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Co-teaching leadership models in inclusive settings: Frameworks for equity, instruction, and collaborative practice

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Abstract
Co-teaching has emerged as a central instructional strategy for implementing inclusive education mandates, yet its effectiveness depends critically on the leadership models that support collaborative practice. This paper examines the intersection of co-teaching instructional configurations and leadership frameworks in K–12 inclusive settings. Drawing on research evidence, we analyze six co-teaching models- One Teach/One Observe, One Teach/One Assist, Parallel Teaching, Station Teaching, Alternative Teaching, and Team Teaching and explore how distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and social justice leadership frameworks shape their implementation. We document academic and social outcomes for students with and without disabilities, identify persistent barriers including scheduling constraints, role parity challenges, and inconsistent administrative support, and examine evidence-based approaches to teacher preparation and professional development. Findings indicate that effective co-teaching requires administrators to combine multiple leadership frameworks: distributed structures to share decision-making authority, instructional focus to build pedagogical capacity through coaching cycles, and social justice commitments to sustain inclusive philosophy. We conclude with recommendations for integrating these frameworks into coherent systems that translate leadership actions into measurable classroom success. This synthesis contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education leadership by providing specific, actionable pathways for administrators seeking to institutionalize high-fidelity co-teaching practice.

Keywords: Co-teaching, inclusive education, distributed leadership, instructional leadership, social justice leadership, teacher collaboration, special education

Introduction

The movement toward inclusive education represents one of the most significant shifts in contemporary schooling, fundamentally altering where and how students with disabilities receive instruction (Ainscow, 2020; Friend & Cook, 2017) [1, 6]. Historically, students with disabilities were educated in separate classrooms or buildings, isolated from their general education peers and denied access to grade-level curriculum (McLeskey *et al*., 2017). This segregated model reflected deficit-oriented assumptions about disability and limited expectations for student achievement (Slee, 2018) [22]. Over the past four decades, legislative mandates, evolving professional values, and advocacy from disability rights communities have converged to challenge these exclusionary practices and establish inclusion as both a legal requirement and a moral imperative (Artiles *et al*., 2011; Yell *et al*., 2013) [2, 26].

Legislative and Philosophical Foundations The rise of inclusive education was driven by statutory mandates and shifting professional values that prioritized access to general education for students with disabilities (Yell *et al*., 2013) [26]. Inclusion expanded with reauthorizations of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004) [9], prompting more students to be served in general classrooms rather than segregated settings (McLeskey *et al*., 2017). These legislative changes reflected broader societal commitments to civil rights and equal access, positioning education as a fundamental right rather than a privilege contingent on ability status (Slee, 2018) [22]. Co-teaching is frequently described in the literature as an educational response to those inclusion mandates and as grounded in social justice aims that seek equity and access for historically underserved students (Friend & Cook, 2017; Preis & Jara, 2023) [6, 19]. School leaders and administrators have a central role in sustaining inclusive philosophy, resourcing co-teaching teams, and aligning practices with district policies and accountability structures (Khan, 2021; Murphy, 2018) [10, 17].

Co-Teaching as an Instructional Response Co-teaching functions as a shared instructional approach that addresses access, differentiated instruction, and teacher development in inclusive classrooms (Friend & Cook, 2017; Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [6, 15]. When implemented with fidelity, co-teaching supports academic and social outcomes while providing strong professional learning opportunities for both general and special educators (Cook *et al*., 2021; Scruggs *et al*., 2007) [4, 20]. The model positions two credentialed teachers—typically a general educator with content expertise and a special educator with pedagogical and accommodation expertise—as equal partners responsible for planning, delivering, and assessing instruction for all students in a shared classroom (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This collaborative structure theoretically enables more sophisticated differentiation, real-time responsiveness to student needs, and modeling of inclusive values than either teacher could achieve alone (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [15].

