The Supportive Co-Teaching Approach

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Topics Included in This Chapter:

❖ Unique features, advantages of, and cautions associated with supportive co-teaching
❖ Vignettes: Supportive co-teaching
❖ Analyzing the cooperative process in the supportive co-teaching vignettes
❖ Frequently asked questions

With supportive co-teaching, often one teacher assumes primary responsibility for designing and delivering a lesson, and the other member(s) of the team provides support to some or all of the students in the class. Basically, one teacher leads, and the other supports. Said another way, one teacher functions as the sage on the stage, and the other functions as the guide on the side. Sometimes the lead teacher is primarily responsible for planning the content and the support person has less or little planning responsibility; sometimes co-teachers share equally in the planning and choose to use supportive co-teaching for a segment of their instruction because it is the most useful co-teaching arrangement. For example, at the beginning of a class, one co-teacher may take the lead, introducing the content and language objectives, while the other acts in a supportive role by collecting and scanning homework to see if students were successful in applying the content covered the day before.

It should be noted that who is in the lead and who is supporting does not need to remain the same throughout the lesson. For example, a general education classroom teacher may take primary responsibility for teaching the first part of a lesson, while a supporting co-teacher (e.g., special educator, speech and language therapist, paraprofessional, teacher of students who are learning English) circulates among the students monitoring academic and social progress, promoting peer interactions, or providing task assistance when needed. For the second part of the lesson, the co-teachers switch roles, with the classroom teacher circulating among students, providing immediate academic or behavioral support, while the other co-teacher takes the lead and introduces the

next concept. Supportive co-teaching between a special and a general educator also might involve the supporting special educator reviewing a test-taking strategy with a student prior to a test, giving specific feedback to a student about his or her use of social skills in the general education classroom, or teaching a student how to use an augmentative communication system that is being used with classmates in the classroom. Still another example might involve co-teaching with someone who is expert in teaching students who are learning English. While the classroom teacher models a written language pattern orally and in writing (e.g., with a document camera, on a whiteboard, on easel paper), the co-teacher circulates around the classroom to check for the English language learners' understanding of the pattern and the associated writing assignment.

Often, when teachers begin to co-teach, they use the supportive co-teaching approach. It allows the co-teacher who is not the classroom teacher to observe the classroom routines, get to know the classroom teacher and students, and learn the preferred instructional strategies of the classroom teacher. Supportive co-teaching is also used when one of the members of the co-teaching team does not have curriculum content mastery and new content is being introduced. Teams with little to no planning time typically use the supportive co-teaching approach.

A caution when using the supportive co-teaching approach is that whoever is playing the support role (e.g., bilingual translator, special educator, paraprofessional) must not become "Velcroed" to individual students, functioning as a "hovercraft vehicle" blocking a student's interactions with other students. It is well documented that this is stigmatizing for both students and the support person, causing classmates to perceive that the student and support person are not genuine members of the classroom (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland 1997). While there are advantages and disadvantages of each approach and a time and a place to use each approach, supportive co-teaching should, over time, become the least utilized of the four approaches because it does not allow the co-teacher in the supportive co-teaching role to adequately use her or his skill set to greatly influence instruction and make it more accessible for learners. Sometimes interventionists cast in the supportive role develop resentment because they feel that their professional skills are not being adequately used. Conversely, classroom teachers may resent their supportive co-teaching partner because they feel an unequal burden of responsibility for designing lessons, instructing, and assessing the progress of the learners.

■ VIGNETTES: SUPPORTIVE CO-TEACHING

If you peek into the classrooms of the co-teaching teams described in Chapter 3, you might see and hear the activities summarized in Table 4.1.

The following vignettes illustrate how supportive teaching might play out in elementary, middle-level, and high school classrooms as co-teachers conduct standards-based lessons.

An Elementary Co-Teaching Team

During math, Ms. Gilpatrick (the teacher) and Ms. Hernandez (the paraprofessional) are in the classroom. Ms. Gilpatrick begins by leading a large-group activity in which she checks students' understanding of number recognition for the numbers 0 through 9 with whole-class choral response and by calling on individual students. Following this activity, Ms. Gilpatrick checks for understanding of the concept of *more* because this is a vocabulary term used when describing the addition process (e.g., *What does 2 oranges plus 1 more orange equal?*). She then models several examples of single-digit addition, using real objects to match written numbers to show the concept as well as the operation of addition.

