Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms

By:

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative Research Project is to explore what strategies general education and special education teachers used to support students in a co-taught inclusive classroom environment. The primary research question that informs this study is: How does a sample of general education and special education elementary school teachers who work in inclusive classrooms effectively co-teach within their assigned co-taught subjects in order to support the learning needs and learning style preferences of students with special needs and how do they create opportunities for these students to be meaningfully included in the learning community? Data was gathered through three semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that the co-teaching model is beneficial for both students and teachers as its collaborative atmosphere supports student emotional, social, and academic growth, and allows teachers and students to learn from each other. Findings also highlight the important role that the school district and administration plays in supporting teachers through the implementation of the co-teaching model through both ongoing training opportunities as well as release time for co-teacher pairings to plan together. Compatibility of teacher personality is also deemed an important factor in successful co-teaching. The implications of these findings indicate that it is crucial for the district and administration to take an active role in supporting teachers and students with the co-teaching model and that a lack of support can exacerbate challenges that teachers and students may experience with the co-teaching model. The district and administration need to provide support through training and co-planning for both teachers. They also need to ensure that co-teacher pairings are thoughtful so that personalities complement each other.

Key Words: Inclusive Classrooms, Co-Teaching Model, Differentiated Instruction, Collaboration, Special Education
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context

Inclusive education refers to the concept that all students have the option of attending general education schools in mainstream classes where their learning needs will be supported (Inclusion BC, 2016). According to Dean and Kitchen (2010), the case of Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education (1997) was a pivotal factor in the prevalence of inclusive classrooms in Ontario. In this case, parents of a child with a disability advocated that their child be placed in a general education class. Ultimately, it was determined by the court that the child would be better off in a special education school. However, this case prompted the court to assert that, prior to placement in a special education classroom, it should first be determined whether a student can be placed in a general education classroom with supports (Dean & Kitchen, 2010). Inclusive classrooms are meant to allow for socialization in an integrated setting that would not occur in settings in which students with special needs are taught separately (Luciano & Savage, 2007).

From an academic perspective, according to the research of scholars McLaughlin, Rea, and Walther-Thomas (2002), students with special needs in inclusive classrooms demonstrated significantly higher academic achievement in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies than students with special needs who received support outside of the classroom. According to Cole, Majd, and Waldron (2004), academic advantages of inclusive classrooms extend to students who are not diagnosed with special needs. With regard to students with special needs, their study found that students received comparable if not higher scores in Math and Reading in inclusive classroom settings as opposed to pull-out support. Furthermore, their study found that students without special needs achieved higher academic outcomes in both Reading and Math than students without special needs in non-inclusive classrooms. Overall, this indicates positive
academic outcomes for both students with and without special needs in inclusive classroom settings.

Within the inclusive classroom setting, a co-teaching model is sometimes implemented. Co-teaching is a broad category with many forms that include various ways in which the two teachers interact with each other in the classroom. The definition that I will be working with is a form of teaching in which at least two educators work together and teach together in a single classroom and to a single group of students (Friend, 2008).

1.1 Research Problem

While there are foreseeable benefits to inclusive classrooms, there are also some problems that arise. From an academic perspective, although teachers indicate willingness and desire to making accommodations and modifications in classrooms, discrepancies have been found between what was desirable and what was feasible (Vaughn & Schumm, 1991; Desai & Kuyini, 2008). From a social perspective, inclusive classrooms are not a complete solution to social isolation. While inclusive classrooms are meant to help with socialization, inclusive programs alone do not appear to prevent bullying. Studies show that students with special needs in inclusive classrooms continue to experience bullying and feelings of isolation, sometimes more often than general education students (Luciano 2007; Zindler 2009; Devitt, Donovan, O’Keeffe, & Kelly, 2014). In addition to academic and social challenges, the class size is an important factor with regard to how special education students’ learning needs are being met. Large class sizes make it difficult for teachers to give students the individual support they need (Graham & Westwood, 2003; Desai & Kuyini, 2008; Singal 2008; Devitt et al., 2014).

Focusing on the co-teaching model, there are other important challenges to identify. The relationship between the special education teacher and the general education teacher plays a
significant role with regard to the degree of success of the co-taught class (Gardizi, Graetz, Mastropieri, McDuffie, Norland & Scruggs, 2005; Ashton, 2014). Teachers who collaborate well together are likely to experience success (Gardizi et al., 2005). Conversely, when conflict is present or even worse, an imbalance of authority, where one teacher takes the dominant teacher role and the other teacher is marginalized, students often suffer (Gardizi et al., 2005; Ashton, 2014).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my research is to learn how a sample of general education and special education elementary school teachers effectively co-teach within their assigned co-taught subjects in order to respond to the learning needs and learning style preferences of students with special needs in inclusive classroom settings.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question guiding my research is: How do a sample of general education and special education elementary school teachers who work in inclusive classrooms effectively co-teach within their assigned co-taught subjects in order to support the learning needs and learning style preferences of students with special needs and how do they create opportunities for these students to be meaningfully included in the learning community?

Subsidiary questions to further guide this exploration include:

- What factors and resources support these teachers in collaborating with each other?
- What factors and resources support these teachers in responding to the learning needs of students with special needs?
- What challenges do these teachers face and how do they respond to them?
• What are teachers’ beliefs regarding why the co-teaching model is an effective model for teaching?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

With regard to my own experiences in elementary school, I never had the opportunity to learn in a class along with students with special needs. Similarly, in my experience working with children, I have not had many opportunities to work in inclusive classrooms. I have had many more opportunities to work with students with exceptionalities in settings where they were separated from mainstream students. Overall in these settings, I observed positive outcomes and positive student engagement. As a result, I may have a bias towards pull-out programs.

My assumption about pull-out programs is that students with special needs achieve more because more one-on-one support is available. Relatedly, my concern with inclusive classrooms is that students with special needs will be neglected because the teachers will not be able to give them enough support. In my second teaching placement, I witnessed a student with special needs struggle because the classroom teacher did not have the time or resources to fully support that student. My concern is that similar situations to what I witnessed during my practicum may occur too often in inclusive classrooms. As a result, in my research, I will be especially attentive to whether or not students in inclusive classrooms appear to be receiving adequate support. However, I need to be aware that perhaps there are other strategies for giving students the support they need aside from one-on-one instruction with the teacher.

In looking at the positive outcomes that I observed, there are certain strategies that were used in the separated classroom that may be beneficial to introduce into inclusive classrooms. In classrooms that I volunteered in, I observed that the low student to teacher ratio positively affected the students because they were able to receive a lot of individual attention. In this way,
the teachers were also able to get to know their students well and determine the strategies that worked best for each student. Students received instruction tailored to their needs. Therefore, in my research, it is important for me to keep in mind the positive outcomes I observed in a separated setting and consider why.

The co-teaching model within an inclusive classroom context is somewhat new to me. Throughout the majority of my education, one teacher taught me. My only experiences with two teachers in the classroom were in kindergarten and when I volunteered in a special education classroom. In both cases, however, the second teacher was an assistant and did not take an equal share of the responsibility. Perhaps my experiences with teaching assistants will give me an insight into possible negative consequences of co-teaching since co-teaching should not be the same as the relationship of a teacher and a teaching assistant. Whereas assistants often take on a more supportive as opposed to leadership role in the classroom, in co-teaching models, the ideal is that both teachers take on an equal leadership role. However, with two teachers involved, there is the potential for one teacher to usurp the role of the other teacher.

1.5 Overview

To respond to the research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview a combination of general education and special education teachers about what strategies they use to collaborate with their counterparts in a co-teaching setting in order to support the learning needs of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. In Chapter Two, I review the literature in the areas of inclusive pedagogy as well as the co-teaching model. Next, in Chapter Three, I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter Four, I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature and, in Chapter Five, I identify the implications of the research findings for my own
teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at inclusive classrooms more broadly and then I focus on the co-teaching model as an inclusive classroom strategy. More specifically, I review themes relating to factors that contribute to and detract from students’ academic success, social, emotional, and behavioural needs in inclusive classrooms, teachers’ beliefs with regard to their own efficacy as inclusive classroom educators, and factors that detract from and contribute to how effectively teachers are able to implement beneficial strategies in their inclusive classrooms. I start by looking at challenges that have been identified in relation to inclusive classrooms, paying specific attention to academic challenges. Next, I look at factors that influence teachers’ feelings of preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms, teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive classrooms, and how they connect to teachers’ education, training, and previous experience with students with special needs. Finally, I consider the co-teaching model, reviewing the literature on its practice as well as looking at concerns and areas for further development.

2.1 Challenges Experienced by Students and Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

Research into the inclusive classroom model of teaching still yields certain challenges that need to be met. A study conducted in Ireland, looking at a trend in which many post-primary students ages twelve and older leave inclusive schools in favour of schools dedicated to special education, sheds light on a range of potential challenges that teachers and students may
experience in inclusive classrooms (Devitt et al., 2014). The findings from the study are based on the perspectives of principals, which leads to a potential for important insights but also limitations, given the principals’ position in relation to students and teachers. Devitt et al. (2014) identify five factors that the majority of principals agreed had contributed to students leaving the mainstream school in favour of entering the special education school. These factors include difficulties in the following five areas: academic, social, emotional, behavioural, and health (Devitt et al., 2014).

According to the survey responses from the principals, the number of subjects, class size, and emphasis on academic achievement that begins to emerge in post-primary settings all contributed to students with special needs leaving the mainstream school. Social and emotional needs of the students also played a role in the departure from the mainstream school, according to principals. Many students experienced feelings of isolation combined with a lack of friends and, in some cases, bullying. Principals also noted that mainstream classrooms often did not respond in beneficial ways to students’ problematic behaviour. Lastly, there were not adequate health supports for students specifically relating to support for dual diagnoses (Devitt et al., 2014). The findings of this study possess certain limitations due to the fact that they are solely focused on students ages twelve and older who left mainstream schools in favour of special education schools. Therefore, it is not clear when these challenges arose. Nevertheless, this study identifies important challenges to be aware of concerning inclusive classrooms and, furthermore, many of the factors that the principals identified as challenges are supported by other research. A study surveying general education primary and primary junior teachers in New South Wales and South Australia also identifies emotional and behavioural difficulties as possible challenges in inclusive classrooms (Graham & Westwood, 2003). They explain that behavioural difficulties
can both disrupt the class as well as cause stress to the teacher. The presence of social challenges in inclusive classrooms is also supported by Zindler (2009) who conducted action-based research on her own Grade Two inclusive classroom in New York City. Zindler (2009) found that, even after implementing many inclusion strategies, the children identified with exceptionalities reported feeling less included in the classroom and having fewer social connections than those who were not identified with exceptionalities. Despite all her efforts, her research showed that students with exceptionalities did not feel especially connected in the classroom (Zindler, 2009).

