

THINKING MORE DEEPLY & COLLABORATING MORE CLOSELY:  
HOW CO-TEACHING IS CHANGING STUDENT TEACHING

by

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## Introduction

Learning to be an effective teacher is a difficult process that takes time, practice, and mentoring. One of the most important pieces of learning to teach is the student teaching experience (referred to as the internship at ECU) at the end of a candidates' course work. This internship can be an extremely stressful experience. Interns are placed in a specific grade level and school (often out of their control) and are expected to observe for a period of time and then take over all of the responsibilities of a teacher. Interns may have limited support in this process. Learning how to overcome obstacles in the classroom and improving teaching skills during this time can be difficult and is sometimes navigated by the intern alone. Taking over the classroom is often done quickly and sometimes with little guidance in the process.

Being nervous and uncomfortable is an experience that many interns have faced in the role of a teacher. However, co-teaching has been introduced as an alternate model of student teaching that helps interns feel more comfortable and supported, less stressed during their internship, and better prepared for their career. Co-teaching has been used as an alternate approach for student teaching at East Carolina University in several program areas over the past six years and continues to be implemented and researched. Co-teaching has been shown to help interns improve their planning and collaboration skills, which has a positive impact on K-12 students (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). This model may be a better way to prepare teachers than the traditional approach to student teaching (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991); however, some teacher educators question whether the model fully prepares interns for when they get their own classroom.

As a future intern and teacher, I was interested in exploring co-teaching to gain a better understanding of the traditional and co-teaching models of student teaching and what the research shows about the validity and effectiveness of the co-teaching model. I wanted to explore how the co-teaching model at East Carolina University has changed over the past six years and how the model affects interns and clinical teachers. The research question framing

my study was: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of the co-teaching model of student teaching. In this paper, I will introduce the history of co-teaching, how it is used in student teaching, and how it has impacted East Carolina University interns and clinical teachers.

### **Review of the Literature**

Co-teaching is the partnership of two or more teachers or education specialists working together in the classroom to deliver instruction (Cook & Friend, 1995). Co-teaching originated as an instructional strategy to address the need to provide education for all students in the “least restrictive environment” as mandated by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which was later called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004). The introduction of different strategies for co-teaching by special education scholars such as Cook and Friend (1995) allowed other educators to incorporate co-teaching into their schools. These strategies include: one teach-one observe, one teach-one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, supplemental teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching. The strategies were really advantageous for special education teachers and general educators to collaborate for the purpose of benefiting students with special needs. English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers also use the co-teaching strategies to work with general education teachers to provide support for English learners. The co-teaching strategies were originally meant to be a collaboration between two practicing teachers, but more recently, co-teaching has been introduced as an alternate approach to student teaching (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010; Tschida, 2015).

The traditional model of student teaching is considered by many teacher educators to be a “sink-or-swim” model, where interns observe the classroom of their clinical teacher, then begin to take on teaching responsibilities without the aid of their clinical teacher until they are teaching all day independently for a set period of time. The clinical teacher often leaves the classroom during this time, and the intern can feel overwhelmed or underprepared (Heck & Bacharach,

2016). Interns must handle all aspects of teaching such as classroom management, logistics, content, planning, and instruction all by themselves (Academy, 2012).

East Carolina University uses the co-teaching model of student teaching for many of its interns across several program areas. The elements of co-teaching at ECU consist of Co-Planning, Co-Instruction, Co-Assessment, and Co-Reflection. Research at ECU shows the benefit of co-teaching in comparison to the traditional model used for student teaching. The co-teaching model has been studied at ECU over the past six years, and researchers have explored two separate models: a 1:1 model, which pairs one intern in the classroom with one clinical teacher and a 2:1 (triad) model, which places two interns in the classroom with one clinical teacher.

Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, and Stevens (2009) researched the benefits and challenges of the triad model and found that collaboration in the classroom was particularly beneficial for interns. Co-teaching allowed interns to bounce ideas off of each other and their clinical teacher, support one another, and reflect with one another on their experiences. Communication improved between co-teachers in this triad model. In addition, interns are able to get experience earlier teaching small groups of students, allowing them to have more opportunities to teach and gain confidence in their teaching. Co-planning and co-teaching help prepare interns in ways that the traditional model of student teaching does not.

While co-teaching has been found to be effective, it is not without challenges. One of these challenges is ensuring that all clinical teachers and interns are trained and knowledgeable about the co-teaching model and how to implement it. This includes the professional relationship between interns and clinical teachers, so work to develop that relationship is a key part of training in co-teaching. Finally, if an intern and clinical teacher have different styles of teaching, they may struggle to work as closely together in ways that as co-teaching requires. Despite these challenges, there are many ways that interns and clinical teachers can overcome these obstacles. Communication is a key factor. Studies have identified administrative support,

planning time, and training as expressed needs of co-teachers (Yoder, 2000; Thompson, 2001; Vesay, 2004; Young Buckley, 2005). Without these elements, co-teaching becomes more difficult than a traditional method of student teaching.

