

**Co-Teaching: An Interview-Based Study of the Perceptions of Secondary Co-Teachers**

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# **Co-Teaching: An Interview-Based Study of the Perceptions of Secondary Co-Teachers**

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Co-teaching has evolved as a popular service delivery approach to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore how co-teachers in a secondary public school district in a Mid-Atlantic state perceive co-teaching; specifically how teachers describe the benefits and challenges associated with co-teaching, and how teachers believe administrators can shape, plan, and improve co-teaching practices. A total of two co-teaching dyads participated in this study. The participants included two general education teachers, one reading specialist teacher, and one special education teacher. Analysis of the data revealed four themes: the importance of a common planning period, increased academic and social outcomes, challenges associated with co-teaching, and the importance of administrative support.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	ix
<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Statement of the Problem .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Purpose .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.3 Inquiry Questions .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.0 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.1 Legislative Changes and Advocacy That Led to Co-Teaching.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 Co-Teaching Defined.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.3 Literature on Co-Teaching .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.3.1 Lack of Content Knowledge.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.3.2 Unclear Roles and Responsibilities.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.3.3 Compatibility of Co-Teachers .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.3.4 Common Planning.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.3.5 Special Education Teacher Scheduling and Responsibilities .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.3.6 Student Scheduling .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.3.7 Professional Development .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.3.8 Student Outcomes .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.3.9 Administrative Support .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.4 Implications for Practice.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.0 Methods.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.1 Participants .....</b>	<b>24</b>

<b>3.2 Instrument.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.2.1 Trustworthiness of the Research Process .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.3 Procedure .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.3.1 Setting.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.4 Design and Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3.4.1 Interview Test .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>3.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>4.0 Results .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4.1 Interviews .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4.2 Interview Results .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4.3 Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4.4 Themes.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.4.1 Importance of Co-Planning.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.4.2 Student Benefits.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.4.2.1 Academic Benefits.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.4.2.2 Social Outcomes .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>4.4.3 Barriers Associated with Co-Teaching .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.4.3.1 Inconsistent Co-Teaching Partners.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.4.3.2 Additional Responsibilities of Co-Teacher .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>4.4.4 Importance of Administrative Support.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>5.0 Discussion.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>5.1 Themes.....</b>	<b>46</b>

<b>5.1.1 Importance of Co-Planning.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>5.1.2 Student Benefits.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>5.1.2.1 Academic Outcomes .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>5.1.2.2 Social Outcomes .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5.1.3 Barriers Associated with Co-Teaching .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5.1.3.1 Inconsistent Co-Teaching Partners.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5.1.3.2 Additional Responsibilities of Co-Teacher .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.1.4 Administrative Support .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.2 Limitations .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>5.3 Implications for Practice.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>5.4 Recommendation for Future Research .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Appendix A Austin Correspondence.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Appendix B Kellem Correspondence .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Appendix C Pratt Correspondence .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix D IRB Correspondence.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>58</b>

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1. How the Laws Compare .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Table 2. Cook and Friend’s (1995) Six Models of Co-Teaching.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Table 3. Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 4. Overview of the Coding Process in Inductive Analysis .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Table 5. Research Question Matrix Showing Relationship to the Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Table 6. Participant Demographics.....</b>	<b>36</b>

## Preface

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## 1.0 Introduction

The chronicle of education in the United States has a long history of exclusion versus inclusion. Parental activism in the 1960s, along with court challenges to the practice of denying many students with disabilities a free public education, led to a rapid expansion of special education within public schools (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). In *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971), a group of parents of children with significant disabilities challenged a state law that absolved school districts of responsibility for educating students thought to be “uneducable” or “untrainable” (Osgood, 2007, p. 104). Prior to the enactment of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (P.L. 94-142), only one in five students with disabilities was educated in the public school setting (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). In fact, many states had laws stating students who had diagnoses of deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed could be excluded from public schools. In the early 1970s, over one million children with disabilities in the United States were excluded from public education and another 3.5 million students with disabilities were estimated to not receive the appropriate services (Martin et al., 1996).

With the passage of PL 94-142, and then later the *Individuals with Disabilities Act*, the inclusive environment for students with disabilities changed. PL 94-142 required students with disabilities be provided with a free and appropriate education (FAPE). School districts moved from exclusionary to inclusionary practices. Thus, the challenge became how to meet the needs of students with disabilities within the least restrictive environment (LRE).

## **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Meeting the needs of diverse students with disabilities in an inclusive setting is a significant problem in education today. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Due to the belief that students' local schools are often the LRE, many schools make great efforts to teach students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their nondisabled peers, in the school they would attend if not disabled, to the maximum extent appropriate (Wright, 1994). This emphasis was based on the idea that many students are best served in settings like those of their nondisabled peers (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). In order for this inclusive model to work, it requires a great deal of collaboration between general education and special education teachers. According to Smith & Leonard (2005), "collaboration as a cornerstone of effective school inclusion is an idea that has high theoretical currency among many scholars in the areas of special education and educational leadership" (p. 269). Thus, the challenge for educational practitioners is to find ways to implement high-quality special education programs collaboratively amid the call for schools to be both highly efficient and effective.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative interview-based study is to determine how suburban public high school teachers perceive co-teaching; how teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching; and how do teachers perceive that administrators shape, plan for, and improve the co-teaching experience?

It is imperative that an adequate research base exist for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to draw upon as they implement co-teaching practices between general education and special education teachers (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). Furthermore, the researchers stress this outcome is critical if schools are to meet the legal mandates of court cases and state and federal laws addressing inclusion and special education.

### **1.3 Inquiry Questions**

The research questions were designed to solicit perceptions of effective co-teaching practices from practitioners who are currently involved in a co-teaching setting.

1. How do participating teachers perceive co-teaching? How do they organize their work together?
2. How do teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching?
3. How do teachers perceive that administrators shape the co-teaching experience? How do teachers perceive administrators plan for and improve co-teaching practices?

## 2.0 Literature Review

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of special education was quickly developing. Throughout the 1960s, leaders in special education and parents of children with special needs began to challenge the barriers their children faced in receiving an appropriate education (Leafstedt, Itkonen, Arner-Costello, Korenstein, Medina, Murray, & Resester, 2007). Simultaneously, a plethora of legislation and litigation occurred explicitly designed to remedy these educational inequities (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Before 1975, public schools had few obligations to educate or include children with disabilities. The vast majority of children, especially those with severe disabilities, were kept out of the public schools and even those who did attend were primarily segregated from their nondisabled peers. With the passage of more inclusive legislation, the roles and responsibilities of teachers began to change. Co-teaching was born out of this need to meet the challenging and diverse needs of students in an inclusive setting.

The origins of co-teaching can be traced back to several related educational trends from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Friend et al., 2010). In the 1950s, educators began to question traditional school structures, procedures, their efficiency and effectiveness (Hanslovsky, Moyer, & Wagner, 1969). During this time, schools and teachers began to explore alternative ways to provide instruction for students with disabilities. One solution proposed was the creation of alternative teaching models, including what was then referred to as team teaching. As a result, team teaching, now known as co-teaching, evolved out of a necessity to provide alternative instruction for students with disabilities. Co-teaching at that time usually included a core lesson delivered by a teacher deemed to be the most knowledgeable among all the available teachers on

the identified topic (Shaplin, 1964). The thinking at the time was it was more practical and efficient to provide one single lecture to all students and afterward, the students would be divided into groups for discussion so that each teacher was responsible for one group. This model of co-teaching would later become known as the one-teach/one-assist model.

## **2.1 Legislative Changes and Advocacy That Led to Co-Teaching**

Over the past 40 years, a convergence of congressional demands has challenged educators and schools to find effective ways to provide high-quality instruction for students with disabilities. From 1975 until 2001, educational practices for students with disabilities, according to Friend (2018), were almost exclusively guided by federal special education and civil rights laws. In 1990, Congress amended the *Education for All Handicapped Act* (originally enacted in 1975) and renamed it the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* (IDEA).

The IDEA states:

To the maximum extent possible appropriate, children with disabilities including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removals of children with disabilities from the general education environment occur only when the nature or the severity of the disability of a child is such that education in general education classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily [IDEA Section 612 (a)(5)(A)].

Therefore, a student's individual education program (IEP) team was required to explore many strategies for enabling a student to participate in the general education classroom if that was

determined to be the LRE. With the reauthorization of the IDEA in 1997, Congress again specified the preferred placement for students with disabilities was in the general education classrooms. Later, amendments to the *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act* (IDEIA-2004) were recommended to better align special education policies and services with the broader national school improvement efforts (e.g., *No Child Left Behind Act*) (Wilson, Kim, & Michaels, 2011).