Academic challenges present an important area of concern for students in inclusive classrooms due to the importance of foundational knowledge in primary education in particular, and that will be the focus for the remainder of this section. The consistent use of modifications and accommodations in inclusive classrooms is an area where more progress needs to be made. Based on surveys from a sample of teachers, many teachers appear willing to introduce accommodations and modifications in their classrooms. However, there is a gap between these teachers’ desires and their practice in their inclusive classroom (Vaughn & Schumm, 1991; Desai & Kuyini, 2008).

While the terms accommodation and modification both refer to adjustments that are made within the classroom setting in order to meet the needs of students, there is a significant difference between the two and it is important to note the distinction. The term accommodation refers to any changes that are made to the environment, the way the curriculum is presented or the equipment that is used in order to assist students with disabilities in meeting course expectations. Examples of accommodations may include giving students more time to complete assignments or allowing students with visual impairments to use books or worksheets with larger print. Unlike accommodations, modifications refer to changes that are made to the curriculum.
Some students may have certain needs that make it difficult for them to follow the curriculum content. In these cases, students may receive assignments with fewer tasks or different tasks to be completed in order to meet their needs (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology, 2015).

Scholars believe the gap between teachers’ willingness to make adjustments in their classrooms and the evidence of these adjustments being implemented has to do with a perceived lack of feasibility (Vaughn & Schumm, 1991). Furthermore, research from samplings of teachers both in the United States and Africa shows that the adjustments they made to their classrooms related more to whole class instruction and did not include any modifications and few accommodations. For example, some adjustments that were observed to be more prevalent in teaching instruction include using reinforcement and encouragement and ensuring that students with special needs were included in class-wide activities. Conversely, curriculum modifications were observed to be much less prevalent (Vaughn & Schumm, 1991; Desai & Kuyini, 2008).

Based on a study conducted with teachers in Ghana, Desai and Kuyini (2008) note that although teachers appear to recognize the value of the accommodation of peer mentoring, few of their sample teachers implemented this strategy. Rather than focusing on these accommodations, many teachers opted for teaching practices that were related to classroom management and how lessons were presented. Desai and Kuyini (2008), however, do not emphasize the nature of the classroom management strategies and lesson plans that were implemented. In addition to the importance of individual modifications and accommodations, Davis, Dieker, Pearl, and Kilpatrick (2012) look at the nature of the behaviour management strategies being applied in inclusive classrooms. This suggests that it is not enough for behaviour management strategies to be present in an inclusive classroom, but that these strategies also need to be modified to meet
the needs of all the students. Davis et al. (2012) note that there is a strong link between behaviour management and learning instruction.

**2.2 Teacher Preparedness**

A large part of teacher preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms is related to previous experience with students with disabilities (Desai & Kuyini, 2008; Gebhardt, Schwab, Krammer, & Gegenfurtner, 2015). Scholars have found that, among the teachers they studied, teachers who had experience with students with disabilities were more likely to incorporate accommodations and modifications in their classrooms, making sure to cater to the individual needs of their students (Desai & Kuyini, 2008). Similarly, Gehbhardt et al. (2015) note that teachers are more likely to be successful in implementing team teaching practices in inclusive classrooms if they have had previous experience teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Since previous experience working with students with disabilities and working in inclusive classrooms have been shown to be salient predictors of better inclusive practices in the classroom, scholars suggest that more training in inclusive classroom practices be incorporated into teacher training programs (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Gebhardt, et al., 2015). Taylor et al. (2012) tested teacher candidates’ perspectives before and after they had taken a survey course in special education. Their findings showed that, after taking this course, candidates showed significant differences in their knowledge of special education teaching practices and improved their attitudes towards inclusive classrooms (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). After observing the correlation between good inclusive team teaching practices and previous experience with students with disabilities, Gebhardt et al. (2015) assert “All prospective teachers should learn more about inclusive practices, the needs of students with SEN, and the purpose of individual educational planning in their studies” (p. 144). Scholars emphasize that this training should be a
part of teacher education programs in order to increase teacher preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Gebhardt et al., 2015).

2.3 Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Classrooms

Scholars believe teachers’ attitudes towards the different aspects of inclusive classrooms are an important factor in how teachers respond to students in inclusive classrooms (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). Based on data collected before and after a teacher education program that incorporated special education survey courses, the candidates showed a difference in attitude after the course was finished. The categories that were tested included Diversity Acceptance, Inclusion Issues, Discipline Issues, Academic Impact, and Teacher Preparation. Overall, a significant difference was observed in each of these categories before and after the survey course (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). This is an important finding because it suggests that teachers’ attitudes can be changed. Therefore, while they have been shown to be significant predictors of teacher success in implementing important accommodations and modifications in inclusive classrooms, should some teachers have more negative attitudes, there is optimism that they can overcome those attitudes. As a result of their study, Taylor and Ringlaben (2012) concluded, “The responses of the students indicated attitudes toward inclusion can be positively affected” (p. 21).

While Taylor and Ringlaben (2012) found that many pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive classrooms changed after being enrolled in special education survey courses, there were certain areas where many candidates’ attitudes did not change as a result of the survey course. After observing pre-service teacher responses to surveys before and after the special education survey course, scholars note, “[Pre-service teachers] obviously still believe teachers who specialize in teaching students with special needs are the best ones to teach those students in
an environment where the students are taught on an individual basis vs. large class instruction” (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012, p. 20). This is an interesting finding because it still shows a certain amount of reluctance on the part of pre-service teachers to fully embrace inclusive classrooms. A study done in Alberta shows that some elementary school teachers had developed negative attitudes towards inclusive classrooms because “It’s putting a child into a classroom where this teacher has their hands tied because they have too many kids and not enough support to help them” (Cizman, Irvine, Loreman, & Lupart, McGhie-Richmond, 2012, pp. 212-213). This may also explain the pre-service teachers’ reservations about inclusive classrooms and their belief that a classroom solely dedicated to students with special needs with a special education teacher would be preferable to inclusive classrooms.

Scholars found there was a gap between the attitudes of elementary school teachers and secondary school teachers towards inclusive classrooms. Some elementary school teachers referred to inclusive classrooms as the “new normal”, while many secondary school teachers believed that there were inevitable limitations to inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, while many elementary school teachers saw inclusive classrooms as an opportunity to celebrate individual strengths in addition to meeting individual needs, many secondary school teachers simply saw inclusive classrooms as beneficial for meeting individual needs (Cizman et al., 2012).

2.4 The Co-Teaching Model

The term co-teaching is often used as a broad term to cover different kinds of teaching practices where two teachers are involved. Billet and Forbes (2012) lay out five central categories for co-teaching: lead and support, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching. Lead and support is commonly used in middle and secondary school and it involves one teacher taking the lead while the other teacher acts as a support by
circulating and working with students individually. The support teacher can either observe students or actively engage with them. When the two teachers teach different parts of the same lesson in different classrooms, it is referred to as station teaching. In this case, teachers will begin by teaching their own class and then switch. Parallel teaching describes a model in which teachers divide the class in two and each teacher teaches the same content to a different section of the class. Students who need additional support will be included in both groups. If a smaller group of students needs more support, one teacher will teach the smaller group and the other teacher will teach the rest of the class. This is referred to as alternative teaching. Team teaching involves both teachers teaching the same material to the same class at the same time.

The majority of studies that follow do not necessarily take advantage of these definitions. However, the co-teaching that I will be looking at incorporates different aspects of each of these definitions, but most importantly, involves an equal partnership and shared responsibility between the two teachers. Friend’s (2008) definition of co-teaching clearly outlines the dynamic I will be focusing on in my research.

Co-teaching is defined as:

A service delivery option in which two (or more) educators or other certified staff contract to share instructional responsibility for a single group of students primarily in a single classroom or workspace for specific content (objectives) with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability, although each individual’s level of participation may vary (Friend, 2008).

Researchers have looked at students’ perceptions of the co-teaching model as well as perceptions of both general education teachers and special education teachers (Drietz, 2003; Gebhardt, et al., 2015). In a study conducted on inclusive classrooms in Austria, Gebhardt et al.
(2015) particularly wanted to assess the effectiveness of co-teaching by comparing the attitudes of special education teachers and general education teachers in a co-teaching context. Another important element of assessing the effectiveness of co-teaching is looking at student perceptions. One study used middle school students as interview subjects from both inclusive classrooms and general education classrooms in order to determine prevailing attitudes about inclusion. The study concluded that, while the students responded positively to all the different forms of instruction, both students with special needs and mainstream students found inclusive classrooms with co-teaching to be the most favourable. One reason given for the students’ preference was an increase in the availability of teachers to assist them (Drietz, 2003).

Based on a study conducted in Austria, both general education teachers and special education teachers also found the co-teaching model to be effective. From the perspectives of both general education and special education teachers in elementary school, the co-teaching model allowed for inclusive practices to be implemented effectively in the classroom (Gebhardt, et al., 2015). Looking at lesson plans from teaching teams indicated evidence of accommodations and modifications. According to Davis, et al., (2012), over half of the lesson plans created by teaching teams showed evidence of modified planning.

In spite of optimism shown by general education teachers, special education teachers, and students, there is still some room for improvement in the co-teaching model. Although this will not be the focus of my research, it is interesting to note that according to Gebhardt, et al (2015), there were considerably more difficulties observed with co-teaching at the secondary level. They hypothesized that this was because in secondary school settings, teachers are expected to teach multiple subjects and multiple classes, and when multiple teachers are involved, coordination can become more difficult (Gebhardt, et al., 2015). Even though Gebhardt et al. (2015) found a
greater presence of challenges at the secondary level, it is important to note that there are still challenges at the primary and junior levels. These challenges fall under six main themes: an unequal power dynamic, the relationship between each co-teaching pair, lack of collaboration in lesson planning and assessment, role confusion, difficulties involving meeting time, and the demands of high-stakes testing.

A qualitative study conducted in Western New York specifically focused on a co-teaching pair, teaching middle school math, from the lens of critical disability studies in education (Ashton, 2014). The results indicated that a power differential dynamic existed between the two teachers in which the general education teacher took on a more significant role in the classroom and the special education teacher was marginalized. Ashton (2014) notes that this unequal power dynamic went beyond the degree of collaboration between Val, the special education teacher, and Keith, the general education teacher. She explains, “Val and Keith accepted segregation and dominance of the traditional general education model of instruction in this nominally inclusive arrangement” (Ashton, 2014, p. 59). In other words, the co-teaching was not based on a foundation of true inclusion. Not only was Val marginalized, but the students with special needs were as well (Ashton, 2014).

Similarly, a study conducted in the southeastern US looking at the perceptions of co-teaching of elementary and middle school students, in addition to those of general education and special education elementary and middle school teachers, shows similar findings regarding unequal teaching responsibilities between co-teachers (Bessette, 2007). From the responses of teachers, Bessette (2007) found that, in some cases, there was an unequal power dynamic in the classroom where the general education teacher took on a more central role than the special education teacher. Referring to her findings, Bessette (2007) notes “one teacher –usually the
special education teacher –can be left feeling underutilized, or as one special educator put it, an ‘extension of the classroom teacher’” (p. 1392). Ashton (2014) alludes to an important aspect of co-teaching, which is creating an inclusive environment for both the teachers and the students where both the special education teacher and the special education students are seen as full contributing members.