In a traditional model of student teaching, the intern primarily observes the clinical teacher for a period of time at the beginning of the semester, during which they oftentimes do not get enough experience working directly with the students (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010). The co-teaching model of student teaching is considered to be more effective because interns work closely with their clinical teacher and get experiences working with students from the very beginning of their student teaching.

The co-teaching model allows the opportunities for interns to work one-on-one with students, or with small groups, while also giving them experience co-planning with their clinical teacher for full class instruction earlier than the traditional model (Dee, 2012; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Interns start out co-planning with the clinical teacher and work their way up to being the lead teacher in the classroom taking on all responsibilities of a full-time teacher in a more scaffolded way. Different than a sink-or-swim model, where interns are thrown into the deep end after primarily observing and occasionally teaching, the co-teaching model slowly and methodically teaches interns how to swim. From the start, the co-teaching strategies are implemented, as interns begin their internship co-planning, co-instructing, and communicating with their clinical teacher daily (Bacharach & Heck, 2007). By working with the clinical teacher sooner to co-plan lessons and teacher alongside the clinical teacher from the beginning of their internship, interns get the needed practice teaching students in groups, learning how to plan collaboratively for their future classroom, and gain valuable experience in the classroom (Academy, 2012).

### **Methodology**

For the purpose of improving student teaching, East Carolina University utilizes co-teaching into several educator preparation program areas. The College of Education graduates

600-700 students each year, with several programs using the co-teaching model during field placements as well as student teaching. Approximately 100 educator candidates each year have a co-teaching placement during their internship.

Focus group interviews were used as the research method and data for this paper. The data came from a larger data set exploring the use of co-teaching at ECU. Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the internship for the students that received a co-teaching placement each year of implementation. Data was transcribed from audio recordings of focus groups for years 1-3 and transcripts came from electronically conducted focus groups during years 4-6. Initial coding of the data involved a preliminary reading and was conducted by looking at focus groups from each year and identifying main topics of the participants talk. The topics were then placed into different charts, and the data was grouped into *benefits* and *challenges* of co-teaching for both interns and clinical teachers. Seven categories emerged initially, which were later collapsed into four categories: planning, collaboration, impact, and preparation.

These four categories were decided upon because they were all critical to the co-teaching approach to student teaching compared to the traditional approach. Interns received experience planning with their clinical teacher, they collaborated constantly to co-plan and co-teach in the classroom, they had an impact on students by being a second teacher in the classroom, and some participants felt they were given a false interpretation of what their future classroom will be like by constantly having a second teacher in the classroom with them. Each category was given a name based on the encompassing information within the category. These categories were important to teacher education in that they correlated with the benefits and challenges of co-teaching while showing how the co-teaching approach has a positive effect on interns, clinical teachers, and students. Each category is discussed in the next section.

## Findings

The four final categories of data were decided because they were the most prevalent topics that came up within the focus group data. Interns talked about the importance and help they found in *planning* with their clinical teacher during their internship. Clinical teachers and interns both believed that *collaboration* with each other was positive and was an essential part of an intern's ability to teach. There were primarily positive and negative effects of co-teaching on students in the classroom, which led to the category of *impact*. The *preparation* of the interns for their future was the final category. These were shown to be important by the impact it had on teachers. All teachers (interns and clinical teachers) had to plan for class, collaborate with other teachers, strive to positively impact students, and be prepared. Some of the categories applied more to interns and some to clinical teachers, but all of them applied to the well-being of the classroom students.

### Planning

Co-planning was a positive tool that was used during co-teaching to prepare interns for when they will prepare lessons for their own students. Interns as a group appreciated co-planning because they felt that they shared responsibilities with the clinical teacher rather than being told what to do. One intern said,

The most beneficial aspect of co-teaching, for me, was the ability to co-plan and work greater in depth for and with my students. By having a co-teacher, we are able to talk about strategies that would benefit the class as a whole, and pinpoint issues and special needs that need to be addressed.

Clinical teachers as a group appreciated co-planning because their interns were learning from their years of experience in planning. They also appreciated the ability to maintain control over the teaching while releasing responsibility to the intern. Interns as a group loved the ability of going back and forth with different ideas with their clinical teacher, and they felt as though they

were learning how to effectively plan for their future classroom. Through co-planning, interns worked closely with their clinical teacher, which develops the skill of collaboration.

### **Collaboration**

In the focus group data, interns and clinical teachers alike praised co-teaching for the impact it has on the classroom because of the use of collaborative work. Collaboration is defined as working together with one or more people for the purpose of a common goal. Interns as a group appreciated the amount of time that they were able to work closely with their clinical teacher. Interns liked how they could offer ideas for lessons while also being able to consider the clinical teacher's expertise, feel comfortable with the support of their clinical teacher, and work together to benefit the students. One intern said, "Informal collaboration happened on a daily basis but we scheduled formal collaboration once a week. This is where we discussed upcoming content and what [lessons] we thought would best co-taught for the benefit of our students." The clinical teachers also saw co-teaching as beneficial and enjoyed the collaboration with the interns because they were able to work closely with them without giving up control of their classrooms. In addition to this, the students in the classroom were strongly impacted by the collaborative efforts that co-teaching offers.