The Leadership Challenge Despite the promise of co-teaching, implementation often falls short of its potential. Research consistently identifies leadership as the critical variable determining whether co-teaching functions as a transformative inclusive practice or devolves into a compliance exercise with minimal impact on student learning (Chattman, 2017; Khan, 2021) [3, 10]. Effective co-teaching requires administrators to address complex organizational challenges: master schedule construction that

protects common planning time, resource allocation that ensures equitable caseloads, professional development that builds collaborative capacity, and cultural work that establishes parity between general and special educators (Murphy, 2018; Preis & Jara, 2023) [17, 19]. These demands exceed traditional administrative functions and require leaders to integrate multiple frameworks—distributed leadership to share decision-making authority (Spillane, 2006) [24], instructional leadership to focus on teaching quality (Hallinger, 2011) [8], and social justice leadership to sustain commitment to equity (Theoharis, 2007) [25].

Literature Review: Co-Teaching Models, Theoretical Frameworks, and Student Outcomes

Co-teaching is characterized by shared responsibility for instruction and outcomes for all students (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. The model increases access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities and creates opportunities for multimodal instruction that benefits diverse learners (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Scruggs *et al*., 2007) [15, 20]. Embedded models of co-teaching can also be used as deliberate professional development and clinical placement settings for preservice teachers, providing reflection, modeling, and skill growth opportunities (Cook *et al*., 2021; Murawski, 2012) [4, 14]. Sustained co-teaching requires administrative commitment to an inclusion philosophy and consistent supports for teams (Khan, 2021; Murphy, 2018) [10, 17].

Six Co-Teaching Instructional Models

The co-teaching literature identifies six primary instructional configurations, each offering distinct pedagogical affordances and requiring different levels of collaborative maturity (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. Understanding these models is essential for leaders seeking to support teams in selecting and implementing approaches matched to lesson objectives and student needs.

- **One Teach/One Observe:** In this model, one teacher leads instruction while the partner collects formative data or observes student behavior (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This configuration is used to document student engagement and guide accommodations in laboratory or inclusive classrooms (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [15]. The unique contribution to student learning lies in focused formative assessment and data-driven adjustments to instruction. While valuable for systematic observation, this model risks creating status hierarchies if the special educator is consistently positioned as observer rather than co-instructor (Scruggs *et al*., 2007) [20].

- **One Teach/One Assist:** The lead teacher instructs while the partner circulates to support individual students (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This model has been applied in college-level co-taught courses and K–12 inclusive classrooms to scaffold learners during whole-group lessons (Murawski, 2012) [14]. Its strength is real-time scaffolding and behavior support management for students needing immediate assistance. However, like One Teach/One Observe, this configuration can reinforce unequal roles if the special educator is perpetually relegated to assistant status rather than sharing instructional leadership (Scruggs *et al*., 2007) [20].

- **Parallel Teaching:** The class is divided into two heterogeneous or leveled groups, and teachers deliver the same lesson simultaneously (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This approach has been implemented in social studies and other content-area co-teaching contexts where teachers split students for smaller-group discussions or inquiry tasks (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [15]. Smaller group sizes increase participation and allow differentiated pacing and questioning. Parallel teaching requires careful coordination to ensure both groups receive equivalent instruction and that grouping practices do not recreate ability tracking within the inclusive classroom (McLeskey *et al*., 2017).

- **Station Teaching:** Teachers establish rotating stations where each teaches part of the lesson or monitors an activity (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This model is used in content classrooms as a means to rotate students through targeted skill stations and to model practice for preservice teachers (Murawski, 2012) [14]. Station teaching enables targeted practice, multiple modalities, and frequent formative checks in shorter intervals. The configuration demands sophisticated planning to sequence learning across stations and manage transitions efficiently (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [15].

- **Alternative Teaching:** One teacher instructs the large group while the other provides intensive instruction to a small group with specialized needs (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This model is documented in inclusion settings where one teacher pulls a small group for reteaching or extension while instruction continues for the majority (Scruggs *et al*., 2007) [20]. Alternative teaching allows intensive remediation or enrichment without interrupting whole-class flow. However, leaders must monitor that small-group instruction does not become de facto segregation or consistently remove the same students from core instruction (Slee, 2018) [22].

- **Team Teaching.** Both teachers jointly plan and deliver the same instruction, alternating contributions seamlessly (Friend & Cook, 2017) [6]. This model has been modeled by co-teaching faculty and veteran teacher pairs in higher education and secondary classrooms to demonstrate collaborative pedagogy (Cook *et al*., 2021) [4]. Team teaching presents a unified instructional front, models collaborative discourse, and supports complex questioning and co-constructed explanations. It is often considered the "gold standard" of co-teaching because it most clearly demonstrates parity and shared expertise, but it requires the highest levels of trust, planning, and pedagogical alignment (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016) [15].

Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Co-Teaching

Co-teaching practice is grounded in several theoretical traditions that shape how educators conceptualize collaboration, learning, and inclusion. Social constructivist theories emphasize learning as a collaborative process mediated by interaction with more knowledgeable others; in co-taught classrooms, students benefit from multiple expert perspectives and differentiated scaffolding. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles align naturally with co-teaching by advocating for multiple means of

representation, engagement, and expression goals more readily achieved when two teachers bring complementary expertise. Critical pedagogy and disability studies frameworks position co-teaching as a social justice practice that challenges ablest assumptions and creates more equitable learning environments. These theoretical foundations inform both the instructional decisions teachers make and the leadership approaches administrators adopt to support inclusive practice.

Student Outcomes in Co-Taught Classrooms

Findings on student outcomes in co-taught environments indicate positive qualitative findings in addition to the limitations of the quantitative data available. The implementation of co-teaching in a faithful manner is characterized by providing access to the general curriculum and enhancing academic engagement and learning opportunities for students with disabilities. Research in lab school and classroom settings has found that when co-teaching teams take shared responsibility and employ multimodal teaching, students with disabilities have greater access and individualized support in general education instruction.

Regarding students without disabilities, it is reported that general education students can benefit from more sophisticated instructional differentiation and classroom community strategies in co-taught classrooms, although specific measured gains in achievement are not consistently reported in the available studies. The availability of two teachers theoretically provides for more responsive teaching, smaller group instruction, and diverse instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students.

Co-teaching is linked to positive outcomes related to classroom culture, social-emotional support, and inclusive environment that is beneficial to peer relations and feelings of belonging when teams focus on student-centered approaches. These social-affective outcomes are critical and important aspects of educational quality that go beyond standardized achievement outcomes. Students in optimally co-taught classrooms experience higher levels of feelings of belonging, increased willingness to ask for help, and positive attitudes toward diversity.

Leadership Frameworks in Co-Teaching: Distributed, Instructional and Social Justice Leadership

To effectively implement co-teaching, school administrators need to synthesize several leadership models, each of which outlines different roles that, when combined, determine policy, schedules, and support for teachers. The most frequently mentioned leadership models in the literature on co-teaching are distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and social justice leadership. Each of these models has different implications for organizing co-teaching in schools.

Distributed leadership

- Distributed leadership practices involve shared decision-making and the use of various leader roles, such as principals, special education directors, and teacher leaders, working together to coordinate support for co-teaching. Instead of building decision-making power in a single administrator, distributed leadership acknowledges that knowledge and power are distributed throughout the organization. In terms of co-teaching, this approach is realized when school administrators establish co-administrator roles, peer leadership, and the development of structures for shared planning and reflection among staff members. Distributed leadership helps to eliminate bottlenecks in decision-making by distributing responsibility among multiple roles. For instance, the principal and special education director can work together to develop the master schedule, which would include common planning time for co-teaching pairs and ensure that the special education director has a manageable caseload. Teacher leaders can also coordinate professional learning communities related to co-teaching practices, sharing strategies and problem-solving approaches. By distributing leadership responsibilities, co-teaching is less likely to be vulnerable to the loss of a single leader who might disrupt the entire system. The administrators who put distributed leadership into practice for co-teaching usually set up structured ways of collaboration, such as co-administrator planning sessions, leadership roles for teachers with guaranteed time, and decision-making processes that involve various stakeholders. This helps to operationalize the philosophical belief in shared governance.