Students' desks are arranged so that every student has a table partner. The co-teachers distribute to each pair a small container of colored, interconnecting blocks, which the students can use to solve several addition problems that have been written on the board. Each student also has a number line taped to the top of his or her desk. Students have had previous instruction and practice on how to use the number line and blocks to arrive at a total. After a short period, partner pairs are called to the front of the room to show how they arrived at their solution. There are colored number lines and translucent two-dimensional blocks on the document projector that students can use to show the thinking and processes by which they arrived at their answers. The other students in the class also have attempted to solve the problem and have previously written the answers on their individual whiteboards, which they hold up after each pair's demonstration and explanation.

Following this guided practice, students are given a choice of three pages that contain problems they are to solve independent of the teacher's instruction: one with 4 problems, one with 6, and one with 10. All pairs are to complete a minimum of eight problems, but any pair can complete all three teacher-designed worksheets for additional practice. Students are instructed to be prepared to explain how they arrived at each answer to the teacher, the paraprofessional, another classmate, or the entire class.

Ms. Hernandez and Ms. Gilpatrick have had no time to plan. Ms. Hernandez arrives just as Ms. Gilpatrick finishes modeling the examples for single-digit addition in large-group instruction. Ms. Hernandez walks around to check with the students as they use the manipulatives and write their answers on the whiteboards. She continues to circulate around the room, asking and answering questions and providing support as needed during the time that partners complete the worksheets. She ensures that students with special needs, those who receive Title I tutorials, and those who are learning English can follow the instructions and perform the addition procedures. She pays particular attention to Elisa, the student with autism, but observes her from a distance rather than sitting by her, thus fostering Elisa's independence. In addition to asking questions of other partner pairs, Ms. Hernandez periodically asks Elisa or her partner to show how they arrived at the answers to their problems.

A Middle-Level Co-Teaching Team

Mr. Silva (the science and math teacher with an endorsement to teach students who are English language learners) wants students to compare and contrast animals

that reside in various environments (e.g., ocean, desert, mountain) and learn about environmental damage or threats to each of these ecosystems. Mr. Silva posts the content and language objectives prior to class. While Ms. Spaulding references the objectives and solicits rationale from the students as to why it is important to learn the content of the lesson, Mr. Silva collects the students' homework. Working in groups (i.e., five groups of four and two groups of three), students are asked to create two visual representations: One will depict the similarities and differences between the environments, and the other will represent some of the environmental concerns for each of the three ecosystems.

At this time, Ms. Spaulding (a special educator) is in the science class with Mr. Silva, and Ms. Olvina (a paraprofessional) is with Ms. Kurtz in her language arts class. Mr. Silva and Ms. Spaulding previously collaborated and assigned students to heterogeneous groups, avoiding best friends and worst enemies in the groups and assuring diversity across gender, race, language, and ability. Some students use Venn diagrams; others create tables; others draw, cut out, or download pictures from the Internet or use other materials to represent the ecosystems graphically. Mr. Silva teaches, checks understanding, monitors group interactions, and answers students' questions. Ms. Spaulding quietly observes various students to help Mr. Silva plan for future modifications, roles within groups, and future grouping suggestions. Ms. Spaulding also collects data on students' level of participation in their groups and demonstration of social skills (e.g., turn taking).

After the lesson, Mr. Silva and Ms. Spaulding meet briefly to discuss what occurred in this lesson. They take turns describing what went well, what they would change the next time they teach this unit, and to what extent they fulfilled their agreed-on tasks. They also take time to outline their plan for the next unit of study (specifically, group composition, content modifications, social skills to teach and monitor). Ms. Spaulding shares with Mr. Silva some online resources she discovered when she did an Internet search. He promises to review them and to subsequently discuss with Ms. Spaulding and the other members of the middle-level teaching team, Ms. Olvina and Ms. Kurtz, how these resources might be integrated into the upcoming unit.

