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Facilitating Collaboration Through a Co-Teaching Field Experience

Abstract

This article describes an action research project in which two teacher educators implemented a co-teaching field experience with pre-service teacher candidates acting as co-teachers to facilitate collaboration among peers. The goal of the action research was to better meet the needs of pre-service teacher candidates and continually develop their ability to grow as reflective and collaborative future teaching educators. To increase collaboration, co-teaching models were implemented in an early field experience. Teaching activities and assignments provided opportunities for collaboration as co-teachers and as members of a teaching community. Data collection and observations indicate peer-to-peer co-teaching helped create a collaborative atmosphere for PTCs, while also revealing areas that need additional refinement in the field experience course.

Keywords: collaboration, co-teaching, field experience, pre-service teachers

For most pre-service teacher candidates (PTCs), the idea of collaborating is nothing new. As university students, our PTCs collaborate as part of a group project countless times. However, during their field experience placements, fewer PTCs collaborate when planning and implementing lessons. Like most educator preparation programs, ours strives to provide meaningful field experiences where PTCs can take on the role of a teacher. Since teachers are responsible for collaborating with other educators across their campus on a daily basis, we feel it necessary to begin the process of learning to collaborate during field placements. This is especially important because the findings from the Center for Teaching Quality state, “collaboration among teachers paves the way for the spread of effective teaching practices, improved outcomes for the students they teach, and the retention of the most accomplished teachers in high-needs schools” (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009, pg. 2). To provide a more meaningful field experience that prepares PTCs for their future careers, we desire to implement an experience that encompasses the full scope of a teacher’s responsibilities – of which collaboration is a part.

PTCs seeking EC-6 certification in our program take two semester long field experiences prior to a culminating clinical teaching experience. The first field experience places PTCs in a local public school two hours each day, Monday through Thursday, with an English Language Arts and Social Studies content focus. During the second field experience, PTCs observe within our university charter school for three hours each day, Monday through Thursday, with a Mathematics and Science content focus. Within the context of this second field experience we work with PTCs as field supervisors. In this role, we interact with PTCs daily while they actively participate within their mentors’ classroom. Our responsibilities include mentoring and supporting PTCs through planning and implementing their lessons. Following each lesson, we assess and provide feedback in an effort to help them grow as teacher candidates. Our field experience also

includes a one-hour weekly lab where we instruct and share resources and information pertaining to the field experience.

While our educator preparation program benefits greatly from our university charter school, a challenge we face is the number of PTCs assigned to one mentor teacher's classroom. Each semester we accommodate as many as 70 PTCs across 12 mentor teacher classrooms. This requires the placement of up to six PTCs within each classroom. Our PTCs spend a great deal of time not only observing their assigned mentor teacher, but also their peers, as each teaches a variety of lessons to fulfill all requirements of the field experience. The challenge of multiple PTCs learning in a single mentor teacher's classroom provided an opportunity to engage in research, with the potential to impact PTCs in their field experience placements.

We sought to ensure that all teacher candidates engage during their field experience and work collaboratively with their peers and mentor teacher. Traditionally, our field experience required each PTC to develop and teach an assigned lesson around a state standard. Little, if any, collaboration took place among PTCs. The idea for our project stemmed from a desire to see more collaboration between PTC peers placed in the same classroom. We wanted collaboration to not only take place in the planning aspect of the lesson, but also in the implementation. Our intent was to provide a field experience placement that encouraged authentic collaboration among future educators.

Our research took on the form of an action research project. Action research has been around since the 1930s with the term first introduced by Kurt Lewin (Adelman, 1993). The tenants of action research described by Lewin still exist today. Lewin suggests that action research requires active participation of those carrying out the work in exploration of problems that they identify (Adelman, 1993). Action research has expanded since its conception, with various forms of the

research method utilized across disciplines. In educational settings, action research is a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to real problems in today's schools, including ways to improve instruction and student achievement (Ferrance, 2000).

Mills (2018) suggests two theories of action research that exist today: critical (or theory based) and practical, with critical action research having the goal of “liberation through knowledge gathering” (p. 12). Practical action research assumes that as decision-makers, teacher-researchers are able to choose their own area of focus, determining how to collect, analyze, and interpret data (Mills, 2018). With a practical action research framework in mind, we began reviewing literature related to collaboration and field experiences, and in doing so, came across co-teaching.