An unequal power dynamic between co-teachers also speaks to the general relationship between co-teachers. Unequal responsibility in the classroom has the potential to negatively affect the relationship between a special education teacher and general education teacher, but there are other factors that contribute to the success or failure of relationships between co-teacher pairings as well. Findings presented by Gardizi, Graetz, Mastropieri, McDuffie, Norland, and Scruggs (2005) on long-term qualitative studies about co-teaching show that the relationship between the co-teaching pair has the potential to be a big influence on the classroom. They explain “the relationship between co-teachers is a major critical component influencing the success or failure of the inclusion of students with disabilities” (Gardizi et al., 2005, p. 268). One of the case studies on civics teachers identifies some challenges that can arise regarding the relationship between co-teacher pairings. In this case, the civics teachers disagreed about planning, behaviour management, and general classroom interactions. Ultimately, the teachers divided the class and taught the two groups separately because of the teachers’ difficulties in collaborating (Gardizi et al., 2005). While it is possible for co-teacher pairings to have a very positive relationship, it is important to note the potential destruction that a fractured relationship can have on classroom dynamics.

Several studies on co-teaching identified collaboration in lesson planning and assessment between co-teacher pairings to be a challenge. This does not necessarily indicate a
completely failed relationship, but that collaboration can be difficult in these areas. Both Gebhardt et al. (2015) and Davis et al. (2012) note that they did not find a strong indication of collaboration with regard to Individual Educational Planning (IEP) between co-teacher pairings among their respective teacher samples. More generally, Davis et al. (2012) note that, from their study of lesson plans, there was not a lot of evidence of collaboration in planning. Gurgur and Uzuner (2009) note a similar finding. Derived from action-based research conducted in a co-taught Grade Two elementary class in Turkey where the special education teacher was the researcher, Gurgur and Uzuner (2009) found that co-planning and reflection meetings between co-teachers were often inefficient. The two teachers were often not in agreement with regard to lesson objectives, materials, and teaching frameworks (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2009).

In addition to identifying difficulties with collaboration, some scholars also identified role confusion between the two co-teachers. In a study conducted in southeastern US, Hang and Rabren (2009) found that, for the category of behaviour management, both special education and general education teachers indicated that they perceived themselves as having more responsibility with regard to this category. Considering the fact that both groups of teachers could not have more responsibility with regard to behaviour management than the other, there appears to be some confusion about their respective roles. Likewise, Gurgur and Uzuner (2009) note that, from their findings from co-planning and reflection meetings, the role of the teachers with regard to planning and teaching was not clearly determined.

In addition to the challenge of ensuring that meetings between general education and special education teachers were efficient, finding the time to meet has also been identified as a challenge by some researchers. Scholars found that co-teaching pairings often had trouble finding common time to plan and setting up fixed times (Gardizi et al., 2005; Gebhardt et al.,
Furthermore, according to Gurgur and Uzuner (2009), sometimes meetings were not held when and where they were supposed to be. Another area in which time was a constraint was with regard to high-stakes testing. Gardizi et al. (2005) found that, in cases where teachers needed to prepare their students for state testing, teachers spent less time reviewing in the interest of covering as much content as possible in the given time and this impacted the modifications that were able to be made for students with special needs.

2.5 Conclusion

In this literature review, I have looked at research concerning challenges of supporting students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, the factors affecting teacher preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms, teachers’ attitudes relating to inclusive classrooms, and a description and analysis of the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms. This review emphasizes the importance of the role of teacher training and experience with students with special needs in supporting students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. It also highlights the connection between teacher training and teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. Teacher attitudes are an important factor in determining how teachers respond to students in inclusive classrooms, and there is evidence to suggest that teacher attitudes can be influenced. This review also raises questions about how teachers can properly modify and accommodate lessons within time and curriculum constraints as well as to what extent co-teacher pairings can truly engage in equal collaboration and create an inclusive space. The review highlights the need for further research in the areas of co-teaching collaborative practices, specifically how to disrupt the potential traditional classroom framework and power imbalance as well as effective strategies for ensuring that lesson planning, assessments, behaviour management strategies, and teaching frameworks are aligned between the special education and general education teacher. In light of
this, the purpose of my research is to learn what strategies general education and special education elementary school teachers use to effectively collaborate with their counterparts in order to support the learning needs of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. My goal is both to contribute to an understanding of how the co-teaching model can be utilized to its full potential as well as inform my own teaching practice with regard to teacher collaboration and ways to best support students with special learning needs.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report on the research methodology. I start by examining the research approach, research procedures, as well as the instruments I used to collect the data. Following this, I give details about which participants I selected and how I selected them, giving rationales for my choices. I then move on to describe the procedures I used to analyze my data. Next, I discuss the ethical concerns that are important to my research. I then present both the strengths and limitations of my chosen methodology. Finally, I conclude by highlighting important methodological decisions and how they support my research purpose and question.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study was conducted employing the qualitative research method, which consists of both a literature review drawing on what is known to date and is relevant to the research questions as well as semi-structured interviews with three educators. According to Robinson and Savenye (2005), in the past, studies that were deemed as poor research were put under the category of qualitative research studies. Conversely, Robinson and Savenye (2005) argue that qualitative research is actually quite rigorous. They define qualitative research as “research
studies that aid us in understanding human systems, whether large scale, as in cultural systems, or smaller scale” (Robinson & Savenye, 2005, p. 67). They explain that the goal is to access unique human opinions on a certain subject. These opinions may be compared with each other to yield interesting trends (Robinson & Savenye, 2005).

Contrasting qualitative research with positivist, quantitative research, Merriam (2002) explains that qualitative research works from the premise that the world is always changing and that there is not a single correct perspective, but rather the meaning that exists depends on the individuals making the meaning through interacting with the world. Similarly, Jones (1995) explains that qualitative research necessarily recognizes that there are many different ways to understand the world and seeks to study what different aspects of the world mean to those participating in the research.

As scholars discuss, the world cannot be understood in a fixed way (Jones, 1995; Merriam, 2002; & Robinson & Savenye, 2005). The value of qualitative research is that it takes into account and works with the notion that human beings hold a manifold of different perspectives. This approach is specifically suited to me, given that I am looking at strategies that general education teachers and special education teachers use in collaboration with each other within a framework of a co-teaching model in order to support the learning needs and learning style preferences of students with special needs. There is not necessarily one right way for these teachers to support the learning needs of their students, but the qualitative approach will allow me to learn unique perspectives from different individuals who have experience with this process.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The central instrument of data collection in this study is semi-structured interview protocol. In the semi-structured interview format, the questions act as an important guide in the
interview process, but there is also flexibility to respond to the interviewees (Dicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). According to Barriball and While (1994), the advantage of using semi-structured interviews for qualitative research is that they are amenable to discovering different opinions and there is opportunity to further probe and inquire if the original questions do not yield sufficient information. Furthermore, because of the degree of flexibility involved, semi-structured interviews allow for differences among participants to be taken into account as questions can be added to better complement the respondents (Barriball & While, 1994).

Millwood and Heath (2000) similarly found the semi-structured interview format particularly helpful due to its flexible nature. According to Millwood and Heath (2000), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to cater to the interviewee. They also diminish the possibility of misunderstanding, given that questions can be reworded and additional questions can be added during the interview. In addition, they allow for the interviewee to feel more comfortable since the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview elicits a more conversational tone (Millwood & Heath, 2000).

I conducted phone interviews. My interview protocol (see Appendix B) is divided into four sections. I start by inquiring about the participant’s background information. Following this section, I ask questions about the participant’s beliefs and perspectives on the co-teaching model used in inclusive classrooms. I then ask the participant to elaborate on the instructional strategies they use to meet the needs of the diverse learners that they teach through the co-teaching model. Lastly, I ask the participants about challenges they experience with the co-teaching model in inclusive classroom, what supports are available for them, and what next steps they believe will help improve this teaching method. Some sample questions include:
• In your view, why is the co-teaching model an effective model for teaching in inclusive classrooms? What are the benefits of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms?
• What are some strategies that you have found to be particularly helpful in effectively collaborating with your co-teacher to support all students in an inclusive classroom model?
• What are some challenges that you have faced implementing the co-teaching model and how have you responded?

3.3 Participants

In this section, I begin by presenting the carefully chosen sampling criteria that I employed to recruit participants for my research. Included in my sampling criteria is the rationale for each criterion I have included. I then discuss the different possibilities that I explored to recruit participants and the sampling procedures I used. Lastly, I introduce each participant.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following sampling criteria was used to identify teacher participants:

1. Teachers will have three to five years of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms.
2. Teachers will have graduated with a teaching degree to be able to teach primary and junior students.
3. Teachers will have a minimum of three years of experience teaching primary junior.
4. Teachers will have at least three years of experience teaching in a co-teaching model in an inclusive classroom.
Teacher participants having upwards of three years of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms and supporting the needs of diverse learners are a main focus of my research and I was looking for them to draw on the experience they have had from different grades and classes. In addition to their in-service teaching experience, I asked teachers to draw on their pre-service teaching experience, which is why it is important that they have graduated with a teaching degree in the primary junior concentration. Since my focus is on the primary junior concentration, it is important that the teacher participants have experience teaching primary and junior grades. Lastly, because my central research question looks at the co-teaching model, it is important for the teacher participants to be able to draw on their own experience in the co-teaching model when they talk about the practical strategies they use to help support the needs of all of their learners.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

The sampling method that a researcher chooses to employ depends on the goals of their research (Marshall, 2006). According to Marshall (2006), traditionally, there are three main sampling approaches. Convenience sampling refers to finding participants that are easily accessible to the researcher. This sampling method is the most cost-effective. The second main type of sampling method is judgment or purposeful sampling. This method involves the researcher actively searching for the best participants to meet their sampling criteria. The third main sampling approach is theoretical sampling, which involves recruiting participants based on theories from the data that is being collected (Marshall, 2006).

Snowballing, which is often seen as a subcategory of purposeful sampling, involves finding new participants based on recommendations from participants that were already recruited (Marshall, 2006). Noy (2008) pays special attention to this method, arguing that it should be seen
The advantage of the snowball sampling is that it helps researchers to find populations that might otherwise be hidden. However, the researcher must be prepared to relinquish a certain amount of control (Noy, 2008). For the purposes of my research, I employed both convenient sampling as well as snowball sampling. By attending a pre-service teaching program in Toronto, I have access to a large pool of educators. However, after doing some research, I discovered that the co-teaching I am researching is not commonly practiced in schools in Toronto. I had the opportunity to connect with an educator while I was visiting family in Phoenix, Arizona, using convenient sampling. Using snowball sampling, she put me in contact with two of her colleagues.

