaching across a building or school system. Teachers expressed a need for time, increased professional learning opportunities, and educational

supports embedded within a comprehensive organizational system. Teachers perceived varying levels of evidence of Systems Thinking with many reporting a lack of strategic leadership provided by principals and district administrators.

Teachers in this study perceived co-teaching to be effective for meeting the needs of students, but cited ongoing concerns with implementation and the way co-teaching models impact educators. Some teachers cited recommendations for improving the special education system and ways to promote sustained development of special education programs.

## **Research Question 2**

What teaching strategies work best in a co-teaching environment?

Just as students need to work cooperatively in the classroom, so must teachers in a co-teaching environment. The inclusion of the Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) emphasized the importance of the collaborative relationship that was clearly articulated throughout the research. The tenets of the Cooperative Learning Theory are applicable to co-teaching, as the interactions, communication, reflection, and collaboration required of students in cooperative groups are also the foundation for a successful co-teaching environment. From the perspective of eighteen secondary teachers, some of these factors were evident, however it was clear that before teaching strategies could be implemented, a cooperative relationship needed to be established among teachers.

Co-teachers in this study cited a variety of instructional strategies used to support student learning in high school ELA classrooms. The knowledge of content teachers in providing targeted reading strategies to students is a foundational component for schools making academic gains on standardized tests and increasing SPP scores. Teachers described their efforts to implement instructional strategies to capitalize on having a co-teacher in the classroom. They

shared effective ELA practices that utilized the expertise of both the regular education content teacher, as well as the special education teacher. Teachers shared instructional strategies that maximized the use of two teachers in the classroom while providing students with useful tools to improve reading comprehension and written expression. Teachers also cited differences between co-taught and pull-out classes with many preferring the latter.

While co-teaching models are intended to promote communication, collaboration, and inclusive practices, teachers did not perceive strengths in these areas contributing to a “we” versus “I” mindset discussed in Chapter Four. Although teachers shared effective strategies for co-taught classes, many did not possess a “we” mindset that would allow them to fully integrate best practices for co-teaching in their ELA classrooms.

### **Research Question 3**

How could co-teaching be improved as perceived by English Language Arts co-teachers?

Gately and Gately (2001) suggested eight essential components of effective co-teaching, as discussed within Chapter Two. Their work connects with the tenets of Cooperative Learning Theory, as similar values of interpersonal interactions, planning, and accountability are present. The alignment of these two ideas was revealed throughout the review of literature. The interviews with regular education and special education teachers provided insight, both positive and negative, with regards to these components.

The effective components of co-teachers were perceived to be at varying levels by the teachers in this study. Despite efforts from intermediate units and school leadership, the relationship in a co-teaching classroom is complex and requires support for an effective implementation. While teachers in this study are implementing the co-teaching, several questioned the practicality of the model with limited staffing, scheduling constraints, and lack of

administrative support.

Teachers perceived a number of improvements requiring school and district leadership. Many expressed that with additional staffing and consistency in scheduling from year to year, co-teaching relationships could improve. They revealed concerns around trust and relationship building among co-teachers and stressed the need for more time to collaborate and communicate with their co-teachers in order for the model to be effective. Overall, the mindset of the teachers involved was an evident barrier for many of the schools. With support from school leaders and ongoing development, teachers believe co-teaching could be improved.

### **Recommendations and Implications for Professional Practice**

Research on co-teaching has emerged over the course of the last 15 years (Cleaveland, 2015; Graziano & Navarrete, 2012; Nickelson, 2010). Researchers have examined different special education models, co-teaching practices, and supervision of special education programs. This study focused on the implementation of co-teaching in western Pennsylvania high schools and has potential implications for teachers, principals, and school districts across the country. The following sections will look at these areas and offer recommendations with regards to their impact on co-teaching practices and comprehensive special education programs in public schools.

#### **School Leadership**

Teachers in this study revealed the importance of school leadership in the effective implementation of co-teaching. The role of school principals and special education supervisors is critical, as these administrators often make the decisions when it comes to factors that directly impact co-teachers in the classroom. Principals of secondary schools can create a positive impact on co-teaching by maintaining consistent schedules with co-teachers assigned together

for multiple years. In addition, they can provide common planning time or create alternate opportunities for collaboration for co-teachers.

Building principals should understand the components of effective co-teaching (Gately & Gately, 2001) and the tenets of the Cooperative Learning Theory (2009) in order to effectively lead co-teaching implementation in their schools. Developing a common understanding of what teachers need for a successful implementation will help to design a system-wide approach to co-teaching. Principals should have a strong understanding of special education and the models of co-teaching. Professional development should be offered to school leaders so that they are equipped to lead the implementation and scheduling required. In addition, providing principals with skills to navigate co-teaching relationships between regular and special education teachers, guiding discussion with teachers, and providing support for their changing needs, is essential to the job of the school leader.