Literature Review

Co-teaching

The origins of co-teaching date back to the 1960s and 1970s as a means of modifying instruction for a more diverse student population (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). The primary goal of co-teaching was to place students with special needs in general education to provide the same learning opportunities as their general education peers (Friend, 2013). Typically, co-teachers include the general education teacher and the special education professional, working as a teaching pair. More recently, co-teaching has been a model used in the special education setting as a response to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Under IDEA, Individualized Educational Programs (IEP) state how students with disabilities participate and progress in the general education curriculum. In 2015-2016, there were 6.7 million children, approximately 13 percent of all public-school students who received special education services (McFarland, Hussar, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Rathbun, Barmer, Forrest Cataldi, & Bullock Mann, 2018). Meeting the needs of these individual students requires collaboration among educators,

including special education professionals and general education teachers. Co-teaching provides a model for educators to collaboratively work together to meet the needs of the child and adhere to federal mandates.

Today, co-teaching is a model of planning and instruction to reach *all* learners, not just students with special needs. The co-teaching model in which co-teachers collaboratively plan and teach can vary. Cook and Friend (1995) have identified six approaches to collaborative teaching through co-teaching, which include:

1. *Station Teaching*. Students divide into groups with each teacher delivering part of the lesson at a station. Independent work typically occurs in one of the stations. Students rotate through all stations, allowing teachers to work with all students;
2. *Parallel Teaching*. Students divide into two groups. Each teacher works with a teacher. The teachers may present information in different ways or they may choose to present the same information;
3. *Alternative Teaching*. One teacher works with the majority of students, while the other teacher instructs a small group to reteach, enrich, assess, pre-teach, or another identified purpose;
4. *Teaming*. Students remain in one group, while the teachers co-instruct throughout the lesson;
5. *One-Teach, One-Assist*. Students remain in one group, with one teacher leading instruction while the other teacher briefly interacts with students to focus attention, answer questions, further explain concepts, and so on; and
6. *One Teach, One Observe*. One teacher leads instruction while the other teacher collects specific data pertaining to one or more children.

While each of the six approaches may look slightly different, at the core is a model of collaboration between educators to meet the needs of all children.

Educators who take on the role of co-teachers can vary. Cook and Friend (1995) describe co-teaching as “Two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single space”. This could mean two certified teachers, or as Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2010) suggest, “coteaching in student teaching provides two professional prepared adults in the classroom who are actively engaged with students for greater periods of time” (p. 12). Since each co-teacher brings different skill sets and experiences to the classroom these co-teachers supplement each other, rather than act interchangeably (Friend, 2013). Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013) suggest that co-teachers engage in a cooperative process of face-to-face interaction, interdependence, performance, along with monitoring and processing of interpersonal skills, and individual accountability.

For all of the benefits, co-teaching also comes with multiple challenges, some of which could potentially impact field experience placements. These challenges include lack of training, compatibility, and planning time. Hedin and Conderman (2015) contend that lack of training could be a potential barrier to a co-teaching partnership, and that university partners, through on-site support can help beginning and experienced co-teachers advance their instructional knowledge and skills. Schools without university partners will need to ensure they have some level of on-going training at the campus level. Friend (2008) suggests that another potential concern to co-teaching, is how co-teaching relationships form. Some teaching partnerships assigned by administrators encounter difficulties, compared to teachers who choose their co-teaching partner. A metasynthesis of co-teaching conducted by Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007), found that one of the most frequently cited challenges to co-teaching is finding a common time to co-

plan. Several of the studies utilized in the metasynthesis indicated that administrators must encourage and support opportunities for co-planning to happen on a regular basis.

With numerous students to place in fewer classrooms, one area we found lacking in the literature, is the idea that PTCs could serve together as co-teachers under the direction of a mentor teacher and/or university supervisor. Using these ideas as a foundation, we sought to develop our PTCs into collaborative educators, and designed our field experience placements to provide the supportive environment needed for healthy co-teaching partnerships.