### 3.3.3 Participant biographies

**Sarah**

At the time of the research, Sarah was an intervention specialist in a school with students in Kindergarten through Grade Twelve. She assists classroom teachers in their teaching. She has been teaching for twenty-nine years in total. Sarah is formally trained as a special education teacher and began her career as a special education teacher, teaching in self-contained classrooms as well as resource classrooms for nine years. She then worked as a school counsellor for ten years, after which she went back into special education.

Sarah taught in inclusive classrooms as a co-teacher for eight years and worked with over ten different general education teachers. She became involved with the co-teaching model through an initiative in her school district that the special education director brought to her school. Anyone in the school who was interested had the opportunity to be trained in the co-teaching model. Sarah was certified as trainer in the co-teaching model and she was then able to
train others. She had many resources available to her and had the opportunity to work with Dr. Marilyn Friend, a co-teaching expert.

Laura

Laura co-taught with Sarah for many years. At the time of the research, she was retired from the teaching profession. She has experience teaching Grades Two, Three, and Four, as well as Pre-school, as a general education teacher. She has close to thirty years of teaching experience in total. While she has attended workshops, she has no formal training in special education. Of the thirty years, she has five years of co-teaching experience in inclusive classrooms where a co-teacher was placed in her classroom just over fifty percent of the time. Laura generally worked with a co-teacher for core subjects, such as Math and Language Arts. Once retired, she did some supply work and during that time, she had the opportunity to supply for a co-taught classroom for Grades Five and Six.

During her co-teaching experience, she had the opportunity to work with two different special education teachers. Laura’s involvement with co-teaching began because she often had taught in classes with larger numbers of students with special needs that were in her colleague’s classrooms. When the initiative came to her district, students with special needs from other classrooms joined her classroom and a special education teacher was brought in for support.

Maureen

Maureen is a special education teacher and, at the time of the research, she taught Grades Seven and Eight. Her main teaching focus is Math and she teaches in three inclusive classrooms and two pull-out classes for students with higher needs. She has experience teaching every grade from Kindergarten through Grade Eight. She has a dual certification. She is certified to teach elementary school from Kindergarten through Grade Eight and she also has her special education
certification to teach from Kindergarten through Grade Twelve. In addition to her teaching role, she also coaches the pentathlon team at her current school. She has a total of twenty-eight years of teaching experience, all in inclusive classrooms. However, during her first two years of teaching, inclusive practices were just beginning at her school.

She has been co-teaching for the past sixteen years and she has experience working with at least eight other teachers. Maureen became involved in the co-teaching model specifically when she started teaching at an inclusive school district where special education teachers had the opportunity to teach in learning centres as opposed to resource rooms.

3.4 Data Analysis

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) emphasize the importance of research analysis, beginning during the interview process as researchers adjust their questions to what they are finding. They later identify three approaches for data analysis: the grounded-theory approach, the ‘immersion/crystallization’ approach, and the template approach (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The grounded-theory approach originated in sociology and it involves searching through texts to find segments that can be interpreted and looking for patterns within the different segments at the same time. Alternatively, the ‘immersion/crystallization’ approach involves repeatedly engaging with the text in a reflective manner until understandings begin to emerge. The template approach, which most closely fits with how I analyzed my own data, involves sorting similar content into categories and then further condensing the data into themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

I analyzed my data by first transcribing the interviews I conducted. I then coded the transcripts with the aid of my research questions. I coded each individual interview separately. Following the coding, I categorized the data and drew out themes from within those categories. I
synthesized the different themes. Then I looked at the meaning that these themes have and at what was important about them in relation to existing research. Throughout this process, I also looked at the null data, which is the data that participants do not respond to. According to Dey (2005), an important aspect of qualitative data analysis is that it deals with meanings. An important aspect of my analysis is not just finding emerging themes, but also looking at what meaning they have in the context of the current discussion about co-teaching in inclusive classrooms.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Each of the participants signed a consent letter (Appendix A). This included consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. It also included a summary of the study, an acknowledgement of ethical implications, as well as an outline of the expectations of participation. When I conducted my interviews, I made sure the conditions were ideal for doing the interview and that the teachers felt comfortable. All participants’ identities are confidential and they have been assigned a pseudonym. Other identifying factors such as school board and students are also kept confidential. The data is stored on a password protected personal laptop and only my course instructor and I have access to raw data. The data is kept for a maximum of five years before it is destroyed. There are no known risks to those who participated in the collection of the data. The participants had the right to withdraw at any time and they had the right to choose not to answer any questions. They also had the right to retract any responses they may given.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The most significant limitations of this study are its scope and generalizability. Seidman (2006) discusses how interviews can be especially beneficial with regard to research into educational institutions because they allow the researcher to gain insight into different
perspectives. While teachers offer a valuable perspective on topics within education, due to the constraints of this study, there is a lack of perspective from parents and students who also have a unique perspective to offer in terms of issues within the classroom. Since qualitative research often focuses on a smaller population, a major weakness of this approach is its lack of generalizability (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Due to the fact that I only interviewed three educators, the data I present is not generalizable because I have not accessed a wide enough range of perspectives. Another limitation of my study is the time constraint. Since I am conducting my study through a professional program, there is a limit to the amount of time I can spend on the research due to other course requirements.

According to Carr (1994), one of the strengths of qualitative methodology is that it allows for a deeper understanding of the participants involved. Similarly, Jackson II et al. (2007) state that the nature of qualitative methodology allows a researcher to learn about their participants in great detail. Seidman (2006) notes, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The main strength of my methodology is the opportunity for in-depth perspectives that individual interviews yield. As opposed to a survey, which reflects more surface perspectives, individual interviews offer the opportunity to gain insight into teachers’ lived experiences and reflections on their own practice with regard to the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented my research methodology. I started by discussing the merits of qualitative research as a method for collecting data, namely that it allows insight into unique human experiences. I explained its purpose and discussed that it is a suitable method for my
research because the goal of my research is to learn about and gain insights from the unique perspectives of general education and special education co-teachers. I then looked at the value of using semi-structured interviews as my central instrument for data collection, explaining that its flexible nature and conversational tone is best suited for my research. I also highlighted sample interview questions.

I then discussed the criteria I used for locating participants as well as expanding on methods I used to recruit these participants. I gave a short biography of each of my three participants. I discussed different methods for data analysis, zeroing in on the template approach. This approach is most beneficial for the purposes of my study, given the opportunity it gives to draw out themes from the data and create meaning in relation to other discussions on my topic. I then looked at important ethical considerations affecting my research. Lastly, I discussed significant methodological strengths and limitations, which included the opportunity for in-depth perspectives of lived experience contrasted with the lack of generalizability and scope.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the results that have surfaced from the data analysis of the research interviews. This data analysis was conducted with the following research question in mind: How does a sample of general education and special education elementary school teachers who work in inclusive classrooms effectively co-teach within their assigned co-taught subjects in order to support the learning needs and learning style preferences of students with special needs and how do they create opportunities for these students to be meaningfully included in the learning community? Throughout this chapter, participants’ beliefs and lived experiences are put
into conversation with the existing literature presented in the Chapter Two literature review. The results are arranged into four main themes:

1. Participants Believe that the Effectiveness of the Co-Teaching Model Rests on Higher Levels of Student Achievement Socially and Academically, as well as Higher Quality Teacher-to-Student Support and Teacher-to-Teacher Support.

2. Participants Indicated that Interpersonal Considerations as well as District and Administrative Support Are Important Factors in Supporting Teacher Collaboration.

3. Participants Indicated that Teachers’ Abilities to Learn from Their Own Experiences and Share with Each Other Are an Important Factor in Responding to the Learning Needs of Students with Special needs.

4. Participants Indicated that Teachers Could Overcome Challenges Related to Teacher Relationships as well as the Limits of the Co-Teaching Model through Communication and Outside Support.

Each theme includes sub-themes that outline more specifically the practices and experiences of participants in the classroom. Every theme involves an overview and explanation of why it is important, specific examples from participants’ respective teaching practices that elaborate on the theme, and finally, an account of how the discussion fits with existing literature.

4.1 Participants Believe that the Effectiveness of the Co-Teaching Model Rests on Higher Levels of Student Achievement Socially and Academically, as well as Higher Quality Teacher-to-Student Support and Teacher-to-Teacher Support.

Participants indicated their beliefs about the significant benefits of the co-teaching model for both the teachers and the students. Participants’ beliefs about the co-teaching model provided important insight into their educational philosophies and who they are as teachers. Their beliefs
also provided important insight into their experiences and knowledge about the co-teaching model as the beliefs they shared relate to their own lived experiences employing the co-teaching model. Specifically, participants highlighted the academic and social emotional support that the co-teaching model provided as well as the opportunity for students and teachers to benefit from different learning and teaching styles.

4.1.1 Participants believe that the co-teaching model is effective because it increases student success socially, emotionally, and academically.

Each participant indicated that they strongly believe in the effectiveness of the co-teaching model. Participants specifically identified higher academic achievement among students as well as social and emotional growth as key indicators of the success of the model. Referring to the academic benefits of the co-teaching model, Sarah related,

"Our test scores skyrocketed for all of the students because they were all getting the benefit of two teachers and they were getting the benefit of learning from each other in different ways and that’s what inclusive practices and co-teaching does."

Sarah implied that the collaborative atmosphere created by the inclusive practice in the co-teaching model allowed all students to excel academically. The beliefs about co-teaching that Maureen shared were similar to Sarah’s. She felt that the diverse needs of the students present in the classroom pushed students to grow and achieve more. Like Sarah and Maureen, Laura also pointed to an increase in academic performance in her co-taught inclusive classroom. She also observed that, specifically, there was an increase in test scores, which she believed confirmed the increase in academic achievement.
In addition to the academic benefits, Laura highlighted the potential for social and emotional growth of students. She referred specifically to the value of an inclusive atmosphere for students of all abilities. Referring to the co-teaching model, Laura explained:

It was really good for developing all of those, uh, empathy and compassion, um, but on the flip side, for students with special needs, I think it gave them a greater sense of accomplishment and… it made them more confident. It allowed them to take more risks in a safe environment.

Laura pointed to the tremendous social emotional benefit of the co-teaching model for students of all different needs. It allowed students to recognize the value of diversity, which, in turn, created a safe environment where students felt comfortable to take risks free of judgment.

While participants clearly asserted the academic and social benefits that the co-teaching model provides, the research is less clear about these benefits. Research shows that teachers were able to increase accommodations and modifications for students in the co-teaching model (Gebhardt, et al., 2015). However, when it came to high-stakes testing, teachers felt pressure to cover the material and found it harder to adjust their lessons to meet the diverse student needs (Gardizi et al., 2005). Additionally, there is less research about the specific social benefits that co-teaching provides. Research on inclusive classrooms that do not employ the co-teaching model suggests that there are concerns for students, socially and emotionally. Zindler (2009) notes that, even with significant time and effort to create an inclusive environment, she still noticed that the students with exceptionalities in her classroom felt less connected socially. Participants have provided important insight about how the presence of two teachers can increase students’ comfort level in the classroom. Perhaps the presence of two teachers would alleviate
Zindler’s (2009) concerns about social emotional challenges as the students would feel more comfortable to take risks.