Interest in co-teaching, according to Friend et al., (2010), intensified as a result of the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB). The NCLB Act of 2001 which reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 (ESEA), included the requirements that all students, including those with disabilities, access the general education curriculum; be taught by highly qualified teachers (HQT); and be included in professionals' accountability for achievement outcomes (Friend et al., 2010). The NCLB's requirement that all teachers be highly qualified significantly impacted how school districts provided instruction to students with disabilities.

The NCLB Act (2001) required teachers to be highly qualified in their content areas. This mandate created a challenge in finding special education teachers who were highly qualified in specific content areas. Co-teaching allowed many school districts to include students with their non-disabled peers in the general education setting as well as be taught by a teacher who was considered a highly qualified teacher of special education.

Around the same time in Pennsylvania, the Gaskin's Settlement of 2004 placed a renewed focus on the LRE. School districts across Pennsylvania were forced to rethink the method in which they educate students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. As Isherwood & Barger-Anderson (2007) explain, the court case *Gaskin vs. Pennsylvania Department of Education*, 2004, was filed on behalf of Pennsylvania public school students with disabilities alleging they had been

denied their federal statutory right to a FAPE in general education classrooms with necessary supplemental aids and service. Specifically, the plaintiffs alleged the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) failed to enforce the laws that require local school districts to provide a full continuum of services, from 100% inclusion in the general education setting to education in a separate school. As a result of this court case, the PDE was required to undertake a series of steps to reform special education processes and procedures.

One reform measure that came out of the Gaskin's Settlement and NCLB was an increased emphasis on including students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible. After the lawsuit, the PDE now required school districts to report on every student with a disability's individual LRE percentage. This information was then made available for the public to view and school districts could be evaluated based upon their LRE numbers. Thus school districts scrambled to search for ways to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom. One service delivery option that was commonly chosen was co-teaching. This option allowed students with disabilities to receive specially designed instruction from a certified special education teacher in the general education classroom.

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Like its predecessor the NCLB Act, the ESSA reauthorized the *ESEA* of 1965. The ESSA returned the power to the states and schools to create their own accountability and teacher evaluation systems. While the ESSA continues the NCLB's focus on standardized testing, it allows states to determine the standards to which students are held. Specific to students in special education, the ESSA provides for 1% of students with disabilities to be excused from the standardized testing in which their non-disabled peers participate. It allows those students with significant cognitive disabilities to take an alternative assessment. Additionally, the ESSA rolled back the NCLB requirement of

highly qualified teachers (HQT). Finally, the ESSA allows alternative methods, other than through standardized testing, for schools to show student academic growth. Table 1 shows the differences between the NCLB act and the ESSA.

**Table 1. How the Laws Compare**

	NCLB	ESSA
Testing	All students tested annually in Grades 3-8 and 11 in math and reading.	All students tested annually in Grades 3-8 and 11 in math and reading
Accountability	Defined progress primarily on test scores; provided the same goal (all students “proficient” by 2014) for all schools and all states.	States determine their definition of progress, using multiple measures. States also decide how much weight to place on each measure, but a majority of the weight must be on academic indicators (test scores, graduation rates, etc.).
School improvement	Schools that did not make progress toward the federal goals were labeled failures; states were instructed to intervene in specific ways to address failing schools.	Does not explicitly authorize new money, but allows states and districts to direct a portion of Title I dollars for school interventions.
School intervention funding	Provided no additional dollars for school improvement.	Does not explicitly authorize new money, but allows states and districts to direct a portion of Title I dollars for school interventions.
Teacher Evaluation	Not officially part of the NCLB but the Obama administration required states to establish teacher evaluation systems based in part on student scores, to waive some of the requirements of the law.	Allows, but does not require, states to evaluate teachers based on student achievement and use federal funds for that purpose.

*Note.* Adapted from The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA): What it means for students with disabilities and music educators. A.A. Darrow.

## **2.2 Co-Teaching Defined**

According to Friend (2018), successful co-teaching begins with a solid understanding of what it is and what it is not. Furthermore, co-teaching was not simply having a second set of hands in the classroom. In co-teaching both teachers were considered key to the instructional process, and both had key teaching roles and responsibilities. Co-teaching was not one person (typically the general education teacher) teaching while the other teacher (typically the special education teacher) roamed around the classroom to provide assistance to students who need more one on one help (Friend, 2018). Additionally, co-teaching was not one teacher taking the lead on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and the other co-teaching taking the lead on Tuesday and Thursday. The author further argues this type of turn-taking was usually a response to the lack of planning time. Finally, co-teaching was not meant for one co-teacher to use it as a prep to complete work for other classes.

Conversely, teachers who co-taught well, according to Murawski & Lochner (2010) were those who took full advantage of the fact there were two teachers in the room. They engaged students actively, used a variety of co-teaching approaches to regroup students, collected and shared assessment information to better individualize for students' needs, and were willing to try a new thing. Additionally, these teachers communicated with one another during instruction and within a classroom structure that was supportive of students, but also flexible to meet the students' changing needs.

Co-teaching has been described as a pragmatic merger between general and special education teachers in which direct educational programming to all students would be provided by having a special education teacher within the general education setting (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989). These researchers coined the term “cooperative teaching” to represent this relationship. According to Bessette (2008), co-teaching is considered one of the most popular service delivery models for increasing instructional equity for students with disabilities in heterogeneous classrooms (Friend & Bursuck, 2018; Friend & Cook, 1996, 2003; Lehr, 1999; Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997). Furthermore, co-teaching involves general and special education teachers coming together to plan, coordinate, implement and evaluate the educational programs of some or all students in a classroom (Bessette, 2008).

Like inclusion, co-teaching has known many names: collaborative teaching, tandem teaching, co-facilitation, and team-teaching to name a few. Later Cook & Friend (1995) shortened the term cooperative teaching to co-teaching and further clarified the characteristics essential in a true co-teaching relationship. They defined co-teaching as two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space. They further described the co-teaching process as a restructuring of the teaching procedures in which two or more educators with a specific set of skills worked in a co-active and coordinated manner to jointly teach academically and behaviorally diverse groups of students in settings that were inclusive (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1995). Co-teaching was defined as a special education delivery model in which two certified teachers—one general education teacher and one special education teacher—shared responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for a diverse group of students (Zigmond & Magiera, 2001). It was suggested by Cook & Friend (1995) that the ideal model involves teachers working collaboratively on all aspects of the education process.

Cook & Friend (1995) identified six models of co-teaching. The variety of models allow for multiple ways to meet the students' needs such as through direct instruction, re-teaching/pre-teaching instruction in large and small group settings, data collection, and behavior management.

For this literature review, the co-teaching models were defined using the categorical definitions developed by Cook & Friend (1995). See Table 2.

**Table 2. Cook and Friend's (1995) Six Models of Co-Teaching**

Model	Definition
One teach, one observe	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other observes the teacher, a student, or a group of students for a specific purpose
One teach, one assist	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other circulates, supports, and assists individual students
Station teaching	In small groups, students rotate among several learning activities; often, each teacher leads a station, one station is an independent learning station, and volunteers support additional stations
Alternative teaching	One teacher provides instruction to the large group while the other pre-teaches, reteaches, or assesses a small group of students for a short period
Parallel teaching	Each teacher delivers the same instruction to his or her half of the class
Team teaching	Both teachers equally deliver instruction to the large group

*Note.* Adapted from “Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices,” by L. Cook & M. Friend, 1995, *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 28 (3), 1-16.

Further detail was provided by Murawski & Dieker (2012) regarding each model. In the one-teach/one-assist model, one teacher was typically in front of the classroom providing direct instruction to students while the other teacher was engaged in a support role. While either teacher can assume the lead role, it was typically the general education teacher.

In the second model, the one-teach/one-observe approach, one teacher typically delivered instruction while the other teacher collected data. This model could be particularly useful when collecting data for progress monitoring or a student's individual positive behavior support plan.

In the third model, station teaching, co-teachers usually divided the class into two or three small heterogeneous groups to go to stations or centers. Two groups were supported by teacher instruction while a third group (or more) worked independently. Students rotated through multiple centers, though teachers may also rotate. Teachers either facilitated stations or circulated through stations (Murawski & Dieker, 2012).

The fourth co-teaching model was alternative teaching. Typically, one teacher worked with a large group of students while the other worked with a smaller group, re-teaching. It was either the general education teacher or the special education teacher who worked with the smaller group. While one teacher worked with a smaller group on re-teaching, the larger group worked on an enrichment activity or extension activity.

Team teaching was the fifth co-teaching model. Team teaching occurred when both teachers were in front of the class, working together to provide instruction. This model required more time spent co-planning and was usually more successful with teacher dyads who had worked together for several years and had a more significant level of comfort between them.

Finally, parallel teaching was the sixth co-teaching model. This model occurred when both teachers divided the class into two heterogeneous groups. This model acknowledged that teachers had different teaching styles. Groups may receive the same content in the same way or in a different way (Murawski & Dieker, 2012).