Collaboration

The ability to collaborate is an essential skill for current and future educators. Collaboration among teachers provides an avenue to share effective teaching practices that can improve outcomes for the students they teach (Berry et al., 2009). Johnston and Tsai (2018) define teacher collaboration as “professional interaction with colleagues that focuses on refining and improving classroom instruction, curriculum, and supports for students” (p. 3). To better meet the needs of K-12 students, educator preparation programs have the responsibility of providing authentic collaborative experiences for future teachers in efforts to prepare them to be effective collaborators. Field experience placements can provide a good opportunity to engage in that authentic collaboration by expanding understanding of collaboration, and the role that each member of a collaborative team plays in an educational setting. Through collaboration, PTCs are able to see the value that teaming actions and decision-making can have related to curriculum, management, and overall impacting learners (Whitley & Williams, 2012). Specifically related to co-teaching field experiences, PTCs are able to learn how to plan and implement instruction with another professional, which encourages reflection on their ability to be a co-teacher, explore their own teaching style, and examine what they bring to the co-teaching relationship (Kamens, 2007).

One of the biggest challenges to authentic collaboration includes finding a common time to meet together and plan lessons. Thirty-one percent of in-service teachers report having dedicated time, that is, adequate time, to collaborate with other teachers (Johnston & Tsai, 2018). As university students, many PTCs face time constraints outside of their field placement, due to a variety of reasons, whether personal or academic.

One method that Johnston and Tsai (2018) suggest for increasing the opportunities for teachers to participate in collaborative activities is through peer observation. Additionally, to address the time constraint to collaboration, providing protocols to guide educators while they collaborate can aid the process of collaboration and make it more efficient. One such protocol for facilitating peer collaboration may lie in the form of peer feedback. Shin, Wilkins, and Ainsworth (2007) contend the peer feedback process is beneficial for helping PTCs to become more reflective about their teaching and improve their instruction. Peer feedback provided over multiple observations allows PTCs opportunities to more deeply reflect on their teaching practices. Furthermore, the frequency in which peer feedback occurs directly relates to the perception that the feedback is helpful for improving instructional practice (Johnston & Tsai, 2018).

Collaboration between PTCs can be a powerful tool. As PTCs engage in collaborative teaching activities, their identities as teachers are further developed (Barahona, 2017), and peer collaboration can further develop lifelong habits of reflection and growth (Shin et al., 2007). Kamens (2007) suggests that introducing PTCs to collaboration that occurs through co-teaching can help shape their expectations about what they will encounter in working with other educators. The goal of forming co-teaching partnerships in our field experience is to help PTCs develop their own collaborative abilities, while also improving their confidence to take on the role of an educator.

Methodology

Context

After some initial research related to co-teaching, we wanted to better understand how we could use co-teaching to help our PTCs collaborate. More specifically, we desired to address the following research questions:

1. What were PTCs overall beliefs and perceptions related to collaboration following a semester-long co-teaching field experience placement?
2. What were PTCs overall beliefs and perceptions of a semester-long co-teaching field experience placement?

To address our research questions, we sought out and attended a co-teaching workshop from The Academy for Co-Teaching & Collaboration by St. Cloud State University and TWH Co-Teaching/Consulting (<https://twhcoteaching.com/>). The workshop offered training related to co-teaching from the perspective of a PTC paired with a mentor teacher. The training gave us insight and resources to implement collaborative co-teaching partnerships into our existing field experience.

While we found the co-teaching workshop to be beneficial, we felt a slight disconnect between the training and our potential application of co-teaching. Due to our large number of PTCs, our field experience does not allow for a ratio of one PTC to one mentor teacher. To fit the needs of our study, we defined co-teaching similar to Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2010), “Coteaching in student teaching provides two professionally prepared adults in the classroom who are actively engaged with students for greater periods of time” (p. 12). But rather than using two professionally prepared adults, we used two PTCs under the supervision of a field supervisor.

We decided to allow our PTCs the opportunity to form their own co-teaching partnerships.

Self-selection of partners allowed PTCs control over who to best collaborate with since these pairs would act as co-teachers for the duration of the field experience. Each PTC was responsible for teaching their own required lessons as the *lead-teacher*, while also serving as a *co-teacher* during their partners' required lessons. This immediately doubled the number of lessons for which they participate, leading to meaningful opportunities for collaboration while planning, implementing, and reflecting on both lessons.