4.1.2 Participants believe that the co-teaching model is effective because students and teachers have the advantages of two teachers for support and two perspectives to learn from.

According to participants, having two teachers in the classroom benefitted both the teachers and the students. Reflecting on her experience co-teaching, Maureen asserted that working with a general education teacher improved her knowledge of the curriculum. For Maureen, the benefit of working with another teacher was the wealth of knowledge about teaching she gained from that person. She had the advantage of seeing them teach, and observing their teaching was invaluable. Laura alluded to a similar benefit. Reflecting on her general education background, Laura noted that while she had more experience with and knowledge of the curriculum, she learned important classroom management skills from the special education teacher as well as strategies for meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities. The unique skill sets of both teachers enriched the knowledge and experience of their co-teaching partner.

In addition to the benefits that the teachers gained from working with each other, participants also indicated that there were important benefits for students. Participants asserted that students benefitted both from the diverse skill sets of the teachers and also from the presence of two teachers, which created more support. Sarah argued that having two teachers with two different styles allowed students to learn from the style that best suited them. Sarah reasoned, “There’s two teachers teaching and if a student didn’t learn one way, but learned another, well, there’s another teacher who is teaching that way and they could grab onto that group and learn that skill that way.” Having two teachers gave students more choice. For Laura, simply having
two teachers present was a benefit because it allowed students to receive more support. Laura also added that having two teachers there for support increased the students’ comfort level. Laura noted, “I think just having two of us right there, all the time, available, one of us would be available, was pretty comforting for them. I think it, um, allowed them to take risks.” According to Laura, the co-teaching model made students feel that they had a high level of support, which prompted them to take risks. Research on the co-teaching model suggests similar benefits to those that the participants suggested. Looking at perceptions of students of all abilities, students appeared to prefer the co-teaching model as they had more teachers available for support (Drietz, 2003). The benefits for teachers using the co-teaching model are less prevalent in the research. Participants have highlighted an important added benefit to the co-teaching model. Not only does the co-teaching model increase student support, but it also allows teachers as well as students to grow and learn from each other.

4.2 Participants Indicated that Interpersonal Considerations as well as District and Administrative Support Are Important Factors in Supporting Teacher Collaboration.

All three participants emphasized the role of teacher relationships and administrative support in teachers’ abilities to collaborate with each other. Collaboration is important for the co-teaching model, as it requires two teachers to both plan and deliver lessons together. Participants have provided important insights about what supports need to be in place to ensure successful collaboration among co-teaching pairs. Specifically, participants spoke of how the personal attributes of teachers were important determinants of how well they were able to collaborate and build relationships with each other. The role of the school district was also crucial in assisting teachers in collaboration by providing training and release time for joint lesson planning.
Another crucial component of collaboration that participants mentioned was ensuring that there was shared responsibility of the class as well as open communication between co-teachers.

**4.2.1 Participants indicated that the individual attributes of teachers play an important role in their interpersonal relations, affecting how they collaborate with each other.**

Sarah stressed that the compatibility of the personalities of both the general education teacher and the special education teacher play an important role in how well co-teaching pairs are able to collaborate with each other. Specifically, in relation to elements of teacher collaboration, such as open discussion, Sarah maintained, “Everything has to be open for discussion and that’s why the personality becomes really important, because if the teachers aren’t willing to talk to each other, you’re not going to get anything done.” Sarah asserted the necessity of compatible personalities between two co-teachers for collaboration. In order to collaborate with each other, teachers must be able to communicate openly about their teaching, their students, and all other aspects of the classroom. Sarah suggested that conflicting personalities cause a break in communication between co-teaching pairs, which leads to poor collaboration.

Laura also placed importance on the connection between teachers’ personalities and their ability to collaborate with each other. She asserted first and foremost that the compatibility of teacher personalities is a strong indicator of effective collaboration since teachers must be able to engage in open discussion. She then noted that, in addition to compatible personalities, teacher collaboration is also supported when teachers get to know each other’s personalities because then they understand each other’s strengths and can balance each other in their collaboration.

Maureen, who is a special education teacher, discussed that it is important for the special education teacher to be adaptable. She indicated her belief that this is a key factor in how well the general education teacher and special education teacher are able to collaborate. For Maureen,
not only do personality traits play a key role in collaboration between co-teaching pairs, but certain personality traits, such as adaptability, are specifically beneficial for collaboration as an adaptable teacher will be able to work with a variety of personalities. While scholars do not specifically discuss personality as a factor in co-teacher collaboration, Gardizi et al. (2005) consider the importance of the relationship of co-teaching pairings for successful teaching. They note how important it is for teachers to agree on many aspects of teaching. This finding is similar to the participants’ discussion of compatible teacher personalities. However, the participants highlight an important factor, namely teacher personality, in helping to build relationships among co-teaching pairs. Participants suggest that relationship building will be significantly more difficult if teachers have conflicting personalities.

4.2.2 Participants indicated that district and administrative support afforded teachers time to plan together and training opportunities, therefore enhancing teacher collaboration.

All participants discussed the role of administrative support as positively impacting teacher collaboration. Both Sarah and Laura indicated that they were allotted time to plan together by the district and they emphasized the importance of this additional planning time for teacher collaboration. Referring to the co-teaching, Laura explained, “It was time-consuming and the district goal was to find some, either a stipend or release time or something, so that the teachers could work together, um, but without that, it was a weak system.” Here, Laura made a direct link between the support of the district and how well teachers were able to collaborate. Early in her co-teaching career, Laura did not have the benefit of release time and then later received it. She shared from her own experience that it was specifically helpful for the district support to be in the form of additional planning time, given how important it is for the two teachers to be able to plan together in order to be consistent. Similarly, Sarah discussed the
importance of planning time. Referring to her time co-teaching with Laura, Sarah articulated, “I think probably the most important thing that worked for Laura and I was having time to, um, collaborate outside of the classroom. They gave us once a month, they gave us a full day to plan.” Sarah specifically mentioned having time to plan outside of the classroom as an important component in teacher collaboration because, as Laura mentions, there is not necessarily built-in time to plan together in the regular schedule.

In addition to district-allotted planning time, both Sarah and Laura also mentioned district support with regard to trainings, which they found were helpful in establishing co-teacher collaboration. Sarah recalled receiving ample training on how to co-teach and recalled having access to resources that were provided by the district. She even had the opportunity to learn from an expert in the field, Marilyn Friend. Reflecting on her experience, Sarah added, “Because the district was so supportive of [co-teaching], we learned the right way to do it.” In her case, the support of the district allowed her access to resources with regard to collaboration in co-teaching. Laura, who also had access to training provided by the district, emphasized, “There needs to be training for teachers that are involved in [co-teaching] because there’s, I think, a natural tendency for one teacher to dominate.” For Laura, training is crucial in giving teachers strategies for collaborating.

Researchers recognize the importance of co-teaching pairs having time in common to plan together, adding that teachers often had trouble coordinating their schedules (Gardizi et al., 2005; Gebhardt et al., 2015). Researchers also recognize the importance of teacher training (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Gebhardt et al., 2015). However, there is not a large emphasis in the research on the role that the district has in providing planning time or teacher training. Scholars believe training should occur in pre-service teacher programs in order for teachers to be prepared
once they start working (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Gebhardt et al., 2015). Pre-service education plays an important role in supporting teachers; however, participants have also highlighted the need for the district to continue to support teachers through allotting additional planning time and training. As new models are developed, such as the co-teaching model, it is important that teachers continue to receive training and support from their district.

4.2.3 Participants indicated that establishing a working relationship between co-teaching pairs gives teachers a framework from which to collaborate.

In addition to the importance of administrative support for teacher collaboration, each participant indicated that putting effort into relationship-building is imperative for successful collaboration. Participants identified communication, as well as equitable division of labour, as important components in the relationship building process. In this way, the teachers collaborated on every aspect of teaching. For Sarah, part of the collaboration involved a more fluid division of responsibilities. Sarah recalled, “I didn’t always just teach the students with special needs, I also taught, you know, the homogeneous grouping, but heterogeneous groupings as well, so at times I wasn’t the one who had any of the special needs kids.” In Sarah’s teaching, the roles of the two teachers were not rigid, which assisted them in collaborating as they each had opportunities to teach in all settings.

For Maureen, an equitable division of labour also played a big role in how well she was able to collaborate with her co-teaching partner. Reflecting on her own co-teaching experience, Maureen explained, “We, um, share the responsibilities and um, we, we plan together, we teach together, we grade together, we conference together, we have lunch together.” Maureen noted that it was essential that co-teachers not only share the responsibilities, but that they also spend large amounts of time together in order to be able to collaborate properly. Maureen is suggesting
that while equitable division of labour is an important component in relationship building and, therefore, in the process of collaboration, it is not enough.

According to participants, constant communication is key. When asked about effective collaboration strategies, Maureen asserted that open communication was one of the underlying components of effective collaboration. Similarly, Laura related that communication between her and her co-teacher was crucial. Sarah’s discussion expanded on this and she noted, “Everything has to be open for discussion…because if teachers aren’t willing to talk to each other, you’re not going to get anything done.” Sarah also emphasized the central role of communication in collaboration, stating that a lack of communication would render ineffective the teachers’ ability to collaborate and teach. Like the participants, researchers assert the crucial role of shared responsibility and communication among co-teaching pairs. Gardizi et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of shared responsibility between co-teacher pairings, asserting that it is a strong determinant of the nature of the relationship between them. Gurgur and Uzuner (2009) present research on the negative effects of lack of communication between co-teacher pairs due to infrequent co-planning meetings. Participants’ responses add to the existing research as they assert that shared planning and communication provide the groundwork for relationship building and collaboration among co-teaching pairs.

4.3 Participants Indicated that Teachers’ Abilities to Learn from Their Own Experiences and Share with Each Other Are an Important Factor in Responding to the Learning Needs of Students with Special Needs.

All three participants acknowledged their own individual teaching experiences and expertise as well as their ability to collaborate with each other as crucial factors in allowing them to support the diverse learning needs of their students. Participants’ voices are important in this
area as they have the lived experience to provide important insight about what supports need to be in place to help students achieve their full potential. Particularly, participants mentioned that it was important that they collaborate not only in their planning, but also during their teaching in a symbiotic way. In addition to the years of teaching experience and the accumulation of resources to promote diverse student learning, participants also highlighted specific teaching strategies as well as technologies that greatly benefitted student learning. Furthermore, the support of the district, as mentioned in section 4.2.2, not only serves to ameliorate teacher collaboration, but also aids teachers in responding to the diverse learning needs of their students. Planning time gives co-teachers more time to communicate with each other and perfect their lesson plans to meet all student needs. Teacher training provided by the district allows co-teachers to improve their practice, thereby better supporting the diverse needs of their learners.