A High School Co-Teaching Team

During a common planning period the week before they are scheduled to co-teach five classes, Mr. Woo (the social studies teacher) and Mr. Viana (the special educator) met to address several issues. They used the matrix shown in Table 3.3 (in Chapter 3) to help determine the appropriate goals and activities for each of the classes, clarified Mr. Viana's responsibilities, and decided how to group students for the various learning activities. Based on his knowledge of students' strengths and needs, Mr. Viana suggested which students should work together, indicating specific roles within the cooperative learning groups that some learners might take (e.g., a student who is not reading at grade level could function as a timekeeper). Mr. Woo explained that if students have questions, he wanted Mr. Viana to encourage them to ask one another to solve the problem before asking an adult for help. Mr. Woo identified four of the eight groups he wanted Mr. Viana to monitor for academic work, role performance, and use of social skills.

On the following Monday, Mr. Woo and Mr. Viana check in with each other briefly before the start of the class. Mr. Viana passes out clicker handsets to the students while Mr. Woo reviews the objectives. Mr. Woo and Mr. Viana decided to use the clicker handsets to informally assess students' knowledge of the three

branches of government. Based on the informal assessment results, the co-teachers make an on-the-spot adjustment for one group by assigning a fourth member with some knowledge of the branch of government that will be assigned to that group. In addition, Mr. Viana believes one student in that particular group will benefit from this additional peer support and modeling.

Mr. Woo introduces the activities, explaining the academic and social (i.e., reaching consensus, listening, equal participation) objectives, and telling the students that they will have a common goal. He describes the individual roles (e.g., timekeeper, recorder) within the groups, notes that each student will be held accountable, and outlines the criteria for success. The class is divided into thirds. Each third is further divided into groups of three. Mr. Woo asks the students questions to check their understanding of the directions and criteria for success he has just explained.

Each third of the class is to learn and be prepared to teach about one of the three branches of government (i.e., legislative, judicial, and executive). Students within each "expert group" will become experts on their branch of government through a variety of means, such as online resources available from museums, government entities, universities, and popular news publications and networks; textbooks, news magazines, and other printed materials; DVDs, videos; and interviews. In 2 days' time, after students have become experts in their areas, Mr. Woo will reconfigure the groups to include an expert with knowledge of each of the three branches of government. This will allow students to jigsaw their information, teach one another, and then apply their collective knowledge to determine the role of each branch of government when given a set of scenarios (e.g., declaring war, how a bill becomes a law, raising taxes, determining guilt, sentencing, the possibility of pardoning those who violate the law).

Mr. Viana passes out the task instructions, a list of resources, and some materials to each of the expert groups. As students get organized to begin studying their respective branch of government, Mr. Woo and Mr. Viana move among the groups to monitor student understanding of the assignment, role performance, and use of small-group social skills. Mr. Woo monitors the time and gives the class a 5-minute warning that the period is almost over so that groups can wrap up.

ANALYZING THE COOPERATIVE PROCESS IN   ■
THE SUPPORTIVE CO-TEACHING VIGNETTES

The cooperative process differed when supportive co-teaching was applied at three levels—elementary, middle school, and high school. The five elements of the cooperative process are face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence, interpersonal skills, monitoring, and accountability.

All three supportive co-teaching vignettes show that the co-teachers interacted face-to-face during the teaching of the lesson, while both the middle school and high school supportive co-teaching teams also met face-to-face after the lesson. The high school supportive co-teaching team met before, during, and after the lesson. Positive interdependence is evident in all three vignettes; each supportive co-teaching team had a division of labor (although the elementary team had an unspecified agreement). Interpersonal communication skills were evident in the high school supportive co-teaching vignette, especially when Mr. Woo communicated

Table 4.1 The Many Faces of Co-Teaching: Co-Teaching Teams' Use of Supportive Co-Teaching

Meet the Co-Teachers	Co-Teacher Roles	Curriculum Area(s)	Teaching Learning Strategies	Planning Method
Elementary				
Ms. Gilpatrick, classroom teacher	Leads the lesson	Mathematics	Manipulative and number line; partner learning	On-the-spot planning
Ms. Hernandez, paraprofessional	Circulates to check understanding and task completion			
Middle Level				
Mr. Silva, science and math teacher	Leads the lesson	Science	Cooperative group learning; multiage grouping	Reflective guided planning
Ms. Spaulding, special educator	Observes to plan for future groupings			
High School				
Mr. Woo, social studies teacher	Leads the lesson	Social studies	Cooperative group learning (jigsaw with expert groups), authentic assessment, computer technology	Preplanning
Mr. Viana, special educator	Suggests student group membership, encourages students to use problem-solving methods, passes out papers, and, along with the teacher, monitors the group interactions			

how he wanted Mr. Viana to interact with the students. Monitoring effectiveness of the lessons occurred on the spot for all three supportive co-teaching teams. In addition, the middle school and high school co-teachers included a debriefing time to discuss what went well, what needed to be done differently, and what would be done next time. Accountability was implied in the vignettes, with the high school co-teachers being more articulate about how they held each other accountable for the tasks they agreed to achieve.