- Instructional Leadership emphasizes teaching quality, classroom practice, and professional development related to student outcomes. Instructional leaders implementing this model emphasize observation and coaching loops, align professional development to co-teaching strategies, and track the implementation of multimodal teaching. Instructional leaders place themselves at the forefront as lead learners who understand teaching practice in depth enough to offer valuable feedback. In the context of co-teaching, instructional leadership involves certain administrative moves on the part of the leader. The leader observes classrooms on a regular basis, observing co-teaching implementation, observing which models of teaching are used by the teams, and observing the effectiveness of differentiation for various learners. The leader offers feedback that helps teams progress from models of lower complexity (One Teach/One Assist) to models of higher complexity (Parallel, Station, Team Teaching) as the capacity for collaboration builds. Administrators who work together with special education leaders to co-create reflection tools and action plans operationalize distributed and instructional responsibilities to ensure co-teaching fidelity. Such tools may include co-teaching observation rubrics, planning templates that encourage multiple instructional models, or data protocols that allow for the examination of student work. By making instructional expectations clear and providing support for meeting those expectations, administrators can build teacher capacity rather than waiting for collaboration to organically develop.

- Social justice leadership views inclusion as an equity issue and co-teaching as a strategy to provide greater access to general curriculum for historically excluded students. Social justice leaders articulate a consistent inclusive vision, eliminate exclusionary practices, and employ co-teaching to provide greater access to general curriculum. Social justice leadership views disability as a part of human diversity, not a problem to be remediated in separate settings. Administrators

practicing social justice leadership clearly articulate values about inclusion and equity and consistently communicate these values in faculty meetings, policy, and resource allocation. They analyze data about student placement and outcomes with an equity perspective, asking whose students are excluded from general education and why. They critique deficit views of students with disabilities and shift the conversation to instructional improvement. Social justice leadership also entails addressing uncomfortable truths about professional culture and status hierarchies. If special educators are considered to be less expert than general educators, or if co-teaching is seen as a problem rather than a chance, leaders must take action to change these perceptions. This could mean changing assessment structures to reward collaborative efforts, giving special educators an equal voice in curriculum development, or highlighting the success of co-teaching.

Integrating Leadership Frameworks

When administrators put these frameworks into practice, they often do so in a way that integrates the different frameworks: distributed leadership provides the structural support to alleviate the pressure of single-person leadership, instructional leadership provides the content to ensure that collaboration is focused on teaching and learning, and social justice leadership provides the moral imperative to ensure that the focus on co-teaching is not abandoned even when policy priorities shift.

Distributed leadership offers the structural support to enable co-teaching, while instructional leadership provides the content to ensure that the focus of co-teaching is on teaching and learning. Social justice leadership provides the moral imperative to ensure that the focus on co-teaching is not abandoned even when policy priorities shift.

Effective leaders who integrate these frameworks exhibit the following key practices. They share equity-oriented vision for inclusion and assign implementation to multiple roles. They offer intensive instructional support through coaching and observation and develop teacher leadership. They assign resources to facilitate co-teaching and hold teams accountable for quality practice. They share consistent messages about inclusion as a value and resolve practical barriers to implementation. This integration shifts co-teaching from a solitary classroom practice to a system that is supported by leadership actions at multiple levels.

Barriers and Facilitators to Implementation: Logistics, Parity, and Administrative Support

Although there is broad recognition of the potential of co-teaching, there are often substantial obstacles to its implementation. It is important to understand these barriers and the strategies that successful leaders use to overcome them.

- Scheduling and Logistical Constraints The lack of common planning time and misaligned master schedules makes it impossible for teams to co-plan and differentiate instruction. Co-teaching involves a tremendous amount of joint planning to coordinate teaching roles, differentiate materials, and align accommodations with the objectives of instruction. When teachers are not provided with dedicated time for joint planning, they resort to less complex models (One Teach/One Assist), which involve little coordination but provide little instructional value either. Master schedule design is one of the most potent tools in the hands of the administrators. Administrators overcome the challenges of master schedule design by developing protected common planning time, aligning master schedules to consistently pair teachers, and employing co-administrator planning to work with district-level constraints. Districts that align the master schedule for co-teaching teams report increased fidelity of multimodal instruction. This requires prioritizing co-teaching in master schedule design rather than adding co-teaching as an afterthought to a completed master schedule.

Effective scheduling also considers continuity. When co-teaching pairs remain together across multiple years, they develop shared routines, deeper trust, and more sophisticated collaborative practice. Leaders who prioritize continuity in co-teaching assignments enable teams to move beyond logistical coordination toward genuine pedagogical partnership.