4.3.1 Participants indicated that teacher collaboration allows co-teaching pairs to be consistent when it comes to responding to the learning needs of students with special needs.

Reflecting on effective co-teaching, Maureen discussed the many ways she collaborated with her co-teacher. She noted that she was in constant communication with her co-teaching partner, which allowed them to be consistent. During the time she spent with her co-teaching partner, she was able to communicate about the students. She also taught with her co-teaching partner. She implied that the high degree of collaboration allowed her and her partner to have a strong understanding of each other’s goals and, therefore, more effectively reach their students.

Both Sarah and Laura provided more detail about how various iterations of their collaborative teaching practice allowed them to meet the different needs of their students. In her discussion of what her co-teaching practice looks like, Laura explained,
We often played off each other, if one teacher was leading and the other was roving, then we could do a lot more, use feedback to ask questions for clarification, if the students maybe didn’t realize they weren’t understanding, but with two of us presenting, that worked out really well.

Here, Laura painted a picture of fluid and dynamic teaching in which she and her co-teaching partner created a truly collaborative framework for their teaching. They were able to work together, taking on different teaching roles as the needs of their students arose.

In a similar vein, Sarah described the many different roles that she and her co-teaching partner took on to help support the students. In some cases, she and her co-teaching partner would collaboratively teach the same lesson together. Sarah and her co-teacher worked together to support each other, which in turn, supported the students. The importance of collaboration in relation to student success is also discussed in the research. According to Gardizi et al. (2005), teacher collaboration is a significant predictor of success in the classroom. A lack of collaboration can have harmful effects on both the teachers and students (Gardizi et al., 2005; Ashton, 2014). Participants have contributed important information about the various facets of collaboration to add to existing research including spending time together, constant communication, and taking turns being a lead and a support.

4.3.2 Participants indicated that the accumulation of resources and experience throughout their teaching career serve as important tools for responding to the learning needs of students with special needs.

All three participants had teaching experience before they began co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, as well as many years co-teaching. Their own experience was a significant tool in supporting their students. Maureen discussed her own reflective practice and noted, “It’s just
been a kind of natural development, um, of, you know, what I, what’s been successful and what hasn’t been successful and kind of honing in on that.” In Maureen’s case, she was able to use her experience to continually reflect and improve her teaching.

The resource for supporting students that all participants agreed on was the value of their own teaching experience and the resources they have accumulated over the years. When asked about helpful resources to meet the different student needs, Sarah admitted, “You know, I had been teaching for so long at that point that I had such a good tool box, um, I had lots of strategies.” It was challenging for her to pinpoint a wealth of specific resources that helped her support her students in her co-teaching practice. Laura articulated a similar feeling, noting that she had accumulated many tangible resources over the years, such as manipulatives and independent readers, to support all different student needs.

Specifically, Laura and Sarah also mentioned certain resources and teaching strategies that they found particularly helpful in meeting all their students’ needs. Both Laura and Sarah cited differentiating instruction as a central strategy in ensuring that all students are supported as well as the use of certain technologies to enhance student learning. Laura asserted, “The material needs to be varied enough that you’re meeting all their learning styles.” Laura recognized that the students have different needs that require different types of teaching and learning materials. Sarah emphasized the importance of differentiated assessment, explaining that not all students respond well to paper and pencil assessment.

Laura mentioned Smart Boards and document cameras as particularly helpful technologies in supporting diverse student needs. She explained that Smart Boards were particularly powerful for visual learners and document cameras allowed all students to participate in and be included in the learning as the camera can project objects close up.
Alternatively, Sarah emphasized assistive technologies such as word processing tools, including Word Cue, Speak Cue, and even calculators, which support the students in engaging in learning that they might otherwise not have been able to engage in. Regarding the word processing tools, Sarah argued, “Let’s look at other strategies so that [the students] can get their thoughts across without having to worry about the physical handwriting part of it.” These technologies allow students to achieve their full potential.

In line with the participants’ discussion of the central role of their own experience, researchers also highlight the important role of teachers’ previous experience in helping them support the needs of the learners in the classroom. Scholars have found that teachers who had experience with students with disabilities were more likely to ensure that they were catering to the individual needs of their students (Desai & Kuyini, 2008). Similarly, Gehbhardt et al., (2015) note that teachers who had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms were more likely to implement collaborative teaching practices in inclusive classrooms. Just as participants relied on their own previous experience to support the diverse needs of their learners, it is evident in the research that experience with inclusive practices better prepared teachers to support students of varying needs. This suggests that not only should teachers have earlier exposure to inclusive classrooms, but also that expertise in inclusive classroom teaching takes time.

4.4 Participants Indicated That Teachers Could Overcome Challenges Related to Teacher Relationships as well as the Limits of the Co-Teaching Model through Communication and Outside Support.

All participants asserted that the co-teaching model presented them with both interpersonal challenges, which could be overcome by communication, as well as challenges related to the limits of the framework to support all student needs, which could be overcome by
outside support. It is important to discuss the challenges that participants overcame in order to learn from their experiences about what areas need more focus. Specifically, participants highlighted the importance of open communication and trust between co-teaching pairs to ensure that neither teacher felt judged. Participants also reiterated the importance of ensuring that all students were able to benefit from the classroom instruction, even if it meant some students needed to spend part of the day receiving more individualized attention.

4.4.1 **Participants indicated that the nature of the co-teacher relationship presented challenges with regard to power dynamics and planning time.**

All three participants stressed that the biggest challenge of the co-teaching model was ensuring that both teachers took responsibility for the students in an equitable way. When asked about challenges she faced with regard to the co-teaching model, Sarah responded, “I think the biggest challenge is the adults and not the kids. The adults have issues… giving up ownership of their classroom, giving up feeling like it’s my room and I can do what I want.” The challenge is for both teachers to figure out how they can both take ownership of the classroom and contribute meaningfully to the students’ learning. All three participants shared examples where they were unable to find a way to meaningfully and equitably contribute to the classroom with their co-teaching counterpart.

Recalling some of her experiences, Sarah, who is a trained special education teacher, explained, “Some teachers, um, used me more as a glorified assistant.” In some cases, rather than dividing up classroom responsibilities in an equitable way, the general education teacher took control of the class and used Sarah as an assistant, revealing an unequal power dynamic. Maureen, who is also a trained special education teacher, related co-teaching experiences “where the general education teacher was not comfortable without being the lead teacher all the time.”
As in Sarah’s discussion, Maureen’s experiences also indicate an imbalance of power where the general education teacher was not able to equitably share teaching responsibilities with the special education teacher. Interestingly, Laura, a general education teacher, also refers to this imbalance of power. However, she frames it as a lack of contribution of the special education teacher. In her experience, in certain cases, the special education teacher was not comfortable taking on a larger role within the classroom.

All three participants identified finding time to plan together as crucial to the success of both the teachers and the students. Maureen explained, “If you’re not planning together, then, uh, when you walk into class, you know, it’s kind of a, you’re blindsided by what the lesson is.” Without planning time to be able to communicate about the lesson, co-teachers will not be able to be on the same page when it comes to teaching the lesson. Similarly, Sarah mentioned that without planning time, co-teaching will not be effective. Laura recalled a time in her co-teaching career before she was given release time to plan by the district. She related, “The first year or two, we didn’t have [release time] and it was a struggle and we always found ourselves playing catch-up and it was a lot of pressure on the kids.” Without the release time for planning, it was challenging for Laura to be consistent with her co-teaching partner and, as a result, she felt that the students suffered.

Research presents similar findings to the participants’ experiences of unequal power dynamics, as well as difficulty finding common planning time. According to Bessette (2007), it is often the case that one teacher feels as if they are unable to contribute to their full potential. Looking through a lens of critical disability studies in education, Ashton (2014) suggests that the power differential between special education and general education teachers stems from the traditional education model dichotomy of general education and special education. Research
suggests that what the participants faced may have stemmed from a larger issue of inclusion where special education teachers are still sometimes seen as having less of a leadership role. With regard to planning time, scholars found that co-teaching pairings often had difficulty finding time in common to plan (Gardizi et al., 2005; Gebhardt et al., 2015). Participants have identified a potential solution for the challenge of finding common planning time in the form of district support.

**4.4.2 Participants indicated that the co-teaching framework limited teachers’ abilities to respond to all student needs.**

Participants indicated their beliefs that the co-teaching model is able to serve students of all different abilities, but they also identified certain limits in the framework with regard to serving student needs. Sarah explained that the co-teaching model is limited in how it can respond to students with emotional disabilities as well as students with multiple disabilities. She explained that the challenge is ensuring that these students are still able to benefit from being in the class and that they are still able to access the curriculum and receive enough support.

Sarah also noted that the co-teaching model is limited in how teachers can respond to students who need to work on certain fundamental skills such as toileting or social skills. She felt that certain students might be overwhelmed learning these skills with all of their peers around. In addition, Sarah explained, students may need more intense support in certain areas, that teachers may not have the resources in the classroom to give them. For example, if students struggle with speech and language articulation, they may need more individual attention than the rest of their peers. Sarah also noted that if students have attentional challenges, simply being in a class with twenty to thirty other students might limit their ability to learn.
Maureen alluded to a similar challenge that the co-teaching framework presents, and explained that, in some cases, it is challenging to help students work on and solidify certain fundamental skills in the co-teaching inclusive classroom setting. Participants found far fewer challenges with regard to supporting students with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms than scholars have. Looking at factors that caused families to leave mainstream schools in favour of special education schools, researchers found that these factors included academic, social, behavioural, and health challenges (Devitt et al., 2014). However, as with the participants, research also presents concerns about multiple diagnoses as well as emotional difficulties (Graham & Westwood, 2003; Devitt et al., 2014). Interestingly, rather than focusing on the needs of the students with emotional difficulties as the participants did, researchers focus on the effect students with emotional difficulties have on the teacher and the rest of the students in the class (Graham & Westwood, 2003). It seems that the co-teaching model in the inclusive classroom may not support all student needs; however, the participants are more optimistic about its power than the research as participants focus on how each student can reach their full potential. This suggests that participants have important knowledge to contribute about exactly where the co-teaching model falls short with regard to supporting student needs.

4.4.3 Participants indicated that time for open discussion as well as outside support helped teachers overcome the challenges of teacher relationships and of supporting all student needs.

In response to the challenge of an unequal power dynamic, participants found it was crucial to find the time to engage in open dialogue with their co-teaching partner. Sarah explained that, in some cases, she believed general education teachers felt judged by the special education teacher, which caused them to be reluctant to have the special education teacher take a
leadership role in the class. She explained, “[the teachers] need to get past their egos and the best way to do that is just to be human and listen and make sure you’re not talking about teachers behind their backs.” It is important that teachers are honest with each other and that they regularly communicate so they are able to resolve any conflicts that may arise. Maureen echoed the central role of communication when she asserted, “If there’s a problem, you talk to [the co-teaching partner] about it… open communication has to be there and there has to be trust, um, or it won’t work.” Both Sarah’s and Maureen’s assertions suggest that communication plays a large part in solving conflicts between co-teaching pairs. It also suggests that they both understand the challenges that may arise from working so closely with another person.