### **School Districts**

District administration, including special education supervisors, assistant superintendents, superintendents and other central office supervisors should be knowledgeable about special education practices within the school district. It is important for administrators to increase their awareness of co-teaching models in order to better respond to the needs of the students and teachers. Similar to building level leaders, needs should be considered prior to the implementation of co-teaching and throughout the implementation of the model, with ongoing checkpoints for group processing.

School districts need to consider creating comprehensive professional development plans that are mindful of the needs of special educators. This should include embedded support for teachers using co-teaching, as well as time with their co-teacher to plan and prepare instructional

materials. Districts may also consider creating procedures regarding the placement of co-teachers as well as explore policies or incentives to retain effective special education teachers, especially those who have made strong academic gains with their students.

School districts should also investigate the use of tools and resources that might assist teachers in the implementation of co-teaching. As mentioned by one participant, online systems exist that allow for the sharing of lesson plans and other curricular resources that might make collaboration among regular education and special education teachers more manageable. The use of Google Docs or other sharing platforms might also be explored to benefit teachers in co-teaching models.

### **Intermediate Units**

In this study, Intermediate Units were perceived as effective in offering support to school districts implementing co-teaching. A need exists to continue this type of support to districts, including providing ongoing coaching for teachers. While support is often high when an initiative is new, additional support is needed as the implementation continues. Intermediate Units (or other support organizations) should consider providing refresher courses for current educators working in co-teaching environments. It might also be beneficial for Intermediate Units to coordinate cohorts of educators that can provide support to one another beyond the professional development offered by the organization. With the availability of technology, online support groups or professional learning communities could be established by Intermediate Units to provide the ongoing support needed to make co-teaching effective.

### **Higher Education**

Institutions of higher education should evaluate preparation programs for teachers, principals, and administrators to ensure that educators are prepared for the demands of co-

teaching. Programs for teachers should include courses on the various models of co-teaching, working collaboratively with a co-teacher, and sharing classroom responsibilities with another educator. For school leaders, principal preparation programs should include courses on special education regulations and best practices for implementing regulations within schools. Professional development for district level administrators should include systems thinking and creating comprehensive plans to support special education models.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on this study of co-teaching practices, future research on the topic could expand in several ways. While this study was limited in scope, future studies could include additional grade levels, different content areas, and a larger geographic area. Considerations could also be made to include other qualitative research methods like focus groups or quantitative surveys to reach a more broad population of teachers.

A follow up study could be considered that would follow teachers through a year of implementing co-teaching or develop a longitudinal study that investigates the practices of a cohort of co-teaching partners over the course of multiple years. Beyond the teachers' perspective, researchers could explore the role of school leadership in the implementation of co-teaching and how principals are supporting the needs of co-teachers.

Future research might also explore themes revealed in this study. Developing trust among co-teachers, systems thinking from school leaders, and the mindset of “we” versus “I” could be pursued through the lens of co-teaching classrooms. Professional learning, communication, and structure for collaborative planning are also important topics with regards to co-teaching classrooms. Professional development models and online training tools might be explored as a means to better equip teachers implementing co-teaching.



## Conclusions

In response to legislation over the last several decades, school districts are designing systems within their school to reflect these mandates. Many service delivery models exist within special education. While all schools have the ability to implement models based on the needs of their student population, many have moved towards inclusion models (Murray, 2012) that often include some form of co-teaching. Co-teaching has become a more relevant and appropriate instructional delivery method in recent years (Walsh, 2012; Feustel, 2015) and will continue to be a viable method for school districts looking to provide instruction to students with disabilities in the regular education classroom.

Through this study, the researcher concluded that general and special educators have mixed perceptions regarding co-teaching models in secondary schools. The nine schools in this study differed in geographic location, socioeconomic status, special education population, and overall academic achievement with all implementing co-teaching models in the English Language Arts classes. Yet, the educators in these schools reported similar concerns around the implementation of co-teaching particularly when it comes to its impact on teachers. Overall, secondary teachers perceive co-teaching to be a necessary model of instruction that requires knowledge, support, and time to plan and implement effectively.

Best practices were revealed in this study that might assist in the implementation of co-teaching in other districts. When time is embedded into the daily schedule, co-teachers are able to communicate and plan for their classes. Ongoing support and training provided by administrators and local organizations can aid co-teachers as they build skills and relationships within the co-teaching environment. With training, school leaders can facilitate effective

implementation of co-teaching through thoughtful scheduling and the consideration of teacher needs and alignment.