- Role Parity and Status Hierarchies Unequal status, unclear responsibilities, and role ambiguity undermine co-teaching effectiveness. In many schools, special educators are implicitly or explicitly positioned as assistants to general educators, responsible for managing behavior and providing accommodations but excluded from content instruction and curricular decisions. This status hierarchy reflects broader professional cultures that privilege content expertise over pedagogical expertise and general education credentials over special education credentials. Leaders address parity challenges by developing role agreements, supporting modeling of equitable instruction in teacher education, and using facilitated negotiation protocols so teams document shared responsibilities and decision rules. These agreements make explicit what might otherwise remain implicit: who leads which parts of instruction, how grading responsibilities are divided, how conflicts are resolved, and how both teachers' expertise is leveraged. Administrators can reinforce parity by recognizing co-teaching in evaluation and workload decisions, ensuring that both teachers receive credit for collaborative work and that special educators' contributions to content instruction are acknowledged.

Parity also requires attention to physical and symbolic dimensions of classroom practice. Leaders can observe whether both teachers have equivalent access to instructional materials, whether both are introduced to students as co-teachers rather than teacher and assistant, and whether classroom space is arranged to support both teachers' movement and visibility. These seemingly minor details communicate powerful messages about status and authority.

- Administrative Support and Systemic Coherence Fragmented or low-priority inclusion policies leave co-teaching without sustained resources or coherent leadership. When inclusion is treated as a special education initiative rather than a whole-school commitment, co-teaching becomes marginalized and vulnerable to resource cuts or policy shifts. Inconsistent administrative support manifests in multiple ways:

failure to protect planning time when scheduling conflicts arise, inadequate professional development, lack of follow-through on agreed-upon structures, and absence of clear expectations for co-teaching quality. Leaders overcome these barriers by adopting a unified inclusion philosophy explicitly communicated across the school, establishing co-administrator partnerships (e.g., special education director working closely with principals), and implementing action plans and reflection tools to monitor and sustain co-teaching practice. Distributed leadership reduces single-person bottlenecks and embeds responsibility in multiple roles. When inclusion is positioned as a core instructional priority rather than a compliance requirement, it receives the sustained attention and resources necessary for effective implementation.

Systemic coherence also requires aligning co-teaching with other school initiatives. When co-teaching is integrated with professional learning communities, instructional coaching, curriculum development, and school improvement planning, it becomes embedded in the school's operational fabric rather than existing as an isolated program. Leaders create this coherence by consistently connecting co-teaching to broader instructional goals and ensuring that resources and supports are aligned across initiatives.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Effective pre-service and job-embedded professional development are repeatedly identified as essential to successful co-teaching. Programs that model co-teaching, provide authentic field placements, and embed coaching show the most promising reported outcomes. Research and program descriptions emphasize modeling, practice in real classrooms, negotiation of roles, and ongoing reflective coaching as core elements.

- Pre-Service Teacher Preparation Teacher preparation programs have a tremendous influence on how future teachers think about collaboration, but many programs still offer general and special educators in separate tracks with very little interaction. This can lead to a siloed professional identity that, in the long run, makes collaboration in schools even harder. One way to deal with this issue is to demonstrate co-teaching in the university courses themselves. When faculty members co-teach methods or content courses, they provide teacher candidates with a real-life example of what collaboration looks like how collaborators build trust, negotiate roles, plan lessons, and manage the classroom. This is especially true when faculty members reflect on their own collaborative process, talking about how they deal with conflicts, divide responsibilities, and leverage each other's strengths. Another way to provide teacher candidates with a real-life example of collaboration is to put them in well-functioning co-taught classrooms for field experiences. These placements must be thoughtfully chosen so candidates see effective collaboration rather than dysfunctional models, and mentor teachers should be supported in explaining and modeling their collaborative decision-making. Finally, providing explicit instruction on parity, communication, and negotiation skills before clinical placements equips candidates to handle the interpersonal side of co-teaching with confidence. Through communication protocols, negotiation strategies, and case-based practice of challenging conversations, teacher candidates can develop the skills and mindset needed to collaborate effectively long before they enter their own classrooms.