In response to the challenge of the limits of the co-teaching framework to support all students, participants conceded that some students might need to receive outside support for their needs to be fully met. Maureen explained, “There’s times when you do have to take students into a special ed class, um, to work on specifics with them.” Maureen recognized that the co-teaching model in the inclusive classroom may not always be able to meet the needs of all the students all the time and, sometimes, outside support is beneficial. Relatedly, discussing the students, Sarah maintained,

You have to decide, is it a benefit for them to be in the classroom or is it more of a struggle for them? And you have to weigh those obstacles because I truly believe that all students benefit from being in the classroom, but I don’t know if they all benefit all day from being in the classroom.

Sarah recognized that there needs to be a range of opportunities for the diverse needs of the students. While the co-teaching model in the inclusive classroom offers benefits to many
students, it is also important to consider outside supports where the co-teaching framework is limited.

With regard to inequitable power dynamics between co-teachers, research takes a slightly different perspective from the participants. Ashton’s (2014) research suggests that open communication between co-teaching pairs may not be enough to ameliorate the relationship. According to Ashton (2014), the change has to occur on a larger scale by developing a more inclusive framework in which the special education teacher and general education teacher are seen as equal contributors. With regard to supporting all student needs, Devitt et al.’s (2014) research is in line with participants’ assertions that the inclusive classroom has limits in meeting all needs. However, their research suggests that rather than finding alternative opportunities for students in collaboration with the school, families simply switched their children to schools dedicated to special education. The participants offer a more collaborative response to the challenge by suggesting that there should be a range of options available to students including one-on-one support for the full day, a half day in an inclusive classroom and the remaining half day with individualized support, and options where students can receive support with significantly smaller class sizes and with other students with similar abilities. The focus should be on what would benefit each child the most. Participants have contributed to research by suggesting that rather than leaving families to decide to switch their child to another school if they are not receiving adequate support at the current one, there should be collaboration between families, teachers, and principals to figure out a solution for best meeting the student’s needs.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter reported on the data analyzed from research interviews, showing where participant responses converged and diverged from existing literature and how this was
significant. This process illuminated the value of the co-teaching model for student and teacher growth. According to participants, the co-teaching model was not only valuable for students both academically and socially, but also benefitted teachers as they had the opportunity to learn from different perspectives and teaching styles. Participants found that teacher personality played an important role in teacher collaboration as well-matched personalities appeared to reduce conflict. District and administrative support also were central to teacher collaboration because the district provided release time for teachers to plan together as well as in-depth training to support teachers in their practice. With regard to supporting the needs of diverse learners in the classroom, participants highlighted the value of the tools and resources they gathered as a result of teaching for many years. Lastly, participants identified challenges associated with the co-teaching model, including its limitations to support students with emotional and/or multiple disabilities as well as the challenge of creating an equitable dynamic between the general education teacher and the special education teacher. Participants also identified potential solutions to these challenges. They suggested that the co-teaching model could be combined with other teaching models for students who needed more individualized attention. In addition, they suggested that co-teaching pairs conduct open discussions with their counterparts to help alleviate conflicts arising from inequitable power dynamics. These findings are significant as they shed light on new avenues to be explored.

There is a tremendous amount of research on the fact that the nature of the co-teaching relationship determines the success of the class for the students and teachers. However, there is less research about how important personality is within the context of the relationship between co-teaching pairs and the potential for the teachers to grow and learn from each other. Thoughtful pairings have the potential to create remarkable relationships and important learning.
The literature also supports the idea that teachers need training to support them in teaching in inclusive classrooms. The key role of administration in providing both training opportunities as well as release time to plan is much less prevalent in the research. Enlisting the district to provide both release time and training has the potential to alleviate concerns in the literature about lack of planning and training time. While the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms has its limitations with regard to reaching learners who may need significant individualized attention or more quiet spaces to work, participants have highlighted that the co-teaching model can work in concert with other models to support all students. The literature identifies similar limitations to inclusive classrooms. Participants contribute by offering a collaborative approach where students can spend varying portions of their day in the inclusive classroom based on what will benefit their learning the most. The next chapter will further explore how these findings contribute to existing literature and implicate teacher practice in the area of co-teaching and will also suggest avenues for further research and exploration.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I lay out the implications of my research study and their significance. First, I give an overview of the key findings of my research as well as their significance. Then, I discuss the implications of my research, both for the broader educational community as well as for my own practice as a teacher and researcher. I then include recommendations about the co-teaching model for school boards, principals, and teachers based on my findings. Lastly, I explore areas for further research based on my findings as well as existing literature.
5.1 Overview of Key Findings

I categorized my key findings into four central themes. My first theme covers participants’ beliefs about the effectiveness of the co-teaching model. All three participants agreed that the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms allows for tremendous gains for the students and teachers involved. They emphasized the collaborative atmosphere that the co-teaching model and inclusive classroom created. Participants believed this atmosphere created a safe and comfortable environment where students felt free to take risks and learn from each other. As a result, participants credited the model with an increase in grades and overall academic performance of all students. In addition to an increase in academic performance, participants also saw tremendous social and emotional benefits for the students. Participants felt that being around students of all different needs and abilities allowed students to develop empathy. The presence of two teachers in the classroom, according to participants, also helped to create a safe and inclusive atmosphere where students felt they had a tremendous amount of support. In addition, the presence of two teachers gave both the students and the teachers an opportunity to learn from different teaching styles.

According to participants, part of creating an inclusive and collaborative atmosphere involved support from their school district and administration. My second theme discusses how the support of the district and the support of administration as well as teacher personalities benefit teacher collaboration. Participants received training on the co-teaching model and release time for joint planning from their district, which aided participants in running smooth and successful classes. Another important factor allowing teachers to successfully collaborate to support their students was the personality traits of the two teachers in the classroom and how much effort each co-teacher put into building a relationship with the other. Participants found
that certain personality traits, specifically adaptability, were important in allowing for successful collaboration. Participants noticed that if teacher personalities were not matched well, it was significantly harder for co-teacher pairings to work together and there was the potential for many more conflicts to arise. Participants also emphasized the importance of putting effort into relationship building. Since the co-teaching model requires a large amount of collaboration between the two co-teaching pairs, participants felt it was important that they spent time working on their relationship with their co-teaching partner, which meant constant communication as well as an openness to the other person and the strengths and skills they brought to their teaching.

The co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms requires teachers to be able to respond to a variety of different student needs and abilities. My third theme relates to the strategies participants used to respond to their diverse learners, within the co-teaching model. Participants found that their own professional experience was an important factor in helping them support the diverse needs of their students. Participants had trouble pinpointing specific resources or tools that helped in their teaching practice, but spoke to a large range of resources and strategies that they had accumulated over their years of teaching. Over time, these resources and strategies had become part of their repertoire and they used them to support their students, almost as if it was an extension of themselves.

Lastly, in my final theme, participants spoke of challenges relating to the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms and possible solutions to these challenges. The challenges they experienced included the limits of the co-teaching model to support students with emotional disabilities and students with multiple disabilities. Participants found, given the collaborative nature of the framework, it was hard to find time to go over specific skills with students who needed consistent individual attention or to support students who became overwhelmed in large
group settings. In these cases, participants felt that it was important to access outside support. They felt certain students benefitted more from spending part of their time in the classroom and part of their time getting more individualized support in a resource room, for example. The other challenge that participants spoke of was unequal power dynamics between the two co-teaching partners. In most cases, it was the special education teacher who became secondary to the general education teacher in the classroom. My participants who were special education teachers felt that, in some cases, the general education teacher was unwilling to share their classroom with the special education teacher. However, my participant who was a general education teacher felt that, in some cases, the special education teacher did not take enough initiative in the classroom. All participants felt that open dialogue with the co-teaching counterpart helped them solve the difficulties of unequal power dynamics.

These findings are significant as they provide insight into the factors involved in creating a positive atmosphere for students and teachers within the framework of the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms. These findings also point to challenges to be aware of and uncover possible methods for solving them. Lastly, these findings point to the general merits of the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms for both teachers and students for successfully supporting students with all different needs.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I summarize the implications of my research findings. First, I discuss how my research implicates the educational community. I discuss implications both for the educational community in Phoenix, Arizona, where the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms is prevalent, and for the Toronto education community if more school boards in
Toronto begin to implement this model. Then, I discuss how my research affects my practice both as a teacher and researcher.

5.2.1 The education community

My participants have specifically highlighted the crucial role that the district and administration play in supporting the co-teaching model. All three participants worked in schools where the district provided both training and release time for planning, which they all indicated made a significant difference to their success. This implicates the educational community in Phoenix, Arizona, as well as the Toronto educational community. It points to an area of focus for a community where the model is already in practice as well as for a community, such as Toronto, where there are far fewer cases of this model being implemented.

While participants point to many positive aspects of the co-teaching model, participants as well as the literature also highlight certain challenges involved with the co-teaching model. If there is a lack of support from the district and administration, these challenges may become exacerbated and have the potential to put stress on the co-teaching model. A school district and administrative body that supports the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms is important for both teachers and students, as teachers do not have to feel the strain of implementing a different model on their own.

Participants have identified two key areas where district and administrative support are especially important. The district and administration can provide in-depth training for staff and release time for co-teacher pairings to plan together and communicate about their shared classroom. The literature also underscores the importance of training and time for teachers to plan together, but the research does not highlight the role of the district and administration in providing the means for these practices to occur (Gardizi et al., 2005; Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012;
Gebhardt et al., 2015). Sarah highlighted the quality of the training she received and how important this was for her practice. She contended, “Because the district was so supportive of [co-teaching], we learned the right way to do it.” Sarah also emphasized the fact that she did not just receive training once, but she received multiple training sessions as well as follow-up sessions, all provided by the district. Laura echoed Sarah’s sentiment, explaining that training was important for learning about how to collaborate and also highlighted how district-given release time was significant for her practice. Reflecting on her experience she noted, “The first year or two, we didn’t have [release time] and it was a struggle and we always found ourselves playing catch-up and it was a lot of pressure on the kids.” Without time allotted by the district, Laura felt her co-teaching practice was compromised.