### **Impact**

Overall, interns and clinical teachers praised co-teaching for its positive impact on their students, some, however, shared how co-teaching may lead to behavior issues in the classroom. Some clinical teachers had concerns about younger students not knowing who the "actual" teacher was when there are three to four teachers in the classroom. By year 3, however, this concern did not occur as often, as clinical teachers may have grown comfortable with co-teaching and having multiple teachers in the same classroom or with introducing the intern as a co-teacher versus an intern. Praise came from both groups as they felt students were able to receive one-on-one and small group teaching that they would not receive with only one teacher in the classroom. With co-teaching, interns were able to help the students more in



the classroom, but they also assisted the clinical teacher. Since the interns were able to give individualized help to students or help with small groups, the clinical teacher was better able to focus on the students' needs. This is reflected in the comments made by the clinical teachers, as one said, "I've noticed a big improvement in my math scores. We're able to pull students and re-teach, re-teach, re-teach; and they get that individualized help that whereas before they got some, but not nearly the amount they needed." While co-teaching may have caused minor behavioral issues at first, the academic impact it had on the students was worth the issues and difficulties that arose.

### **Preparation**

The issue of preparation of interns for the classroom was a final category that emerged from the data. Some interns and clinical teachers had complaints that co-teaching did not represent the "real world" of teaching and could be setting interns up to fail when they become teachers in their own classrooms. In years one through four, both groups felt there were not enough solo days where interns taught by themselves. By year five, these complaints did not occur as often, as interns were required to teach independently for more days and clinical teachers became more comfortable with the co-teaching model. Some interns as a group expressed concerns that co-teaching was unrealistic, and fears that because they were so comfortable with co-teaching they will struggle when they teach in their own classroom. Some clinical teachers knew there would not be two or three teachers in the classroom, so they expressed concern that co-teaching does not adequately prepare interns for their career. One clinical teacher said, "The co-teaching model is great but I don't feel like it gives interns a true picture of what having a classroom on your own is like." The support co-teaching offered was helpful as interns are learning how to teach, but questions remained whether interns are getting a clear picture of what having their own classroom will be like.

## Discussion

Planning, collaboration, impact, and preparation were important aspects of the work co-teachers did. Interns needed to understand how to plan for instruction and learning to co-plan effectively from the beginning helped them become strong teachers. Collaboration during co-teaching was necessary for interns to learn how to work with other teachers, as this will be a skill they will use throughout their careers. Successful teachers gain ideas from and work closely with other teachers, and co-teaching gave interns opportunities to develop skills necessary for effective collaboration. The impact of co-teaching on students showed that students worked well with more teachers in the classroom. Co-teaching allowed interns to learn how to develop skills in working with smaller groups of students, so they were able to feel more confident when taking over the teaching of the full class as well as preparing them to utilize small group instruction in their future classrooms. If interns could figure out how to teach in the classroom without a co-teacher but use the co-planning and co-instructional strategies and implement the skills they learned using the co-teaching approach, then the co-teaching model of student teaching would be successful. This may eliminate the fears of some interns and clinical teachers that co-teaching doesn't represent the real world of teaching.

A limitation was that only one data source was explored for this project. Even though the data from this study show that the co-teaching model has many benefits for interns, clinical teachers, and students in the classroom, there is still much to be learned. Although most interns in the focus group data liked co-teaching, we still needed to know how it affects them once they move into their teaching career and have their own classroom. Longitudinal studies will help us know the true impact of co-teaching on effective teaching. It is also important to explore whether one model of co-teaching (a 1:1 or 2:1 placement) is more effective than others. This would require following our interns out into their classrooms for additional study. Were interns that were in a 1:1 or 2:1 placement able to implement strategies and skills they learned from co-

teaching more effectively? Next steps might involve connecting with participants from this study to interview them about how co-teaching affects their teaching career today.

### **Conclusion**

The co-teaching model of student teaching has a strong impact on how teacher candidates learn to plan, instruct, assess student learning, and collaborate with colleagues. As a model of student teaching, it gives teacher candidates the space to develop one or two skills before taking on more; until they are ready to take full responsibility for instruction in the classroom. Candidates are supported throughout all aspects of teaching from co-planning with their clinical teacher to reflection on the instruction and assessment. Student teaching has not changed much in nearly a century. Perhaps it is time to consider a more supportive model of student teaching than the traditional “sink or swim” method. Co-teaching may provide the life jacket that will keep teacher candidates afloat while they learn to swim.

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