## **2.3 Literature on Co-Teaching**

Previous literature reviews on co-teaching have summarized and identified important themes: barriers to co-teaching, effectiveness on student outcomes, and teacher perceptions (Friend, Reising, & Cook 1993; Welch, Brownell, & Sheridan, 1999; Weis & Brigham, 2000; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Weiss, 2004; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Wexler, Kearns, Lemons, Mitchell, Clancy, Davidson, Sinclair, & Yei, 2018). To date, research into the effectiveness of co-teaching has been limited and yielded mixed results (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Current research on co-teaching practices is based primarily at the elementary level, and according to Mastropieri & Scruggs (2001) is a major challenge to the research of co-teaching at the secondary level. Further, Wexler et al. (2018) argue that despite the growing use of co-teaching in the secondary level the field remains uncertain about what currently occurs in co-taught secondary level classrooms. This lack of research, combined with the inconsistency of the co-teaching models, leaves a significant gap in the research. This study seeks to investigate how teachers in a suburban public school perceive co-teaching; specifically how teachers describe the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching, and how teachers believe administrators can shape, plan, and improve co-teaching practices.

### **2.3.1 Lack of Content Knowledge**

An overreliance on the one-teach/one-assist co-teaching model was mentioned in several studies (Buckley, 2004; Feldman, 1998; Hardy, 2001; King-Sears, Brawand, Jenkins, & Preston-Smith, 2014; Norris, 1997; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Trent, 1998; Ward, 2003; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Teachers stated, due to the lack of content knowledge, they were not comfortable taking on

a more dominant or active role in the classroom. Instead, they took on the part of an assistant, or more passive role, in the secondary content area classrooms. The researchers further reported that the role of the special education teacher varied across content areas, with the lowest level of lead teaching observed in high school mathematics classes. They hypothesized the level of comfort with the content knowledge likely determined who the dominant teacher was. Special education teachers also struggled with assuming instructional roles in the classroom because they did not want to infringe on the content teacher's expertise (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008).

The limited role of the special education teacher was not something that co-teachers planned for, but it appeared to be connected to the lack of confidence with the content knowledge on the part of the special education teachers. As Keefe & Moore (2004) point out, content area knowledge was more challenging at the secondary level than at the elementary level. Additionally, teachers reported frustration with the content knowledge often led to an increase in anxiety and would cause tension in the co-teacher relationship (Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008). Teachers said that the content area of the class forced them to take specific roles (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Further, the researchers reported in their study one teacher stated, "I don't feel confident in some classes to be a team." Another teacher stated, "Do you think I would have the audacity to go in the geometry class and say I was a collaborative teacher?"

King-Sears et al., (2014) found that the general education teacher presented to the whole class group twice as often as the special education teacher. Additionally, the general education teacher introduced new content three times as often as the special education teacher, who often assumed the role of assisting individual students (Friend, 2018). Fontana (2005) noted the secondary high school special education co-teachers in her study conceded to the content teachers' philosophical perspectives for instruction.

### **2.3.2 Unclear Roles and Responsibilities**

Unclear roles and multiple teaching responsibilities were mentioned as barriers to successful implementation of co-teaching in numerous studies (Austin, 2001; Bouck, 2007; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004; King-Sears et al., 2014; Morocco & Aguilar, 2002; Norris, 1997; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Trent, 1998; Walther-Thomas, 1997; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002, Zigmond & Matta, 2004). Austin (2001) reported special education and general education co-teachers agreed that general education teachers do more than their special education partners in the inclusive classroom. The researcher hypothesized this might be because the special education co-teacher was typically the visitor in the classroom and often viewed as the expert on curriculum adaptation and remediation, whereas the general education co-teacher was often regarded as being more expert in the content area (p. 252). Further, he discovered more special education than general education co-teachers said they were responsible for the modifications of lessons and remediation of learning difficulties, whereas more general education than special education co-teachers reported that they were mainly responsible for lesson planning and instruction. When co-teachers fulfill traditional special education or general education responsibilities, the special education teacher was often viewed as the assistant and the general education teacher perceived as the head teacher (Kovic, 1996; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Trump & Hange, 1996; Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996). Teams settled into a division of roles that involved the general education teacher taking responsibility for the curriculum, planning, and large group instruction whereas the special education teachers helped individual students and designed modifications. This division of labor led to a significant challenge for the co-teachers (Keefe & Moore, 2004).

One investigation observed over 50 high school science lessons taught by ten science and special education co-teaching teams. Moin, Magiera, & Zigmond (2009) perceived the special

education teachers' roles were more like those of paraprofessional, walking around the classroom, and assisting individual students, rather than roles of certified teachers.

### **2.3.3 Compatibility of Co-Teachers**

Many researchers believe successful co-teaching largely rests upon the compatibility of the co-teachers (Buckley, 2004; Conderman, 2011; Keefe & Moore, 2004; King-Sears et al., 2014; Norris, 1997; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Trent; 1998; Ward, 2003; Yoder, 2000). When co-teachers got along and worked well together, students with disabilities were more likely to be successful and have successful experiences in the inclusive classroom (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005). However, many teachers reported before beginning co-teaching was the possible inability of teachers to develop cooperative working relationships, and potential resistance by teachers to such a radical shift in the service delivery format (Bauwens et al., 1989). Sometimes conflict occurred when two teachers with different backgrounds and views worked closely together.

While pairing teachers from different backgrounds can result in professional satisfaction and growth for co-teachers and increased student academic performance (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008), co-teachers were likely to face more opportunities for possible conflict than when they taught on their own. When teachers from different content areas with specific content training made decisions about student needs, they were likely to disagree about desired outcomes (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochin, 2008). For example, Scruggs et al. (2007), observed one pair of civics teachers whose conflicting beliefs about how to plan for co-teaching, how to manage behavior, and how to interact with students caused them to eventually split the class into two groups and meet in two separate rooms.

Rice & Zigmond (2000) concluded several of the teachers rated personal compatibility between partners as the most critical variable for co-teaching success. One general education teacher who was interviewed blamed the dissolution of their partnership on the special education teacher's "inflexibility and personal issue" (Frisk, 2004). Another general education teacher reported in Norris's (1997) study, "If I had known that I would have to defend the way I always believed in teaching, I would not have agreed to co-teach...I have not been teaching for 30 years for someone else to tell me how to teach...I am furious" (p. 107).

#### **2.3.4 Common Planning**

Numerous researchers noted the importance of co-planning in the implementation of the co-teaching process (Austin, 2001; Bouck, 2007; Feldman, 1998; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Kellems, 2014; Walther-Thomas, 1997; Yoder, 2000). Experts agreed that successful co-teaching required common planning time (Dieker, 2001; Friend & Cook, 2007; Scruggs et al., 2007). The lack of time for planning time was the number one issue for many educators related to co-teaching (Dieker, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004). Teachers consistently reported the need for structured planning time for all staff involved in instruction (Manset & Semmel, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Scruggs et al., 2007). Teams frequently discussed the struggle to find sufficient time to plan. Under normal conditions for co-teaching, teachers stated they lacked adequate planning time in their schedules (Bouck, 2007; Magiera & Zigmond, 2005). When sufficient planning time was provided, teachers reported they struggled with different planning styles, distractions that occurred from colleagues, and sidebar conversations about certain students during planning sessions (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013; Murawski, 2012; Rice,

Drame, Owens & Frattura, 2007; Sileo, 2011). The list of demands on a teacher's time during the school day, according to Nierengarten (2013), was nearly exhaustive.

### **2.3.5 Special Education Teacher Scheduling and Responsibilities**

Common issues that take special education teachers away from the co-taught class included last minute IEP meetings, emergency meetings, and student behavioral needs. One study found that 68% of special educators did not have enough time to do their work (Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995). Special education teachers were often pulled in multiple directions. If one special education teacher co-taught in three or four different classrooms per day, it was not realistic to expect that teacher to complete half the grading or preparation (Friend, 2018).

In an investigation conducted by Weiss & Lloyd (2002), teachers indicated that scheduling decisions dictated their roles in co-teaching, and in fact, some teachers were scheduled to work in two classrooms during one class block period. For example, one teacher was expected to co-teach in nine different classrooms, but there were only eight periods of classes; therefore, he spent 45 minutes of a 90-minute period co-teaching in one classroom and moved to another classroom to co-teach for the remaining 45 minutes.

### **2.3.6 Student Scheduling**

Another barrier discovered by Walther-Thomas (1997) included scheduling the right students into the right co-taught classes. Many teams experienced problems with scheduling students with disabilities into classrooms and coordinating co-teaching schedules. Furthermore, many teams reported that assigning student placements required thoughtful considerations by

planning teams (i.e., administrators, guidance counselors, classroom teachers) to ensure the heterogeneity was maintained in classrooms and that adequate support could be provided for students and teachers. This involved a lot of “hand scheduling” instead of the use of computer programs to randomly assign students. However, as stated, this was dependent upon the planning teams. If the identified students were not assigned to the co-taught classes, the students’ schedule would later have to be changed. Due to an overabundance of schedule changes, this led to class sizes being either much larger or smaller than anticipated.