Once we decided how to pair co-teachers and aligned co-teaching to the requirements of our field experience, we developed a timeline for implementation. To begin the semester, we designed a co-teaching orientation for all PTCs enrolled in our field experience sections. The orientation was co-taught by us, as field supervisors, and provided an overview of the co-teaching models. Our field experience also includes a one-hour lab that meets once a week. As field supervisors, we decided to conduct our labs together, as co-teachers, to showcase the different models of co-teaching. Modeling the co-teaching methods allowed each PTC to participate in the co-teaching models as a student before planning and implementing the co-teaching components in their field placement. The weekly labs also allowed time for PTCs to ask questions about the models, think about implementation, and reflect on their experience.

Data Collection

To gauge the impact of our action research, PTCs completed a co-teaching survey at the end of their field experience. Forty-four (N=44) female participants completed the survey, adapted from the Academy for Co-teaching and Collaboration (2015) at St. Cloud State University. Participants responded to a variety of four-point Likert scale questions indicating their perceptions of each co-teaching model including any perceived benefits and drawbacks. Participants also rated the level of collaboration that occurred between co-teaching partners during the co-planning

process. Additional open-ended survey questions allowed PTCs to describe their overall experience of a co-teaching field experience, asking specifically for PTCs to describe any benefits and/or challenges from a co-teaching field experience placement. Furthermore, field supervisors met regularly to reflect on implementation of co-teaching and evidences of collaboration. Analysis of the co-teaching survey, along with our own reflections, revealed a variety of experiences related to collaboration and co-teaching.

Findings

Perceptions of Collaboration

The co-teaching survey allowed PTCs to indicate their perceptions related to several topics centered around collaboration. Based on their perceptions, co-planning was an area in which most of the collaboration took place among co-teachers (see Table 1). Eighty-nine percent of participants indicated that the time spent between planning with their co-teacher was productive (indicated by the selection of *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*). Furthermore, 72% of participants indicated that they developed a deeper understanding of the curriculum through co-planning, while 70% of participants gained confidence through the planning process. Additionally, 89% of participants perceived themselves to be better equipped to work collaboratively with others in the future as a result of their co-planning experience. While the majority of participants found the co-planning process to be collaborative, the level of participation was not always balanced, with 43% indicating that equal participation in planning of lessons was an issue.

In addition to perceptions of the co-planning process, PTCs identified how co-teaching affected collaboration. Ninety-eight percent of participants indicated an increase in collaboration skills as a benefit of co-teaching. Additionally, the same percentage of participants (98%) indicated that co-teaching helped them learn to facilitate and/or direct the efforts of other adults in

the classroom. Finally, ninety-one percent of participants, indicated that co-teaching provided more opportunities for the PTCs to ask questions of each other and reflect on their efforts as a co-teaching team.

Perceptions of Co-teaching

The survey also revealed data related to PTCs’ experiences related to co-teaching throughout their field experience. Participants identified the degree to which they found value in each model of co-teaching. The majority of participants found all co-teaching models to be either “moderately valuable” or “very valuable” (see Table 1).

Table 1

PTC Rating of Each Co-teaching Model

<u>Co-teaching Model</u>	<u>Very Valuable</u>	<u>Moderately Valuable</u>	<u>Slightly Valuable</u>	<u>Not Valuable</u>
Parallel Teaching	54.5	43.3	2.2	0
Team Teaching	77.3	20.5	2.2	0
One Teach, One Observe	63.7	20.5	13.6	2.2
One Teach, One Assist	84.1	11.3	4.6	0
Station Teaching	81.8	13.6	4.6	0
Differentiated/Alternative	79.5	20.5	0	0

PTCs also shared their perceptions of co-teaching and how it impacted the children they worked with over the course of the field placement. All PTCs indicated that co-teaching can allow for:

- more individual student attention,
- students to experience two perspectives,
- students to experience greater opportunities for academic growth, and
- meeting student needs more quickly.

The results indicate a variety of benefits related to a peer-to-peer co-teaching experience. The

survey also revealed a few challenges related to a co-teaching field experience.