We advocate that supportive co-teachers incorporate as many elements of the cooperative process as possible. This happens when co-teachers experience face-to-face interactions, realize that they are positively interdependent, use their social interpersonal skills, monitor how well they work together, and hold each other accountable for the tasks they set for each other. The research is clear that when all five elements are present, the quality of the co-teaching relationship improves. And when the quality of the co-teaching relationship improves, the outcomes in terms of student achievement are positively affected.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

We have interviewed many co-teachers, students, parents, administrators, and advocates for the use of co-teaching arrangements in the classroom. The following questions are those asked most frequently when people first learn about the supportive co-teaching approach.

1. What is the most difficult problem to overcome when working with a paraprofessional and a classroom teacher using the supportive co-teaching approach?

No matter whether it is a classroom teacher, a special educator, or a paraprofessional who is playing the supportive role, the supportive co-teacher must not become "Velcroed" to individual students. He or she should not function as a hovercraft vehicle blocking a student's interactions with other students. Hovering can stigmatize the student. It also runs the risk of stigmatizing a co-teaching team member who works predominantly with one student. Students from preschool through high school explain that if a teacher is glued to a particular student, the teacher becomes a barrier to other children's desire to interact socially with that child. Not only that, students often raise this question: "If the special teacher helps me, will people think that I'm a special education student?" (Villa and Thousand 2002, 304). An important component of successful supportive co-teaching is ensuring that students perceive each member of the co-teaching team (special educator, regular educator, or paraprofessional) as their teacher.

We hope you agree that the vignettes featured in this chapter show how the supportive co-teaching teams organized their interaction so that students perceived each of the co-teachers as their teacher. Administratively, to avoid stigmatization further, the job definition for paraprofessionals hired to work with individual children with special needs can include responsibilities for all the children in the classroom.

2. Does supportive co-teaching always occur inside the classroom?

We suggest that the place co-teachers should work most often is the classroom in which all the children meet. Occasionally, however, co-teachers may work for a short period with an individual child

(Continued)

or a group of children outside the classroom, in the library, or in the computer lab. If you choose to use this approach, we advise that, to avoid stigmatization of students or instructional personnel, the same students or member of the co-teaching team should not always be the ones leaving the general education classroom.

3. I'm a professional special educator who has just been assigned to work as a co-teacher with a general educator. How do I avoid acting in a subsidiary role by just walking around and helping the students?

Are you worried that you'll go into a classroom and just drift around, working with one or two students, waiting and watching the flow of the classroom teacher's lesson? This indicates your concern that all of the skills you've acquired will not necessarily be used. One way to address this concern is for co-teachers to learn to use the other approaches to co-teaching described in subsequent chapters of this book. Then you and your co-teacher can agree to a goal that will help your relationship capitalize on all four approaches instead of relying on only one. The benefits of the increased awareness that all educators bring to their co-teaching partnerships far outweigh the temporary discomfort that occurs when a team is just beginning to use the supportive co-teaching approach. It is not uncommon for special educators and support personnel to discover, when they enter a general education classroom, that it is a very different world from the one-on-one or small-group instruction typically found in resource rooms or self-contained classrooms. With a supportive co-teaching arrangement, both co-teachers have the chance to become familiar with each other's curriculum and teaching techniques. The goal is to nurture and enrich the relationship so that both co-teachers can experience an evolution of their skills. Remember that this involves taking time to talk, establish trust, and communicate. Expanding your co-teaching repertoire beyond just the supportive approach avoids the special educators' resenting the classroom teachers for not valuing them and allowing them to use their skills and avoids the classroom teachers' resenting the special educators because they feel they are left with the majority of the responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessing the learners in the classroom.