### **2.3.7 Professional Development**

Lack of professional development before implementation of co-teaching, during and after, were reported as a significant barrier to co-teaching’s success (Austin, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Kamens, Susko & Elliott, 2013; King-Sears et al., 2014; Walther-Thomas, 1997; Yoder, 2000; Wexler et al., 2018). King-Sears et al., 2014 studied one set of co-teachers in a science class. These teachers had previously co-taught, but neither had received focused professional development or other preparation for this assignment. When teachers from different disciplines tried to work as a team, their unrelated educational preparation may cause different expectations (Fennick & Liddy, 2001). As Friend & Cook (1990) pointed out, teacher preparation does not typically include developing skills to work effectively with colleagues. Teachers were often placed together in a classroom without adequate preparation to collaborate effectively (Nierengarten (2013). Teachers do not naturally know how to co-teach. To be successful in a collaborative co-teaching arrangement, they need training and preparation that help to develop skills in communication and collaboration, instructional strategies, responsibilities, and building on another's strengths (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker & Murawski, 2003). Participants reported in

Walther-Thomas's (1997) study, that there had been very few schools or district sponsored opportunities to increase their skills in co-teaching. Teachers reported this was due to cutbacks in staff development funds that had been made during recent years, and to the limited time that had been set aside for new skill development. However, the researcher stated the teacher participants indicated that additional staff development would help improve their co-teaching skills and would be valuable for all teachers and related services professionals embarking on changes in current service delivery programs.

### **2.3.8 Student Outcomes**

Several studies reported improved outcomes observed in the effects on student outcomes in reading/writing (Tremblay, 2013; Hang & Rabren, 2009; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas 2002; Wexler et al., 2018). Rea et al. (2002) reported that students with learning disabilities in co-taught classes performed better on measures such as report card grades and attendance than students in single-teacher classes. Improved outcomes were also reported by Hang & Rabren (2009) in student academic and behavioral performances in comparison groups between the year before co-teaching and the year of co-teaching. Tremblay (2013) reported improved outcomes in reading and writing but not mathematics. The academic progress of students with and without learning disabilities placed full-time in general education classes was investigated by Klinger, Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm, & Elbaum (1998) and the researchers found most students with learning disabilities made considerable gains on reading achievement.

### **2.3.9 Administrative Support**

The role of the administrator is a busy one. They arrive at school early, leave late, attend school related activities in the evenings, address the most severe student issues, and calm upset parents (Friend, 2018). Co-teaching was one more item on the agenda.

Research indicated that administrative support was a critical factor in co-teaching effectiveness (Cook & Friend, 1995; Kamens et al., 2013; Scruggs et al., 2007; Walther-Thomas, 1997). Scruggs et al. (2007) conducted a meta-synthesis of thirty-two qualitative investigations of co-teaching in inclusive classes. One study identified administrative support as the number one need for co-teaching to be successful. Salend, Johansen, Mumper, Chase, Pike, & Dorney (1997) studied co-teachers in a kindergarten classroom and reported, “The support of the principal was instrumental in the success of the teachers’ collaboration” (p. 8). In another study of five elementary-level co-teaching dyads conducted by Frisk (2004), teachers were in substantial agreement the district administration must also be committed to supporting the co-teaching model

For example, in Walther-Thomas’s (1997) study, two middle schools with the same district both used the same computer program for student scheduling. In one school, the principal saw the value of scheduling students with disabilities and their special education teachers onto the same teams. Hand scheduling was supported, and participants reported few scheduling problems. At the other middle school, scheduling persisted as a problem throughout the study. The principal indicated that it was “impossible” to modify or override computer decisions, and that staff members would have to live with the outcomes. This caused continued problems for teachers and students. Scruggs et al. (2007) found administrative support to be linked to some additional issues: common planning, compatibility, professional development, and content knowledge.

## 2.4 Implications for Practice

Many secondary general education teacher preparation programs, as discussed by Dieker & Murawski (2003), focus on content mastery at a much higher level than their colleagues in special education. Secondary special education teachers often are provided a rigorous preparation in learning differences and accommodations but have limited content-specific knowledge. As many of the studies reported, special education teachers lacked the training and expertise in content knowledge to ensure a level of comfort with co-teaching. In order for special education teachers to be better prepared, teacher preparation programs must change to support current education initiatives.

The nature of high schools presents more significant challenges for co-teachers. According to Mastropieri & Scruggs (2001) high school settings presented greater obstacles for co-teachers because of the importance of content area knowledge, the need for independent study skills, the faster pacing of instruction, high school competency exams, less favorable attitudes of teachers, and the arbitrary success of strategies that were effective at the elementary level.

Additionally, the importance of professional development cannot be emphasized enough. Professional development on co-teaching will need to be provided to current general and special education teachers. This professional development should be continued and ongoing. As new teachers are added to co-teaching partnerships, they too will need to be trained.

Administrators must make co-teaching a priority. Administrators need to provide logistical support (e.g. common planning time) and be trained in observing co-taught classrooms. Administrators need to model a belief in the importance of this service delivery model for all stakeholders. To do so, they must comprehend what makes co-teaching useful about student achievement and provide a framework in which practice can be successful (Kamens et al., 2013).

Finally, administrators must recognize when a co-teaching partnership was irrevocably broken and be willing to intervene or reassign teachers.

## **3.0 Methods**

### **3.1 Participants**

The participants for this study consisted of two dyads of cooperating high school teachers who taught in a school district in a Mid-Atlantic state. Within qualitative research, the researcher relies upon a purposeful sample rather than a representative sample since it is critical for all participants to experience the phenomenon that is under investigation (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). In this study, a purposeful sample was utilized. The inclusion criteria that was used for obtaining a purposeful sample for this study was current participation in a suburban, secondary co-teaching classroom.

### **3.2 Instrument**

Interviews in qualitative studies aim to make sense of the topic being studied. Interviews allow the researcher to gather data while reducing researcher bias (Kellems, 2014). The researcher developed questions through a critical review of existing literature and from the researcher's personal experience.

The interview structure for this study was a semi-structured interview format. Interviews in this study allowed the participants to share their thoughts and feelings pertaining to co-teaching. Interview questions were designed by the researcher based on the research questions and a review of the literature for this study. Previously published semi-structured interviews by Dr. Ryan

Kellems, Dr. Vance Austin, and Dr. Sharon Pratt were reviewed. Based on the research questions derived from the review of the literature, the researcher was able to pull certain questions from each of their published interviews. The researcher contacted each author and acquired permission to use, modify, and/or adapt their questions to better suit the needs of this study (Dr. V. Austin, personal email communication, December 28, 2018; Dr. R. Kellems, personal email communication, December 10, 2018; and Dr. S. Pratt, personal email communication, January 7, 2019)(see Appendices A, B, C). These researchers have published numerous articles on co-teaching and can be considered experts on co-teaching.

### **Table 3. Interview Questions**

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#### Semi-Structured Interview: Perceptions of Co-Teaching

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##### Directions to the Interviewees:

The following questions are designed to provide information about your co-teaching experience. You are encouraged to answer these questions as candidly and as completely as possible; the anonymity of your responses is assured. The response of all of those teachers interviewed in the course of this study will be reported as group data according to trends that are identified. The interview normally takes from 20-25 minutes. The results of this study will be available to you upon request.

##### Demographic Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What is the highest level of education you have achieved?
3. How long have you been teaching?
4. What subjects do you teach?
5. How many years have you been teaching with another teacher in the room?
6. How many different co-teachers have you worked with during your career?

##### General questions:

7. How are co-teaching assignments made in your school?
  - a. Are co-teaching assignments voluntary?

- b. Do you get to select which teachers you work with?
  - c. Are both teachers certified in the content area?
8. Explain how you became a co-teacher?
9. Tell me about lesson planning. Describe the process that you and your co-teacher go through to determine how a lesson should run and take into account the various student needs. Take me through a recent lesson that you planned utilizing coteaching
10. Do you feel like you have enough planning time with the other teacher to prepare quality lesson plans?
11. There are naturally occurring challenges in any co-teaching relationship as two people work together. Tell me about any challenges you have experienced in your co-teaching relationship?
12. What have you done to mitigate these challenges?
13. How have you and your co-teacher divided up your roles and responsibilities in the Elements of Literacy class or English 9?
14. Talk about the advantages that you have seen in the Elements of Literacy or English9 co-taught class.
15. Talk about the disadvantages that you have seen in the Elements of Literacy or English 9 co-taught class
16. What is the impact on students in your co-taught class?
17. Tell me about administrative support for co-teaching in your building?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with co-teaching?