Challenges to Co-teaching

Candidates also identified any barriers or drawbacks to co-teaching. Eighteen percent of participants viewed the amount of time it takes to co-plan as a drawback. Furthermore, the same number of participants indicated that co-teaching did not allow for enough individual teaching time. Sixteen percent of participants believed having two teachers was either a great or moderate drawback to co-teaching. Open-ended responses to survey questions revealed that PTCs had difficulty finding a common planning time. One PTC stated, “The most challenging thing about co-teaching is time to meet outside of class. We both work about 20 hours a week in addition to going to school full time.” Another PTC echoed this idea, “The most challenging aspect of my co-teaching experience was the actual working together with my co-teacher. We didn't really set aside time to plan out our lessons together, so that is something that I would definitely change for the future when I use these different models.”

Co-teachers who were unable to find a common planning time encountered additional complications, often times centered around communication. One PTC stated, “Communication is tough. You have to be very clear when giving instructions to your co-teacher or things won't be done the way you want.” The difficulty communicating may have also impacted the working relationship of co-teachers. While referring to her co-teacher, one PTC stated, “She never set clear expectations of what she wanted from me and would tell me what to do minutes before the lesson, hoping I would simply catch on and know what she wanted from me.” Another PTC commented, “I found that co-planning was challenging at times and knowing exactly what my place was when I was not the lead teacher.” The challenges of some PTCs in the areas of co-planning and communication present opportunities for us as field supervisors, to refine the structure of our field

experience.

Table 2

PTC Perceptions of Co-planning

	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
Time spent co-planning was productive.	43.1	45.5	6.8	4.6
Both partners participated in planning of lessons and activities.	34.8	21.0	37.2	7.0
I developed a deeper understanding of the curriculum through co-planning.	34.8	37.2	23.3	4.7
I gained confidence through the co-planning process.	51.1	18.6	25.6	4.7
As a result of co-planning I will be better equipped to work collaboratively with others.	55.8	34.9	7.0	2.3

As noted in Table 2, being part of a co-teaching team did not always create equal partnerships for all lessons. Only 35% of respondents indicated that “both partners participated in planning of lessons and activities.” While this may be due to the issue of finding time to plan collaboratively, it could also indicate a mismatch in co-teaching partners or a lack of shared responsibility for all lessons they participated in as a co-teacher. Since one partner took the role of the lead teacher, while the other the co-teacher, some PTCs reported that the bulk of the planning responsibility fell on the lead teacher. The lack of collaboration and shared responsibility did cause some PTCs to feel that the co-planning was a difficult piece of co-teaching. We see that perhaps this was an indication that the co-teaching pair saw themselves as collaborative until the resulting activity was a grade for one of them. In this case, the co-teacher did not feel it their responsibility to participate as fully in a co-taught lesson for fear of negatively impacting the grade assigned to the lead teacher.

Researcher Reflections

In addition to the data collected our daily interactions with our PTCs often provided

glimpses into the level of collaboration taking place between co-teachers. Through numerous conversations with PTCs throughout the experience, we heard them discuss when and where they were meeting to plan upcoming lessons. Often times, when we reviewed an upcoming lesson with a co-teaching pair, it was difficult to tell whose lesson we were discussing, the lead teacher or the co-teacher, because of the level of collaborative efforts of the team. Both PTCs actively participated in the lesson, regardless of who took on what co-teaching role. Additionally, as we observed each lesson, it became evident when co-teaching pairs spent meaningful time planning and collaborating with each other. Each co-teacher's involvement in the lesson was seamless and natural, teaching when needed and appropriate, rather than strictly carrying out their role as defined in the lesson plan.

Discussion

Field experiences play a pivotal role in the development of future teachers as collaborators, which has the potential to improve student outcomes (Berry et al., 2009). These experiences provide authentic opportunities for PTCs to engage in the work of their future profession. Educators have multiple opportunities to collaborate with parents and other professionals across their campus. As field experience supervisors, we engaged in action research to encourage peer collaboration through co-teaching in our field experience. In response to our first research question related to PTC beliefs and perceptions of collaboration, the data collected suggests that time spent collaboratively planning with a co-teacher was productive and beneficial to both partners. Through collaborative planning, PTCs were able to develop a deeper understanding of the curriculum, gain confidence, and feel better equipped to work collaboratively in the future.