- Job-Embedded Professional Development Even when teachers graduate from strong preparation programs, they still need continuous, meaningful support to build and sustain effective co-teaching practices. Professional development works best when it is embedded in teachers' everyday work rather than delivered through isolated, one-time workshops. Co-teaching Professional Development (CoPD) models are especially powerful because they pair experienced special and general educators to model effective collaboration, engage in reflection cycles, and demonstrate strategies directly in classrooms. In this approach, skilled co-teachers act as coaches, working alongside developing teams, offering real-time feedback, and tailoring guidance to the specific classroom context much like an apprenticeship where learning happens through guided practice. In addition, when administrators actively support co-teaching through structured observation, feedback, and follow-up coaching cycles, they signal that collaboration is a genuine instructional priority. Rather than offering vague advice to "work better together," effective coaching focuses on concrete, observable practices such as how teachers shift between instructional models or differentiate questioning techniques. Equally important is providing protected, sustained common planning time during the regular workday. When schools intentionally safeguard this time from interruptions, co-teaching pairs can engage in the deep planning, coordination, and reflection necessary for truly collaborative and inclusive instruction.

- Program Elements Associated with Success Successful co-teaching professional development programs tend to share a few important features. One of the most significant is a strong emphasis on shared responsibility, where both teachers see themselves as equally accountable for the learning of all students rather than informally dividing the class into "your students" and "my students." This shared ownership encourages more cohesive planning, teaching, and assessment practices. Effective programs also include reflection and documentation tools that are co-created by administrators, coaches, and teachers. These may take the form of planning templates, observation checklists, or student progress measures that help teams make their collaborative practices visible and track growth over time. Because these tools are developed together, they are better suited to the school's context and foster a sense of teacher ownership and commitment. Evidence from program descriptions and case studies consistently shows that when training and coaching are thoughtfully aligned with the real demands of co-teaching, teachers feel more prepared and classrooms function more smoothly. Across these successful models, the common thread is ongoing, practice-based learning that connects strong collaboration directly to improved student outcomes.

Discussion and Future Directions

- Translating Leadership Actions into Classroom Success The evidence reviewed in this paper makes it clear that for co-teaching to truly succeed, administrators must move beyond simply expressing support for inclusion and instead take deliberate, practical steps that make collaboration possible. Effective leadership influences classroom success in several interconnected ways. To begin with, structural supports especially thoughtful scheduling and protected common planning time create the basic conditions teachers need to build strong collaborative relationships and coordinate instruction effectively. When leaders intentionally design the master schedule to prioritize co-teaching and safeguard shared planning time, they provide the foundation for meaningful teamwork; however, structure alone does not guarantee quality. In addition, instructional leadership that focuses specifically on co-teaching practices helps teachers grow in their ability to use different instructional models thoughtfully and responsively. Through targeted observations, constructive feedback, modeling, and ongoing coaching not just one-time workshops administrators can help teams move beyond routine patterns toward more intentional collaboration. Equally important is a commitment to social justice leadership, where administrators consistently promote inclusive values, address exclusionary practices, and frame co-teaching as an equity-driven responsibility. This cultural commitment sustains teachers' motivation, especially when challenges arise, and keeps the focus on improving access and outcomes for students with disabilities. Ultimately, these elements work best together: structural supports without instructional guidance may result in co-teaching in name only, coaching without time leads to frustration, and equity rhetoric without concrete action feels hollow. Strong leadership weaves all three dimensions into a coherent system that genuinely supports high-quality co-teaching.
- Addressing Evidence Gaps although research on co-teaching has expanded considerably, important gaps still remain. One major concern is the limited availability of rigorous quantitative evidence linking co-teaching directly to student achievement outcomes. There is a clear need for well-designed quasi-experimental and experimental studies that can separate the specific effects of co-teaching from other influencing factors and examine its impact across diverse school contexts and student populations. Such research should rely on multiple measures of success not only standardized test scores, but also broader indicators that reflect the full range of academic and social benefits co-teaching may offer. In addition, more attention must be given to the long-term sustainability of co-teaching initiatives. Many existing studies focus on early implementation phases or short-term grant-funded projects, yet fewer track schools over several years to understand how co-teaching evolves, what supports its continuity, and how leadership changes influence its effectiveness. Longitudinal research could shed light on how collaborative practices mature over time and which organizational conditions help maintain high-quality implementation. Further, there is a need for deeper exploration of co-teaching in secondary schools and within specific subject areas, such as high school mathematics, science, or English language arts, where specialized content knowledge may shape how collaboration unfolds. Finally, student perspectives deserve much greater attention. While some studies include student feedback, relatively few place student voice at the center of inquiry. Students can provide valuable insights into how co-teaching influences their learning, engagement, sense of belonging, and overall academic experience, making their perspectives essential for a fuller understanding of its impact.
- Implications for Policy and Practice The findings synthesized in this paper have several implications for policy and practice. At the policy level, state and district leaders should establish clear expectations for co-teaching as a primary service delivery model for inclusive education, accompanied by resources and accountability mechanisms. Policies should address scheduling, caseload limits, planning time, and professional development as essential infrastructure for co-teaching rather than optional enhancements.