### 3.2.1 Trustworthiness of the Research Process

Trustworthiness addresses the truth of respondents in the context of the study, the applicability of the outcomes in other settings, the replicability with the same or similar respondents over time and the degree to which outcomes arise from data collected as opposed to biases, motives, interests, and perspectives of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, Lincoln & Guba (1985) propose four terms to address trustworthiness as “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 219). Yin (2009) recommends that qualitative researchers check the reliability of their case studies by documenting procedures of their work by setting up detailed protocols. The researcher documented the procedure and data analysis techniques so when applied to a similar population, the outcomes would be transferable as well.

To establish credibility, participants were encouraged to review the researcher’s findings and clarify any misinterpretations before the study was reported in full. The participants were asked to review the results of the interviews for clarity and accuracy. This was how member checking was achieved.

The researcher pulled from previously published interviews to develop the semi-structured interview that was used in the study. This would ensure objectivity. To safeguard trustworthiness, the researcher presented biases and limitations, such as the number of participants and the researcher being a member of the community.

### **3.3 Procedure**

The proposed protocol for this study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Pittsburgh (see Appendix D). The study was found to be exempt and did not require further evaluation by the IRB. Upon approval from the researcher's dissertation committee, the researcher sought out volunteers who currently co-teach in a suburban secondary public school setting. The researcher contacted friends and colleagues who were known to either co-teach or be an administrator in charge of co-teaching. Participants were given pseudonyms. All data were kept anonymous except from the researcher on a password protected laptop. All recordings, transcribed materials, and notes were held in a locked file cabinet by the researcher.

#### **3.3.1 Setting**

The setting for this study was a suburban secondary public high school in a Mid-Atlantic state. The district was comprised of four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. During the 2017-2018 school year, there were approximately 4,000 students enrolled in grades one through twelve (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2017).

The researcher conducted all semi-structured interviews. The interviews were held individually to ensure that participants could answer freely. The interviews took place in either the school building. The interviews took place during the teacher's planning periods. The researcher reviewed the purpose of the study with each participant and asked if the participant had any questions. The researcher used a voice recorder app for the iPhone and a digital audio recorder for back up to record each individual interview. Recording interviews is advised by Seidman (2013)

in order to preserve the accuracy of the participants' words and to avoid the researcher's interpretation of the interview. Each individual interview was saved separately and uploaded to a transcription website. Upon receipt of the transcribed interview, the researcher shared the transcription with the teacher to check for accuracy.

### **3.4 Design and Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is grounded in the idea that knowledge is created and research is a tool to understand how people make sense of their experiences in the world (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research methods were chosen to explore the perspectives and experiences of co-teachers for the following reasons: (a) qualitative research typically occurs in a natural setting-the site where participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009), (b) qualitative researchers study a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Merriam, 2009), (c) qualitative researchers organize data to develop categories or themes by shifting back and forth between themes and the database until no new information can be reached (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009), (d) qualitative research is useful for a small number of participants given that it provides the reader with a clear reality of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

A qualitative interview-based study was used to study perceptions of teachers around co-teaching and how administrators can plan for and improve upon co-teaching practices. An inductive data analysis format was applied for this study and consisted of the general processes of coding, categorizing, and thematizing (Merriam, 2009). The researcher used inductive coding, coupled with in vivo coding strategies, to identify emerging themes.

**Table 4. Overview of the Coding Process in Inductive Analysis**

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
Preparation of raw data	Close reading of text	Creation of categories	Overlapping coding an uncoded text	Revise and refine category system
Initial read through of text data	Identify specific segments of information	Label the segments of information to create the categories	Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories	Create a model incorporating most important categories/themes based on the theoretical framework
Many pages of text 	Many segments of text 	20-30 categories 	5-10 categories 	3-5 categories 

*Note.* Adapted from Creswell, 2002, Figure 9.4, p. 266

A thorough review of the interview transcripts was conducted by the researcher to highlight significant statements related to the research questions. Coding of findings was anticipated to revolve around the themes of barriers, communication, and administrative support. For example, the researcher sought to understand how teachers perceived the practice of co-teaching. In order to understand these research questions, one had to find out how administrators of the school managed this service delivery model, and how teachers were supported. In relation to the first research question, when considering the perceptions of co-teachers and how they organize their work together, the researcher anticipated issues around content knowledge, compatibility, conflicting roles and responsibilities, and administrative support to appear. Additionally, the researcher hypothesized the same themes would emerge as areas of possible benefits and challenges.

**Table 5. Research Question Matrix Showing Relationship to the Interview Questions**

Research Question	Interview Questions
Demographic information	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Question 1: How do participating teachers perceive co-teaching? How do they organize their work together?	9, 10, 13
Question 2: How do teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching?	11, 12, 14, 15, 16,
Question 3: How do teachers perceive that administrators shape the co-teaching experience? How do teachers perceive administrators plan for and improve co-teaching practices?	7, 8, 17

*Note.* A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **3.4.1 Interview Test**

A pilot test was performed to assess the quality of the instrument and potential researcher bias. The researcher performed a pilot test using one individual with the same or similar inclusion criteria as the main study to test the data collection tool. The researcher approximated the conditions as planned for the study's implementation. The individual was asked to respond to each question as if they were involved in the main study and also to comment on the clarity of questions. Responses were recorded via the Rev app on an iPhone XR and on a digital voice recorder. At the end of the interview, the individual was asked for feedback on the entire experience of being interviewed with the protocol. No information from the test interview was included in the actual study.

### **3.5 Summary**

This study was designed to reveal the perceptions of suburban public high school teachers on co-teaching to determine how co-teachers perceive co-teaching, how teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching; and finally, how administrators can shape, plan and improve co-teaching practices. Based upon a review of the literature, a semi-structured interview was designed to illicit responses to the research questions. The researcher hoped to improve upon the current practice of co-teaching while contributing to the body of research on this topic.

## **4.0 Results**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand co-teachers' perceptions to determine how suburban public high school co-teachers employ co-teaching. Additionally, this study sought to determine how teachers describe the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching; and how do teachers perceive that administrators shape, plan for, and improve the co-teaching experience? This chapter reports the results of an analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions. The findings are organized by theme and aim to answer the following research questions:

1. How do participating teachers perceive co-teaching? How do they organize their work together?
2. How do teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching?
3. How do teachers perceive that administrators shape the co-teaching experience? How do teachers perceive administrators plan for and improve co-teaching practices?

### **4.1 Interviews**

Interviews were conducted on site in a Mid-Atlantic suburban public high school between April 1, 2019 and April 19, 2019. All four of the interviews took place in a conference room within the high school. The interviews varied between 25 minutes and 35 minutes in length. The participants appeared to be relaxed and comfortable talking about their experiences with co-teaching. Interviews took place in a private, air-conditioned office. The door was kept closed to

provide for extra privacy. The interviewer thanked each participant for volunteering. Each participant stated they were happy to help or be of assistance.

## **4.2 Interview Results**

The participants for this study consisted of four cooperating high school teachers who taught in a suburban public high school in a Mid-Atlantic state. This district moved to a full inclusion model approximately eight years ago. Classes in this high school were a semester in length based upon a block schedule.

One dyad consisted of two females with an average of fourteen and a half years of teaching experience between them. They co-taught the following courses: Elements of Literacy I and Elements of Literacy II. These courses were developed by the teachers due to a significant need the English department observed in a group of students at the high school. Teachers 3 and 4, and other members of the English department, identified a group of students in the high school that were reading one-to-three years below grade level. They were concerned about how they could meet the needs of the students and brainstormed ways to intervene. Teachers 3 and 4 recommended to administration the creation of a series of co-taught English courses, eventually called Elements of Literacy I, II and III, specifically aimed at this subset of students reading one-to-three years below grade level. These courses were designed to provide the students with intensive reading intervention the semester prior to taking the co-taught grade level English course. Teachers 3 and 4 are currently on year 2 of the piloted courses. They implemented the Elements of Literacy I in ninth grade during the 2017-2018 school year. The Elements of Literacy II was implemented in

tenth grade during the 2018-2019 school year. They will implement the Elements of Literacy III in eleventh grade during the 2019-2020 school year.

Criteria for placement in these courses included teacher recommendation, STAR 360 scores, CDT (classroom diagnostic tool) and the state standardized scores. The Star 360 are short tests that provide teachers with learning data. Star tests are computer adaptive, which means they adjust to each answer a student provides. In this district, the STAR 360 is used as a universal screener in grades one through eight. The classroom diagnostic tool (CDT) is a set of online assessments, divided by content areas (literacy, mathematics, and science), and designed to provide diagnostic information to guide instruction in order to support intervention and enrichment.

The second dyad consisted of two females with an average of twenty-six years of teaching experience. They co-taught an English 9 course. This course was open to both students with and without diagnosed disabilities. Students with disabilities enrolled in the course included students with diagnoses of autism, emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, and/or other health impairment. The age of students in the course ranged from fourteen to sixteen years old. Table six shown below displays the demographic information of the participants.