This study confirmed the need for a more comprehensive, system-wide approach to implementing co-teaching models. The teachers, principals, and administrators involved in this implementation would benefit from building an understanding of both the Cooperative Learning Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and the effective components of co-teaching as recommended by Gately and Gately (2001). Within these theories, valuable strategies exist that can inform educators at all levels as they work to improve co-teaching models in secondary schools. This study adds to the existing research with a goal to help educators enhance the implementation of co-teaching models and better support students in need of special education supports.

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## Appendix A



### Superintendent's Informed Consent Cover Letter

Dear School Superintendent,

I am a student in the Doctoral Program in the Administrative and Policy Studies Program in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania conducting a study entitled: Perceptions of Secondary Teachers on the Co-Teaching Model: An Examination of the Instructional Practices of English Language Arts teachers in Western Pennsylvania.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of both general education and special education high school teachers who are using a co-teaching model. This qualitative study will explore how co-teachers perceive the strengths as well as areas for improvement within this instructional model. My study will be based on information collected through interview with teachers in schools that have demonstrated growth in meeting the needs of “Historically Low Performing Students” based on data from the School Performance Profile. Since your district has demonstrated strengths, particularly in English Language arts, I am hoping to invite teachers in your district to participate. The tape-recorded interview will take approximately one hour and will focus on questions related to the implementation of co-teaching in high school English Language Arts classes.

I am seeking your approval to interview general and special education teachers implementing a co-teaching model in your high school. Their participation in this study is completely voluntary. All information will be held in the strictest of confidence and participants will not be identified by name, school or district. In the event the findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants. Participants may withdraw at any time by notifying the principal investigator via email at [VMKG@IUP.EDU](mailto:VMKG@IUP.EDU) . If you withdraw from the study, all data pertaining to your involvement in the study will be destroyed.

If you approve of your high school co-teachers participating in this study, please complete the attached approval form, put it on your district letterhead, and email it to me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Phillip Woods

Principal Investigator:  
Phillip Woods  
Doctoral Candidate, IUP  
106 Melony Place  
Freedom, PA 15042  
(412) 216-9319

Faculty Sponsor:  
Dr. Robert Millward  
Professor/Chairperson  
Professional Studies in Education  
136 Stouffer Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 375-5593

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730)



## Appendix C

### Teacher's Informed Consent Cover Letter



Dear Fellow Educator,

I am a student in the Doctoral Program in the Administrative and Policy Studies Program in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am inviting you to participate in this study in an effort to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of high school teachers who are using a co-teaching model in English Language Arts classrooms in Western Pennsylvania.

You are invited to participate in a study to explore how co-teachers perceive the strengths as well as areas for improvement within this instructional model. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision as to whether or not you would like to participate.

My study will be based on information collected through an interview with you. The tape-recorded interview will take approximately one hour and will focus on questions related to the implementation of co-teaching in high school English Language Arts classes.

As an educator myself, I understand how busy a teacher's day can be. By taking time to talk with me about your classroom, we can inform other educators about the effective co-teaching practices in Western Pennsylvania schools.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in the strictest of confidence. You will not be identified by name, school or district. In the event the findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants. Participants may withdraw at any time by notifying the principal investigator via email at [VMKG@IUP.EDU](mailto:VMKG@IUP.EDU). If you withdraw from the study, all data pertaining to your involvement in the study will be destroyed.

Within the next week, I will contact you to answer any questions and determine if you are willing to participate in this study.

Thank you for your consideration.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact me by phone or email at the information provided below:

Cell Phone: (412) 216-9319

Email: [VMKG@IUP.EDU](mailto:VMKG@IUP.EDU)

Your time and cooperation is very much appreciated. Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

Phillip Woods

Principal Investigator:  
Phillip Woods  
Doctoral Candidate, IUP  
106 Melony Place  
Freedom, PA 15042  
(412) 216-9319

Faculty Sponsor:  
Dr. Robert Millward  
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## Appendix D



### Informed Consent Form

#### **Title of the Study:**

Perceptions of Secondary Teachers on the Co-Teaching Model: An Examination of the Instructional Practices of English Language Arts Teachers in Western Pennsylvania

#### **Researcher:**

Principal Investigator:  
Phillip Woods  
Doctoral Candidate, IUP  
106 Melony Place  
Freedom, PA 15042  
(412) 216-9319

#### **Advisor:**

Dr. Robert Millward  
Professor/Chairperson  
Professional Studies in Education  
136 Stouffer Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 357-5593

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions that general education English Language Arts (ELA) teachers and special education teachers have on co-teaching models in Western Pennsylvania. It is important to understand the perceptions of teachers using co-teaching models to learn about the strengths of the program, as well as areas for improvement.