In addition to creating a more collaborative field experience, our second research question sought to gauge PTC beliefs and perceptions of the co-teaching field experience. Participants

found each of the co-teaching models to be of value. All PTCs indicated that the use of models allowed for more opportunities for individual student attention, the potential to meet the needs of their students much more quickly, and the ability to have multiple perspectives in each lesson to meet more needs of students they are teaching. Finding a common time to plan and the ability to communicate continue to be areas of difficulty related to co-teaching.

Overall, our PTCs perceived the co-teaching experience as beneficial in helping them develop collaborative skills while working with their peers. This would indicate the co-teaching models were helpful in improving their abilities to collaborate in ways that helped improve their teaching practice. However, PTCs continued to list difficulty in communication and finding common time to plan as concerns in the co-teaching partnership, which relates directly to the ability to collaborate. This would indicate that we, as field supervisors and researchers, need to continue seeking ways to help PTCs develop as collaborative partners, particularly in what it means to work collaboratively as a future educator.

In our own reflections as field supervisors, implementing the co-teaching methods allowed PTCs to automatically participate in twice as many lessons versus their traditional field experience. Additionally, co-teaching provided another resource for questions or support: their co-teacher. The co-teaching relationship allowed each PTC to ask questions and get feedback from each other throughout the semester. The co-teaching relationship, while built on a fixed time schedule of one semester, can grow beyond the field experience placement through the use of technology. At the completion of our field experience we engage our PTCs in conversations that allow us, as researchers, to discuss ways to continue the collaborative relationships they have established, regardless of the location where each PTC will begin their teaching career. Through Skype lessons or a conversation about new lesson ideas, co-teaching pairs often feel comfortable asking each

other for – and expecting – honest feedback. Having a confidant who has already proven trustworthy can be invaluable for novice teachers entering the field.

Future Research

While the implementation of co-teaching appears to have been beneficial, we acknowledge areas to refine and research as we move forward with co-teaching in our field experience. Finding time to plan was a difficulty for many of the co-teaching pairs in our study. To address this concern, we want to build in a planning time for co-teachers to meet in hopes of encouraging co-teachers to be more collaborative. This would also allow us to observe the level of collaboration that is taking place between co-teachers.

Another area we would like to strengthen is the level of peer feedback given during a co-taught lesson. Shin et al., suggests peer feedback is a tool to help PTCs become more reflective about their teaching (2007). Despite more involvement from each partner as co-teachers, multiple PTCs remain in the classroom whose only role is to observe the lesson. One of our next actions is to develop protocols for those who are observing a lesson take place. We feel developing protocols for lesson feedback will help PTCs to learn how to give feedback, while simultaneously providing a tool by which the co-teaching pair could reflect on to improve their teaching.

Finally, while we recognize the benefit of the mentor teacher as a collaborator, the goal of this action research project was to develop the abilities of peers to collaboratively plan, implement, and reflect on lessons as colleagues. For future research we would like to study the role of the mentor teacher as they pertain to co-teaching and collaboration in our field experience placements.

Conclusion

Field experiences play a critical role in the development of PTCs. These experiences shape the development of PTCs positively or negatively. As we reflected on our action research project,

we found that pairing peers as co-teachers and the implementation of the co-teaching models allowed PTCs to have a more meaningful field experience. Participating in co-teaching has also created more opportunities for collaboration among peers. Findings from our research suggests that participants found value in the co-teaching models and that collaboration took place between co-teachers, particularly in the planning of co-taught lessons. For future educators, collaboration is not simply a suggestion, but an expectation. Co-teaching experiences provide a context in which preservice teachers learn how to work with other educators (Kamens, 2007), such as paraprofessionals, special educators, grade level teams, or content-specific teams.

The ultimate goal of any educational preparation program is to prepare teachers who are able to meet the needs of the students they teach. Knowing that co-taught classrooms are able to provide more positive feedback for students, small-group instruction, and one-on-one support (Sweigart & Landrum, 2015), introducing PTCs to co-teaching in a field experience setting gives them practical experience meeting students' needs. With such experience, future teachers can more readily implement co-teaching in their future classrooms.

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