Specifically, students who met the criteria for placement in the Elements of Literacy I course would take the Elements of Literacy I class first semester and then take the co-taught English 9 class during the second semester. During tenth grade, students who met the criteria for placement in the Elements of Literacy II course would take it first semester and then the co-taught English 10 course second semester. Finally, students who met the criteria for placement in the course would take Elements III first semester and then the co-taught English 11 course second semester (during the 2019-2020 school year). These courses were open to both students with and

without diagnosed disabilities. The age of students in the classes ranged from fourteen to eighteen years old. Students with disabilities in the course included students diagnosed with autism, specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, other health impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

**Table 6. Participant Demographics**

	Years of Teaching Experience	Certification	Number of Co-teachers they have worked with over the years
Teacher 1	32	Sp. Ed. Sec. English	4
Teacher 2	20	Sec. English	1
Teacher 3	19	Sec. English	2
Teacher 4	9	Elem. Read. Spec.	4

*Note.* Sp. Ed. = Special Education; Sec. English=Secondary English; Elem=Elementary; Read. Spec=Reading Specialist.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Each participant was asked eighteen open-ended questions that guided our discussion during the interview. All questions focused on the teachers’ perceptions and their experiences with co-teaching. After all interviews were conducted, and transcribed, the data was entered into the Dedoose qualitative software program. The researcher used Dedoose to assist in taking the raw collected data and identifying themes. A thorough review of the interview transcripts was conducted by the researcher to highlight significant statements related to the research questions. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, the researcher used inductive coding, coupled with in vivo coding strategies, to identify emerging themes. As expected, these themes correlated to the themes

already established through the review of literature. Data analysis of the participants' responses revealed four themes.

## **4.4 Themes**

The first theme that emerged from the interview data analysis was the importance of co-planning. The second theme that emerged was that participants perceived that co-teaching increased academic and social outcomes. The number of challenges co-teaching leads to was identified as the third theme. Finally, the importance of administrative support was the final theme that emerged from the data analysis.

### **4.4.1 Importance of Co-Planning**

The importance of co-planning emerged as a theme for this study by analyzing questions nine, ten, and thirteen. Numerous researchers have noted the importance of co-planning in the implementation of the co-teaching process (Austin, 2001; Bouck, 2007; Feldman, 1998; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Kellems, 2014; Walther-Thomas, 1997; Yoder, 2000). Researchers agreed that successful co-teaching required common planning time (Dieker, 2001; Friend & Cook, 2007; Scruggs et al., 2007).

Teacher 3 stated when she previously co-taught, she did all the planning and the prep work. She stated, while the co-teacher was cooperative and willing to do anything in class, it was always at her direction. She stated that they were rarely able to meet to co-plan due to the responsibilities of the other co-teacher. When Teachers 3 and 4 recommended the development of courses to be

co-taught to administration they requested a common plan period. Administration honored this request for the first two years of the pilot, and has assured the team they will make every effort to schedule a common plan for the conceivable future. During the semester and summer prior to implementation of the Elements of Literacy I course, the teachers met and planned after school, during weekends, and in the summer. They developed the curriculum together. Teachers 3 and 4 stated they "...ask ourselves where do we want these kids to be? We look at data. Where are they showing strengths, where are they showing weaknesses...we discuss students and whether things were successful or not. We often ask ourselves what can we do to change it up." Once the semester started, they continued to meet daily during their common plan period to discuss what went well and tweak what did not work. They believe the common plan period which allowed them to create and conduct a range of teaching activities within the classroom to differentiate to the students' needs. Additionally, because the teachers both proposed and created the course collaboratively, they viewed themselves as equal partners in the class.

Teachers 1 and 2 indicated they do have a common plan period, but they rarely use the time to co-plan. However, they both indicated they felt earlier in their co-teaching relationship, the common plan period was very important. They believed the common planning period allowed them to develop a relationship and trust with one another. The common planning period afforded them the opportunity to create and implement a variety of activities within the classroom to address the different ability levels and learning styles of the students. They stated they have taught together for so many years now that they "have a symbiotic relationship." While they do not meet to co-plan, they do have a common shared electronic document that they use to communicate with each other to suggest changes or improvements to the class.

## **4.4.2 Student Benefits**

### **4.4.2.1 Academic Benefits**

The second theme that emerged from the interview data analysis was that teachers believe participation in the co-taught class increased student academic outcomes. This theme emerged as participants' interview answers to questions eleven, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen were analyzed. The increase in academic outcomes closely aligns to the results of the review of the literature (Tremblay, 2013; Hang & Rabren, 2009; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas 2002; Wexler et al., 2018).

The teachers were unanimous in their perceptions that co-teaching led to increased academic outcomes for students. The teachers attributed the increased academic growth to having an additional qualified teacher in the classroom as their co-teaching partner. Two of the participants stated their lesson plans were more challenging and meaningful because they had someone else to help bring a different perspective into lesson planning. Additionally, they stated co-teaching allowed them more time to focus on individual student's academic needs, and thus, has had a direct impact on increased student outcomes.

Teachers in this high school who teach courses with end-of-course exams use a tool from the state department of education to measure growth and achievement. This tool is a statistical analysis of state assessment data, and provides districts with growth data to add to achievement data. This tool uses students' scores, rather than their academic performance level across grades and subjects to produce a reliable estimate of the true achievement level of a group of students (State Department of Education website). Then, these estimates of achievement are compared to estimated growth for a group of students. Teachers in this school district are given one to two in-service days per semester to analyze the data.

Teachers 1 and 2 also stated they have seen a lot of growth from their students as evidenced by improved performances on the STAR 360, CDTs, and the end-of-course exams. Specifically, a handful of their students in the co-taught class passed the end-of-course exam. For those students who did not pass, they increased their performance from a score of below basic to a score of basic. Participants hypothesized this was a result of the intensive intervention students received in the co-taught class.

Due to the addition of another certified teacher to the classroom and lower student-teacher ratios, Teachers 3 and 4 observed many of their students gain confidence with their knowledge of the subject and with class participation. For example, students who were previously not willing to read aloud in class now were willing to volunteer to read.

While there is limited research available to support the claim that co-teaching increases academic outcomes, in the co-teaching scenario with Teachers 3 and 4, it does appear to indicate co-teaching does improve student outcomes. All participants were comfortable discussing academic outcomes as prior to the researcher's study, this school district had just completed a university-based study on co-teaching and academic achievement.

#### **4.4.2.2 Social Outcomes**

Another benefit mentioned by three of the four teachers was the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting. In addition to improved academic outcomes, teachers stated they also perceived improved social outcomes for both students with disabilities. Teacher 2 explained she believed students with disabilities had improved social skills after participation in the co-taught class. Additionally, Teachers 3 and 4 stated they witnessed many benefits to participation in the co-taught class: improved self-confidence, self-esteem, and stronger peer relationships. Teacher 3 stated as she and her co-teacher saw their students grow emotionally,

become more confident, and that confidence carried itself across into other subjects because the students were better versed in reading comprehension strategies as well as improved vocabulary skills. Teacher 2 further stated several of the students without disabilities in the class eventually joined the school's Best Buddies local chapter. Best Buddies is a national organization which promotes one-on-one friendships with students with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

### **4.4.3 Barriers Associated with Co-Teaching**

#### **4.4.3.1 Inconsistent Co-Teaching Partners**

Several challenges associated with co-teaching were mentioned by the participants. Inconsistent co-teaching partners were cited as a significant challenge by three of the four teachers. As teacher 4 further explained, as a reading specialist, she was the one who would constantly get moved around from classroom to classroom each year. She stated it was difficult to navigate all the different personalities and how best to insert herself into the class. While she now co-teaches with Teacher 3 in the Elements of Literacy class each year that is the only consistency she has in her schedule. The rest of her schedule is dictated by student need and she never knows each semester which English classroom or teacher with whom she will be assigned to co-teach. She further stated, "there are four or five of us they rotate through co-teaching...the consistency of working with one co-teacher isn't always there." She explained this inconsistency is a challenge in developing trust with her new co-teachers. Additionally, Teacher 4 believed that because the Elements of Literacy class was the class in which she had the most involvement with curriculum and planning, she felt it was the class in which she was most useful. She stated she and Teacher 3 rotated the models of co-teaching they used on a regular basis. Teacher 4 said specifically the students in the Elements of Literacy preferred station teaching so she and Teacher 3 would try to

incorporate that co-teaching model more often than the others. In contrast, she stated in her other co-teaching classes they rarely moved past the one-teach/one-assist model.