Teacher preparation programs should integrate co-teaching throughout their curricula, preparing both general and special educators for collaborative practice from the beginning of their professional training. This integration should include coursework, modeled practice by faculty, and clinical placements in high-quality co-taught classrooms.

School and district leaders should adopt comprehensive frameworks that integrate distributed, instructional, and social justice leadership approaches. This integration requires moving beyond single-champion models toward distributed responsibility, investing in instructional coaching focused on collaborative practice, and consistently articulating and enacting inclusive values.

Professional organizations and educational leadership preparation programs should incorporate co-teaching leadership into their standards and curricula. Aspiring administrators need explicit preparation in the organizational, instructional, and cultural dimensions of supporting collaborative inclusive practice.

- **Future Research Directions** Future research needs to move in several meaningful directions to strengthen what we know about effective leadership for co-teaching. Comparative studies that examine different leadership models and their impact on co-teaching quality and student outcomes would help clarify which approaches work best—and under what conditions. It is equally important to explore how leadership practices interact with contextual factors such as school size, available resources, and community characteristics, since co-teaching does not operate in a vacuum. Researchers should also take a developmental perspective by studying how co-teaching expertise grows over time, identifying the kinds of support teachers need at different stages of their collaborative journey. Such insights could lead to more targeted and responsive professional development and coaching. In addition, there is a need to understand how co-teaching can be scaled from isolated classrooms or individual schools to district-wide implementation, offering system-level leaders practical guidance on sustaining quality while expanding reach. Finally, future studies

should examine co-teaching through an intersectional lens, considering how disability intersects with race, language, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of identity. This line of inquiry could deepen our understanding of whether and how co-teaching advances broader equity goals and help shape more culturally responsive and inclusive collaborative practices.

Conclusion

Co-teaching holds great promise for inclusive education because it allows students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers in general education classrooms while still receiving the specialized support they need. Yet simply assigning two teachers to the same classroom is not enough. For co-teaching to truly work, it requires thoughtful leadership that blends distributed, instructional, and social justice perspectives to build supportive structures, strengthen teacher capacity, and nurture a culture of inclusion. The research reviewed in this paper shows that administrators can turn inclusive ideals into meaningful classroom practice through deliberate and coordinated actions such as prioritizing co-teaching when creating the master schedule, safeguarding common planning time, offering focused instructional coaching, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and consistently reinforcing inclusive values. These efforts directly address common barriers like scheduling conflicts, unequal role expectations, and inconsistent institutional support. Strong teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are equally important. Pre-service programs that model collaboration, provide authentic clinical experiences, and explicitly teach communication and negotiation skills help future teachers enter the profession ready to collaborate. Meanwhile, job-embedded professional development grounded in coaching, modeling, and sustained support enables practicing teachers to deepen and refine their co-teaching practice over time. Although more rigorous research is still needed, particularly around long-term sustainability and measurable student achievement outcomes, existing evidence offers valuable direction for leaders committed to equity. Co-teaching is not a cure-all, and its success depends heavily on the quality of implementation and the context in which it occurs. However, when supported by integrated leadership and a sustained organizational commitment to inclusion, co-teaching can meaningfully improve both access to and the quality of education for diverse learners. Moving forward, progress will require continued research, supportive policy reforms, leadership development, and, above all, a steadfast belief that every student regardless of disability deserves high-quality learning opportunities in inclusive settings.

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