In addition to district and administrative support, both the literature as well as my participants stressed the significance of the dynamics of the co-teacher relationship, both for the co-teachers themselves as well as the students (Gardizi et al., 2005; Gurgur & Uzuner, 2009; Ashton, 2014). Training and release time are important catalysts for a successful co-teaching model, but according to my participants, teachers also have to put a significant amount of effort into their co-teacher relationship. According to participants, establishing a successful co-teacher relationship involves openness to collaborating and working with each other coming from both of the teachers, constant communication, and an equitable division of classroom responsibilities. Emphasizing the importance of openness and communication, Maureen asserted, “If there’s a problem, you talk to [the co-teaching partner] about it… open communication has to be there and there has to be trust, um, or it won’t work.” While all participants asserted how important it was to communicate openly with their co-teaching counterpart, participants added that the personality of the two teachers involved also plays an important role. Participants noted that, in some cases,
personalities may conflict, making it more difficult for teachers to practice the openness and constant communication that is so important. It is important for the educational communities both in Phoenix and Toronto to understand that there are many aspects that need to come together for successful co-teaching and if any of these aspects are lacking, the co-teaching may be compromised to varying degrees, depending on the factors that are present.

When co-teaching pairs are able to build a strong relationship and collaborate successfully, there are tremendous benefits not only for the students, but also for the teachers. Research on student perceptions of the model suggests that students prefer having two teachers (Drietz, 2003). Participants noted the social, emotional, and academic benefits for students as well as the benefits for teachers. Both Laura and Maureen noted how much they learned from their co-teaching counterpart.

5.2.2 Implications for myself as a teacher researcher

In this section, I highlight how my own practice as a teacher and researcher has been implicated by the findings. I have gained a deep appreciation of the importance of teacher collaboration. According to the participants, teacher collaboration increases student and teacher success. Whether, in the future, I teach using the co-teaching model in an inclusive classroom or not, collaboration is very important to bring into my practice. Maureen talked about co-teaching being a part of her identity. She explained that even if she were not formally assigned a co-teaching partner, she would make her own arrangements with other teachers. I will now be conscious of bringing this to my practice, as I believe there is a benefit both to the students and myself.

I learned from my participants the importance of giving students the opportunity to work with students of all different abilities. All three participants highlighted the major academic and
social gains for students when they have the opportunity to learn from and with students of all
different abilities. The co-teaching model provides a perfect opportunity for such a learning
environment. However, similar to my goal of seeking out colleagues to collaborate with, whether
I am teaching within a designated co-teaching inclusive classroom framework or not, I can still
seek out opportunities for my students to work with learners of different abilities. This could take
the form of reading buddies, for example, or it could involve collaboration with other schools. I
believe any of these opportunities could help foster the social and academic benefits that my
participants expressed, as long as I worked with the other teachers involved to create a safe and
comfortable environment where students felt free to take risks and participate fully.

I also learned from my participants that gaining comfort and expertise in supporting
students in inclusive classrooms takes time. It is likely that in my practice as a teacher, I will
encounter many integrated classrooms and it is also likely that I will encounter challenges
associated with them. However, my participants had had significant experience with the co-
teaching model in inclusive classrooms by the time I interviewed them. Therefore, when I begin
my practice as a teacher, I will keep in mind that at the beginning, I may not have all the answers,
but as I continue to apply myself and try new strategies and reflect on what I have tried, I will
begin to gain more comfort and experience.

Although my participants felt they had a significant number of tools and resources readily
available to them as a result of their years of teaching experience, one of my participants also
noted that she still did research to support her in her practice as she planned her lessons. I think it
will be important for me to continue to update myself on current research as I begin my teaching
practice. There will always be new models and new strategies for me to learn to improve my
practice and I will strive to continue to update my pedagogy throughout my whole career.
5.3 Recommendations

A successful co-teaching inclusive classroom approach involves many different stakeholders and several different components need to be in place. Based on my research, in the following section, I recommend courses of action for school boards, principals, and teachers to take to support a successful co-teaching inclusive classroom approach. My recommendations are applicable to both stakeholders in Phoenix and Toronto as they are beneficial for improving current co-teaching models, but they are also important considerations for introducing the co-teaching model.

5.3.1 School boards

- It is important that school boards hire teachers who are flexible and can adapt easily to new situations as the co-teaching model requires teachers to be able to adapt to and work with the different personalities of their different co-teaching partners.

- School boards should ensure that sufficient funds are allocated towards professional development so that teachers can receive the resources they need to properly support their students in inclusive classrooms within the co-teaching framework.

- School boards should invest in in-depth training for all staff participating in the co-teaching model so that the staff members are sufficiently prepared to support their learners. The training should occur at multiple points throughout the year as teachers have a chance to implement strategies in the co-teaching model and teachers should have continuous access to supports about the co-teaching model as any issues may arise.
5.3.2 Principals

- Principals should be conscious of the personalities of the teachers that they pair together as this will make a significant difference in how these teachers are able to collaborate with each other.

- Principals should actively seek out co-teaching pairs to ensure that they have the resources and supports they need.

5.3.3 Teachers

- Teachers should have an open mind when it comes to working with their co-teaching partner. They should be prepared to embrace different perspectives and different teaching styles.

- Teachers should put effort into getting to know their co-teaching counterpart and building a relationship with them as this will help them work smoothly together to support their students.

- Teachers should take note of strategies and resources that they have found to be useful in the practice thus far to begin to build a repertoire of tools and experience to support their learners in the future.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

While there is significant research on inclusive classrooms, there is less research on the implementation of the co-teaching framework within the inclusive classroom, specifically with regard to its social benefits, how to supplement it, and positive techniques for managing the relationship between the two co-teaching partners. My participants have spoken to each of these areas from their own experience, but evidence in the literature is less prevalent and deserves more attention.
There is support in the literature about social concerns that may arise in inclusive classrooms (Zindler, 2009). In her study, Zindler (2009) found that, even with the implementation of inclusive practices, some students still felt marginalized in the integrated classroom. There is very little evidence in the literature about how the co-teaching framework might address social concerns. My participants highlighted social and emotional benefits of the co-teaching model. They believed that the presence of two teachers in the classroom helps to create a safe environment where students can be themselves and take risks, which in turn leads to the students feeling socially comfortable and included in the classroom. Given my participants’ assertions about these social benefits, it important that this be further researched.

The literature on the co-teaching model, as well as my participants, suggests that there are limits to the co-teaching model. Some students may need more individualized support than this model can offer (Devitt et al., 2014). My participants explained that there should always be a range of options available for students, and furthermore, that the various classroom teachers should work with the various other experts as well as the child’s parents to find the best option for each child. There is evidence in the research that inclusive classrooms were seen as insufficient and many families simply removed their children from those classrooms (Devitt et al., 2014). Given these limitations, I believe it is important that more research is done on how to reduce the limitations of the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms so that as many students can benefit as possible. I also believe there should be research on how various experts can work with classroom teachers, other specialists, and parents so that students can receive the best support possible in recognition of the fact that there may not be one model that can satisfy everyone.
While there is evidence in the literature that communication between co-teaching partners is an important factor regarding their relationship and their ability to collaborate and support their students, there is less evidence in the research about constructive strategies for dealing with conflict that will inevitably arise at some point (Gardizi et al., 2005; Gurgur & Uzuner, 2009). Given how important it is for the students and teachers that the co-teaching partners are able to collaborate, I believe there should be more research about ways that teachers can prevent conflict and manage it when it arises.

5.5 Concluding Comments

Conducting this research study has given me insight into the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms and all the different aspects that are involved. Through my participants, I have learned what the co-teaching model can look like when it is implemented well. It involves hard work on the part of the two co-teachers and an openness and willingness to collaborate in all aspects of teaching. My participants have also given me an understanding of the potential challenges that may arise and what has helped them through these challenges.

This research has helped me to understand that supporting the needs of all different learners takes a community. There are many stakeholders involved in a child’s learning, including teachers, parents, principals, and peers. When not everyone is collaborating with each other and supporting each other, the child as well as the stakeholders involved may begin to suffer. However, if everyone involved works together, there are significant benefits, including social and academic benefits for the students as well as opportunities for both teachers to learn from each other. Although the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms has certain limitations, through this research study, I have learned that it is a valuable method for supporting all different learners that deserves more research.
References


Graham L., & P., Westwood (2003). Inclusion of students with special needs: Benefits and


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Dear _______________________________,

My name is Rachel Goldberg and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how a sample of general education elementary school teachers effectively collaborate with special education teachers within the framework of a co-teaching model in order to respond to the learning needs of students in inclusive classroom settings. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience teaching in primary and junior inclusive classrooms employing the co-teaching model. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor, Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Rachel Goldberg
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Contact Info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Rachel Goldberg and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how general education elementary school teachers collaborate with special education teachers in a co-teaching model to respond to the diverse learning needs of students within inclusive classrooms for the purpose of contributing to an understanding of how the co-teaching model can be utilized to its full potential as well as to inform my own teaching practice with regard to teacher collaboration and ways to best support students with special learning needs. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on strategies co-teachers use in inclusive classrooms. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering my questions, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A – Background Information

1. What is your current position?
   a. What grade are you teaching?
   b. What grades have you previously taught?
   c. Do you fulfill other roles at your school, in addition to being a classroom teacher?

2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

3. How many years experience do you have teaching in an inclusive classroom model?

4. Of those years, how many were in a co-teaching model with a special education teacher?

5. How many co-teachers have you worked with? Can you elaborate on your experience(s)?

6. How did you become involved with the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms?

7. Do you have any formal training for supporting students with special needs? What educational or professional experience do you have in this area?
Section B – Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

1. In your view, why is the co-teaching model an effective model for teaching in inclusive classrooms? What are the benefits of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms?
   a. For your students?
   b. For you?

2. In your experience, what supports need to be in place for the co-teaching model to work?

3. What does it mean to you to co-teach?

4. In your experience, what are some of the significant barriers that students with exceptionalities face in the school system?

5. How, if at all, do you see the inclusive classroom model offering a response to some of these barriers?

6. How, if at all, do you see the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms offering a response to some of these barriers?

7. What do you believe are some of the key characteristics of a strong co-teaching model?
   a. And a strong co-teaching model in an inclusive classroom environment specifically?

Section C – Teacher Practices

1. What does the co-teaching model look like in your classroom?
   a. Can you describe for me how you work together with your teaching partner?
      How do you structure your teaching with your co-teaching partner?

2. What are some strategies that you have found to be particularly helpful in effectively collaborating with your co-teacher to support all students in an inclusive classroom model?
a. And to support students with special needs in particular?

3. Are there some aspects of teaching that you are each responsible for? Who is responsible for what?

4. In what areas, if any, do you share responsibility?

5. How do you and your teaching partner work together to support students with special needs, in particular?

6. What resources support you in your co-teaching practice?

7. What resources support you in being able to meet the differentiated needs of learners?

8. How do you work together to meet the differentiated needs of your students? What are some instructional strategies that you find particularly effective in meeting the needs of diverse learners in your classroom?

Section D – Supports and Challenges

1. What are some challenges that you have faced implementing the co-teaching model and how have you responded?

2. What challenges, if any, are specific to the inclusive classroom learning environment?

3. What range of assist you in meeting these challenges? What further supports are needed?

Next Steps

1. What professional goals do you have, if any, when it comes to your co-teaching practice in an inclusive classroom?

2. What advice do you have for beginning teachers who are interested in teaching within a co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms?

Thank you for your participation.