While all participants felt co-teaching was important, two of the teachers (the special education and reading specialist) stated more challenges to implementation than the others. The special education teacher (Teacher 1) noted she was assigned to work with two different co-teachers this semester. She estimated over the past eight years she had worked with at least four different co-teachers. While always welcomed into the new class, some teachers were more accepting than others. Although she has worked with many of them over the years, it was still challenging to navigate all the different personalities. Each co-teacher had a different view on co-teaching and how they wanted co-teaching implemented in their classroom. The view of the co-teacher really determined how active a role she played in the class. Teacher 4, the reading specialist, was also assigned to work with multiple co-teachers every year. Teacher 4 agreed with Teacher 1 that she often felt pulled in many directions. She stated it was difficult to navigate the different personalities of all the co-teachers with whom she worked.

#### **4.4.3.2 Additional Responsibilities of Co-Teacher**

Two of the participants (the general education teachers) cited the responsibilities the co-teachers had outside of the co-taught class as a challenge to co-teaching. Teacher 2 explained one of the biggest challenges she and her co-teacher faced was the nature of her co-teacher's job outside of the co-taught classroom. Her co-teacher (the special education teacher) often had to deal with other situations and was pulled out of the class period by the administration. While Teacher 2 stated she was not complaining, and understood the need, it was still frustrating when they would have a plan in place for the class, beyond the one-teach, one-assist model, and she would not be there to implement her part of it. Teacher 3 reiterated Teacher 2's comments. She explained during

her first co-teaching experience with a co-teacher, who was a special education teacher, her co-teacher would often get pulled out of the class to handle emergencies or to attend IEP meetings. Both teachers felt the removal of the co-teacher from the class was a disruption.

Outside of the special education teacher's co-teaching responsibilities, Teacher 1 had a caseload of between twenty and twenty-five students with disabilities for which she was responsible for their IEP paperwork and progress monitoring. Additionally, when an emergency with one of her students on her caseload occurred, she would be called out of class to handle it. She stated she felt pulled in multiple directions.

#### **4.4.4 Importance of Administrative Support**

The importance of administrative support emerged as the final theme for this study by analyzing questions seven, eight, and seventeen. Research indicated that administrative support was a critical factor in co-teaching effectiveness (Cook & Friend, 1995; Kamens et al., 2013; Scruggs et al., 2007; Walther-Thomas, 1997).

All four participants indicated they received a great deal of support from building administration. The support provided varied by the needs of the co-teacher. For example, when Teachers 3 and 4 proposed the Elements of Literacy course they requested three things: 1. A common plan period for the co-teachers; 2. Students placed into the class met the pre-determined criteria; and 3. Administration capped the class size at fifteen students. Teachers 3 and 4 indicated administration was respectful of their wishes.

Teacher 2 also stated administration made sure the students met the criteria for the co-taught instruction were scheduled into the co-taught classes. She further explained students were not scheduled into the class just because there were two teachers in the room. All participants felt

the students were appropriately scheduled for the co-taught class based upon the pre-determined classroom criteria.

All participants commented administration tried to schedule them a common plan period with their co-teacher. However, when assigned to co-teach with multiple co-teachers and possibly across multiple content areas, during the semester not all schedules allowed for the common plan period. In these situations the teachers noted it was difficult to play a more active role in the classroom and she sometimes felt like she was a “glorified aide.” Teachers 1 and 4 stated they wish administration was more thoughtful with their co-teaching partners. They indicated the inconsistency of co-teaching partners was very difficult to overcome.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand co-teachers’ perceptions to determine how suburban public high school co-teachers employ co-teaching, how teachers frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching, and how administrators can shape, plan and improve co-teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers who currently were co-teaching. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data. First, the teachers were unanimous in their belief regarding the importance of a common co-planning period. Secondly, the participant’s perceived co-teaching increased the academic and social outcomes of the students. The third theme to emerge from the data analysis was the multitude of challenges co-teaching led to. The importance of administrative support emerged as the final theme.

## 5.0 Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand how suburban public high school teachers perceive co-teaching and how they frame the benefits and challenges related to co-teaching. Additionally, this study sought to perceive how administrators can shape, plan, and improve co-teaching practices. The interview protocol used to gather data was designed to answer these questions and gather additional information pertaining to effective practices, benefits and challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

Improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities has been an emphasis in school districts across the United States for several years. Interest in co-teaching intensified as a result of the *IDEA*, *NCLB*, and the Gaskin's Settlement. As a means of improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities, and in an attempt to close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities, co-teaching evolved in this suburban secondary public school district in a Mid-Atlantic state approximately eight years ago out of a necessity to provide alternative instruction for students with disabilities in the general education setting. These qualitative data gathered from this interview-based study show that participants overwhelmingly perceive co-teaching to be an effective instructional model that benefits students both academically and socially.

Several general conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. This chapter is organized by findings according to the emergent themes, providing implications for practice, and making recommendations for further research.

## 5.1 Themes

### 5.1.1 Importance of Co-Planning

The importance of a common planning period between co-teachers was a theme throughout the research on co-teaching although not all of the participants utilized a traditional, common planning time with face-to-face conversations to co-plan. Teachers identified co-planning as the number one condition needed for co-teaching to be successful. It was during this part of the interview that Teachers 3 and 4 spoke with the most feeling. While Teachers 3 and 4 were the teachers to who proposed the development of the Elements courses, the teachers made it very clear to building administration they would only be willing to co-teach the courses if administration assured them they would have a common plan time. Each co-teacher had previously experienced co-teaching partnerships that did not have common plan periods. In those situations, rarely did common planning occur. Teachers 3 and 4 did not consider those experiences to be successful. Both felt the common plan period would be critical to the success of the Elements courses. The importance of a common plan period aligns with the research on co-teaching (Austin, 2001; Bouck, 2007; Feldman, 1998; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Kellems, 2014; Walther-Thomas, 1997; Yoder, 2000).

Teachers 1 and 2, who had previously worked with each other several times, could not always use their common plan time to meet. However, they felt it was very important to share ideas and thoughts with each other. Instead, Teachers 1 and 2 developed an electronic planning tool as a means to replace face-to-face meetings. This aligns with recommended practices from the research literature which finds that electronic planning technology is one successful tool to replace face-to-face meetings (Friend, 2013). This level of interaction between Teachers 1 and 2 indicated

to the researcher there was a certain level of trust and respect between the dyad. They were confident in their co-teachers and had developed a trust between them. Still, they recognized the importance of collaboration and on-going communication. Since time is a valuable commodity to a teacher, the researcher recommends the co-teachers ask themselves how they can support common planning without losing the time of two teacher's planning.

## **5.1.2 Student Benefits**

### **5.1.2.1 Academic Outcomes**

The teachers who participated in this study perceived the model of co-teaching to be generally beneficial to students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Participants were very optimistic about the improvement in academic outcomes they witnessed from their students and perceived it was a direct result of their using co-teaching as the instructional delivery model in the classroom. Teachers attributed the increased academic growth to having an additional qualified teacher in the classroom as their co-teaching partner. Additionally, Teachers 3 and 4 stated their lesson plans were more challenging and meaningful because they had additional input into lesson planning and could bounce ideas off of one another. The improvement in academic outcomes aligns with the results of the literature review.

Participants' perceptions that co-teaching increases student achievement is partly supported by recent studies. For example, Klinger et al. (1998) reported students with disabilities made considerable gains on reading achievement. Improved student academic performances were also reported by Hang and Rabren (1998) between the year before co-teaching and the year of co-teaching. While Teachers 1 and 2 did not mention specific data to support their statements regarding improved academic outcomes, Teachers 3 and 4 mentioned several examples.

### **5.1.2.2 Social Outcomes**

Participants in this study perceived that participation in the co-taught classroom benefited both students with and without disabilities socially. Teachers perceived students with disabilities in the co-taught classroom thrived with interaction with their peers. Participants noted improved social skills and participation in the co-taught classroom. Additionally, participants noted benefits to the students without disabilities as well. These results align with findings from a number of investigations that reported on the positive effects of co-teaching collaboration as a social model for students (Frisk, 2004; Hardy, 2001; Hazlett, 2001; Trent, 1998). However, there appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the impact of peer models on participants in the co-taught class.

### **5.1.3 Barriers Associated with Co-Teaching**

#### **5.1.3.1 Inconsistent Co-Teaching Partners**

Teachers 1 and 4 noted more challenges than the general education teachers. These two teachers are pulled in more directions than the general education teacher. The general education teacher teaches a level of English to three classes each semester. They only work with one co-teacher. However, Teachers 1 and 4 could co-teach with up to three different teachers. These teachers have to carefully navigate all the different personalities and expectations their various co-teachers may have for them and their partnerships. Working with different co-teachers often led to Teachers 1 and 4 having subordinate roles in the co-taught classroom. Surprisingly, a frequent challenge identified by the literature, compatibility between co-teachers, was not identified as a concern by the teachers in this study. Another challenge frequently identified in the literature, professional development, was also not mentioned as a concern by the participants in this study. The researcher was surprised by those omissions.