#### **Procedures for the Study:**

After your acceptance to participate in the study, I will arrange a meeting with you at a time and location of your convenience. At this meeting, you will participate in an interview focusing on your perceptions of co-teaching models in high school ELA classes in Western Pennsylvania. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes in length. An audio recording device will be used to transcribe the interview after its completion. You will receive a copy of the transcript and be asked to review it to ensure accuracy and help to clear up any miscommunication.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no known risks to participate in this study.

**Compensation:**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The only people who will have access to my study will be my advisor and myself. All materials pertaining to the study will be locked in a cabinet in my home office. Upon compilation of the study or any reports pertaining to the study, pseudonyms will be used for all individual participants in the study.

Additional communication, such as phone calls or emails, will be treated in the same manner with regard to confidentiality. In compliance with federal regulations, your informed consent document and all research data will be retained for a minimum of three years. All such materials will be locked in a cabinet in my home office.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time by notifying me at the provided contact information. Also, you may refuse to provide information any interview question you are not comfortable answering.

**More Information:**

Please contact me [VMKG@IUP.EDU](mailto:VMKG@IUP.EDU) or (412) 216-9319 or my advisor, Dr. Robert Millward ([millward@IUP.edu](mailto:millward@IUP.edu) or (724) 357-5593 for additional details pertaining to this study.

If you are in agreement with the terms stated above and are willing to participate in this study, please sign the consent form enclosed and either scan and email it to me or mail it directly to the address in this informed consent letter. A copy will be provided so that you may keep it for your records.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM**

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdrawal at any time through personal conversation, written communication, phone call, or email. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.



**Name (PLEASE PRINT)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone number or location where you can be reached** \_\_\_\_\_

**Best days and times to reach you** \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Investigator's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730)

## Appendix E

### Guiding Questions

Guiding questions	Research question	Johnson and Johnson's Cooperative Learning Theory	Gately and Gately's Components of Effective Co-Teaching
<p>1. Describe how you and your co-teacher initially designed how to implement co-teaching within your class.</p> <p>a. Describe the process in determining the best teaching strategy to be used in your classroom.</p>	RQ 1	Positive interdependence, Face-to-face promotive interaction, Individual accountability, interpersonal and social skills, group processing	Goals and objectives
<p>2. Describe the strengths and areas for improvement for co-teaching strategies. What seems to work and what needs to be improved in helping students to read and write in the English Language Arts classroom?</p>	RQ 2	Positive interdependence	Interpersonal interactions, goals and objectives
<p>3. Describe how teaching strategies differ between your regular reading class and an inclusive reading class.</p>	RQ 1	Individual accountability	Instructional planning and presentation
<p>4. What are the essential elements needed in your English Language Arts class to ensure that co-teaching is successful?</p>	RQ 2 and RQ 3	Positive interdependence; individual accountability	Interpersonal interactions
<p>5. Describe the approach to planning and implementation of co-teaching taken by your school/district.</p>	RQ 1	Face-to-face promotive interaction	Instructional planning, goals and objectives
<p>6. How would you characterize the planning and collaboration between you and your co-teaching partner?</p> <p>a. How could the process be enhanced?</p>	RQ 2	Face-to-face promotive interaction; Interpersonal and social skills	Interpersonal interactions

<p>7. How do you decide on the responsibilities with your co-teacher in regards to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. classroom management</li> <li>b. student discipline</li> <li>c. parent communication</li> <li>d. assessment/grading</li> <li>e. presenting materials/instruction</li> <li>f. special education paperwork and documentation</li> <li>g. other areas</li> </ul>	<p>RQ 2 and 3</p>	<p>Positive interdependence, Face-to-face promotive interaction, Individual accountability, interpersonal and social skills, group processing</p>	<p>Classroom management, assessment, instructional planning, instructional presentation</p>
<p>8. Describe the level of support you receive from the building level leaders and/or district administration regarding the co-teaching model.</p>	<p>RQ 1</p>	<p>Face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing</p>	<p>Interpersonal interactions, goals and objectives</p>
<p>9. Describe the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of training/professional development you received regarding co-teaching.</p>	<p>RQ 1</p>	<p>Face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing</p>	<p>Curricular content, goals and objectives, assessment</p>
<p>10. In what ways has the implementation of co-teaching impacted the students in your classroom?</p>	<p>RQ 1</p>	<p>Group processing</p>	<p>Physical workspace, instructional presentation, assessment</p>
<p>11. Describe any additional barriers encountered when implementing a more inclusive approach to serving students with special needs.</p>	<p>RQ 1 and RQ 3</p>	<p>Interpersonal and social skills, individual accountability</p>	<p>Interpersonal interactions, physical workspace, curricular content, goals and objectives, instructional planning, instructional presentation, classroom management, assessment</p>