### **5.1.3.2 Additional Responsibilities of Co-Teacher**

In addition to their co-teaching responsibilities, Teachers 1 and 4 have many different roles and responsibilities outside of the co-taught classroom. The special education teacher has a caseload between twenty to thirty students for which he or she is responsible. The needs of those students can vary significantly and she can be pulled in multiple directions.

### **5.1.4 Administrative Support**

Participants were unanimous in the perception that they received a great deal of administrative support. Teachers 3 and 4 proposed the adoption of a class to provide intervention to students who met the criteria that was developed. Not just one class, but in the second year, two classes, and during the 2019-2020 school year, a third class. The support Teachers 3 and 4 received from administration is extraordinary. When any class is added to the building's program of studies, there is a financial impact. If Teachers 3 and 4 are teaching the Elements of Literacy courses, this means they are not available to teach the courses they had previously been teaching. That is a staffing issue and thus has a significant financial impact upon the district. Staffing concerns and their impact upon co-teaching is an understudied area.

Not only did administration provide the staffing resources to Teachers 3 and 4, they ensured they had a common plan period. Additionally, administration worked with Teachers 3 and 4 to develop the placement criteria for the course and ensured the students who met the criteria were scheduled into the course. This type of support does not happen across all districts. Without the support all the teachers received from administration the researcher does not believe co-teaching would be as successful in this district. Interestingly, there appears to be little research on districts who implement it according to best practice and its impact upon academic benefits.

While the teachers perceived they overwhelmingly had the support of administration, the researcher observed there is a flaw in their perception. One of the challenges teachers reported was the co-teacher being pulled to either attend IEP meetings or deal with emergencies. However, it is typically the administration pulling the co-teacher from the classroom. If administration is committed to limiting the number of disruptions to the co-taught class, why are they pulling out the special education teacher? Additionally, what constitutes an emergency? How do they define an emergency?

If the teachers perceive overwhelming support from administration, why do they not question when the co-teacher is pulled from class? Historically, special education teachers handled everything to do with the students on their caseload. From being the contact person for the parent to resolving all concerns that may arise during the school day. Do the teachers allow themselves to continue to bear this responsibility? In order for administration and co-teachers to be truly committed to co-teaching, they need limit the disruptions to the co-taught classroom.

## **5.2 Limitations**

The results of the study must be considered with limitations. Because qualitative research is not a pursuit for definitive truth (Pratt, 2014), but rather an understanding of experiences from both participants' views and the researcher's interpretation (Pratt, 2014), biases may exist with this study. Furthermore, transferability is dependent on readers' conclusions of whether the participants and setting are relevant to their own circumstances (Pratt, 2014). The uniqueness of this school district and co-teaching teams may limit the broad generalization of this study's conclusions.

Another limitation for this study is the lack of access the researcher had to co-teaching dyads. It was extremely difficult to obtain permission from school districts to interview co-teachers. Of the participants, all co-taught in English. No co-teaching partners were available in Science or Math to interview. Additionally, only one dyad included a special education teacher. The other dyad included a reading specialist.

While the researcher would like to think the participants spoke openly and freely about their co-teaching experiences, the researcher's acquaintance with the Director of Special Education and Pupil Services may have impacted how some of the participants responded to interview questions. It could also explain why the participants were so positive when they spoke about administration.

The final limitation of this study was the researcher was unable to interview administrators. Due to difficulty obtaining site permission, the scope of this study was pared down considerably in order to comply with the site's requirements. Therefore, once permission was received, the researcher was thankful she could interview the teachers.

### **5.3 Implications for Practice**

Overall, the results of this study suggest several implications for practice. Legislative demands such as the *Individuals with Disabilities Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act* require districts to increase access to the general education setting and improve outcomes on state assessments for students with disabilities. Co-teaching is a popular service delivery model school districts have explored to close the achievement gap between students with, and without, disabilities. In order for districts to move forward with implementing co-teaching as service

delivery model, administration must address the concerns and challenges that are faced by its' teachers. Administration must make the scheduling of students with disabilities a priority. In order to limit the number of co-teaching partners, students with disabilities should be hand scheduled into pre-established co-teaching classrooms instead of scheduling teachers based upon student need. This will limit the number of co-teaching partnerships and increase consistency amongst co-teachers.

Administration should also make every attempt to minimize the number of responsibilities the special education co-teacher has outside of the co-taught classroom. Participants mentioned multiple times throughout the interview the number of times the special education teacher was pulled out of class to handle an emergency or attend a meeting and how disruptive it was to the class. What constitutes an emergency that would require the special education teacher to leave the co-taught classroom? The researcher strongly recommends administration and the special education department meet to define an "emergency". If the special education teacher has a student on his or her caseload with behavioral or emotional needs, the IEP team should consider including a crisis response team to the student's positive behavior support plan (if there is not one already in it). This team could include the building social worker, guidance counselor, dean of students, school psychologist, assistant principal, principal or any trusted adult identified by the student. Inclusion in the IEP would ensure the person handling the crisis would know who to call for assistance.

Another suggestion for limiting the disruptions to co-teaching is to limit the number of days on which IEPs are scheduled. This building has approximately 150-200 students identified as receiving special education services. If the building identified certain days per month to hold IEP meetings, the teachers could plan in advance for the disruption.

While the teachers perceived there were many disruptions to the co-taught classroom, this perception could be flawed. The researcher recommends all parties involved keep a log of the disruptions so data can be collected and analyzed. If the data indicates there is a pattern of disruption, the problem can then be addressed and mitigated.

Finally, the researcher also recommends considering how caseloads are assigned to those at the secondary level. Some special education teachers are more comfortable co-teaching than others. Could they be assigned to co-teach all day and not be responsible for a caseload? Could the special education teachers who are not comfortable co-teaching, perhaps they be assigned higher caseload numbers to compensate for the co-teachers not having a caseload. This division of responsibilities could significantly decrease the disruptions.

#### **5.4 Recommendation for Future Research**

Based upon the findings of this study, there are implications for future research. There is a gap in the research regarding the effects of co-teaching on the academic and behavioral outcomes of students with disabilities. There is little quantitative research to suggest co-teaching improves academic outcomes to students with disabilities. Replication of this study with a larger sample size would be helpful in determining the ability to generalize the findings to different geographical areas and different school districts. Additionally, researchers should compare the academic outcomes in classrooms where co-teachers volunteer to co-teacher versus co-teachers who are assigned to co-teach. Lastly, researchers should study the impact peers have upon each other in the co-taught classroom.

## Appendix A Austin Correspondence

Vance Austin <Vance.Austin@[mville.edu]>

Thu 12/27/2018, 4:40 PM

Sipe, Beth A

Austin Interview.doc  
36 KB

Austin's Survey.doc  
47 KB

2 attachments (83 KB)

Good Afternoon Beth,

Sure, happy to share it with you and grant my permission to use and modify as you see fit. I've attached a copy just in case you don't have one.

Wishing you every success with your research!

Cordially,

Vance

Vance Austin, PhD  
Chair, Special Education Department  
[vance.austin@\[mville.edu\]](mailto:vance.austin@[mville.edu])

## Appendix B Kellem Correspondence

Re: Journal Article-How does the Presence of a Special Education Teacher impact Co-Teachers'...

Ryan Kellems <rkellems@byu.edu>

Mon 12/10/2018, 3:53 PM

Sipe, Beth A

Rkellems\_interview protocol.doc

63 KB

Beth,

Thanks for the email and sorry it took me a few days to find this. Attached is the interview protocol. Let me know if you have any other questions.

Ryan Kellems, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Special Education Program Coordinator  
Counseling Psychology & Special Education  
Brigham Young University  
340-B MCKB  
Provo, UT 84602  
[rkellems@byu.edu](mailto:rkellems@byu.edu)

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ryan\\_Kellems](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ryan_Kellems)

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=CDh8srUAAAAJ&hl=en>

## Appendix C Pratt Correspondence

Pratt, Sharon <prattsh@[redacted]un.edu>

Sipe, Beth A

Beth,

You may certainly use questions that came from my co-teaching research. I wish you well in your endeavors!

Sharon

Dr. Sharon Pratt

Assistant Professor of Literacy and Elementary Education,  
School of Education, Indiana University Northwest

3400 Broadway, Hawthorn 351

Gary, IN 46408

[prattsh@\[redacted\]un.edu](mailto:prattsh@[redacted]un.edu)

"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Fredrick Douglass

**Appendix D IRB Correspondence**

**Ivanusic, Carolyn** <ivanusic@[REDACTED]>

**To:** Beth Sipe

Jan 18 at 2:50 PM

Beth,

If your goal is not to contribute to generalizable knowledge, you should not submit a protocol to the IRB. It would not meet the regulatory definition of "human subjects research" under IRB purview.

Carolyn

\*\*\*\*\*

Carolyn Ivanusic, MSW CIP  
Research Review Coordinator  
University of Pittsburgh  
Institutional Review Board / Human Research Protection Office  
Hieber Building, Suite 106  
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Ivanusic@[REDACTED]

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