

This Doesn't Look Familiar!

A Supervisor's Guide for Observing Co-Teachers

GLORIA LODATO WILSON



Among the challenges of delivering services to students with disabilities via a co-teaching model (the pairing of special and general education teachers in a general education classroom) is the dilemma of how to observe teachers in such a setting. Collaboration between a university and a large school district with special and general education supervisors investigated how the two disciplines looked at a co-taught lesson at the secondary level. Then, through a series of interactive workshops, special and general education supervisors developed a common lens for viewing a co-taught lesson, resulting in a guided format for observing co-teachers.

The two teachers looked at each other in disbelief. One was a tenured secondary English teacher who had taught for 6 years in this large middle-class, suburban high school. The other was a first year special education teacher who recently received her master's degree. They had been co-teaching a ninth-grade English class for 4 months, and although the beginning weeks were a bit overwhelming, they were rather proud of their cooperative and respectful relationship. They had been co-planning, co-grading, and co-teaching, and they were certain the class would go well. The students responded to the co-teachers' combined efforts, and both social and academic progress was noted for all students in the class.

The teachers were looking at their observation reports. The special education and English chairpersons had decided to observe the co-teaching class at the same time. The special education teacher read her report: It was glowing. Her supervisor recognized the adaptations that

were made in the materials, saw that she worked with individual students, observed her contributions to the teaching of the mini-lesson, noted the parity she enjoyed with her co-teacher, and acknowledged the acceptance and respect of her students.

The general education teacher held back tears as she read her write-up. How could this be? She had never received an unsatisfactory observation. She prided herself on her competency in the classroom, and her supervisors repeatedly recognized her skills as a teacher. She read the comments. Her chairperson thought there hadn't been enough time spent developing the content of the lesson and that the student group work detracted from a more formal delivery of content. The chair also felt the general education teacher had relinquished too much of her content specialist role to the special education teacher and noted there was too much interaction between the co-teachers.

The practice of delivering special education services to students through *co-teaching*—the pairing of general and special education teachers in general education classes—is becoming increasingly popular in the United States. As this practice increases, so does our understanding of its complexities. Among the issues developing is the dilemma of supervision and observation of co-teachers. Although there is an ever-expanding literature base on the practice of co-teaching (e.g., Murawski & Swanson, 2001) and the beginnings of a body of outcome or efficacy research (e.g., Gable, Mostert, & Tonelon, 2004), there are virtually no guidelines or research studies addressing supervision of collaborative efforts from either the special or general education vantage point.

Co-teachers have increasing opportunities for collaborative training that usually investigates the relationships and roles of each teacher in creating access to the general curriculum as well as various models of co-teaching, instructional methods, and material adaptations. Historically, though, general education supervisors have had little guidance in observing special education teachers (Breton & Donaldson, 1991; Schutz & Zeph, 1990–1991), and both general and special education supervisors may not have access to specific training in the intricacies of observing a co-taught lesson. As the vignette illustrates, depending on the orientation of the supervisor, the same co-taught lesson could be viewed in diametrically opposing ways. The vignette exemplifies the importance of raising administrator awareness to the dynamics of a co-taught lesson.

A recent survey (Wilson & Pace, 2002) on co-taught inclusion programs revealed that 84% of directors of special education rated their co-teaching inclusion programs as *superior* to *very good*, which raises significant questions:

1. How do special education administrators actually know their programs are superior or very good?
2. Do special and general education administrators use similar criteria when evaluating co-taught lessons?
3. How might special and general education administrators collaborate and generate shared evaluation criteria when rating their co-taught inclusion programs?

This article describes a process used to initially investigate these important questions and to develop a reflective observation guide for supervisors of both special and general educators in co-taught classes.

The Need for a Co-Teaching Observation Tool

A collaborative project among a local university and school district, district central and building administration, and special and general education supervisors began in the fall of the school year during which the district's

gradual emersion into co-taught classes had reached its critical mass. Three high schools, 2 middle schools, 38 special education teachers, 65 general education teachers, and 93 classes were involved in the co-taught collaborative program. As the program grew, conversations and questions about supervision and observation began to emerge. Specifically, teachers began to express puzzlement over how they were being observed. Both special and general education teachers wanted guidance about how and by whom they were to be observed. Questions began circling about various aspects of supervision. For example, were the co-teachers to be treated as one and receive a single observation report? Could the special education supervisor comment on the general educator's performance, even if the focus of the observation was the special educator? Should the general and special education supervisors observe the same lesson? Should they write one observation? Are there different criteria of performance for the general and special education teachers? As these and other questions were discussed, one foundational or fundamental question emerged: What criteria should be used to judge teacher performance in a co-taught class or program?

To address this critical question, the assistant superintendent of curriculum planned a series of monthly meetings comprised of a consultant from the local university who had been working with the co-teachers for 3 years, the director of special education and pupil personnel services, assistant principals from two middle schools and three high schools, and department chairs from each school. A total of 23 supervisory personnel were involved in the meetings. The monthly meetings were structured by the consultant to begin a "cycle of inquiry" (Silva & Dana, 2001, p. 316) so all stakeholders could begin to collaboratively address co-teaching observations and examine cooperative teaching teams (Salend, Gordon, & Lopez-Vona, 2002).

Establishing Criteria for Judging a Co-Taught Class or Program

The year-long process involved the facilitation of open and frank discussions concerning the program and the unique dimensions of a co-taught program. The road to the development and use of the co-teaching observation tool can be broken into four phases. Each phase addressed an essential question:

- Phase 1: What makes a good lesson?
- Phase 2: Does the evaluation of a co-taught lesson require a unique perspective?
- Phase 3: What are the essential components needed in an observation tool for co-taught lessons?
- Phase 4: How useful is the observation tool that was developed?

Phase 1: What Makes a Good Lesson?

We first asked the group to collaborate in generating an answer to the question, What makes a good lesson? In other words, when observing a teacher, what do you look for during a lesson? The following is the composite of answers generated:

- Lessons are student-centered
- Recognition of diverse learning styles of students
- Questions tap high-order thinking
- Engagement of students and evidence that students are on task
- Use of materials that are useful and available
- Attention to motivation
- Awareness of transitions
- Aims that are open-ended
- Summation at the middle and end of the lesson
- Activities that apply the information
- Connections made to students' experiences
- Positive student-teacher relationships and interactions
- Appropriate use of technology
- Adherence to state standards
- Reinforcement of previously learned and new material

Stakeholders were in consensus that these were necessary for a good lesson and that the list represented what both special and general education supervisors generally looked for when observing a teacher.

As a second part of Phase 1, the group generated an answer to the question, What is needed to make a good co-taught lesson? All agreed that everything on the list was important. Supervisors felt that one additional attribute had to be added: positive teacher-teacher relationships.

Phase 2: Does the Evaluation of a Co-Taught Class Require a Unique Perspective?

During Phase 2, stakeholders observed two videotaped co-taught lessons. One was a 10th-grade biology lesson co-taught by a veteran special education teacher who was also certified in biology and a first-year general education biology teacher. The second lesson was a ninth-grade English class taught by a special educator and general education teacher who had been co-teaching for 4 years.

The group viewed the videotapes, and the supervisors observed and commented. The supervisors discussed the roles of the four teachers, the strategies used to assist learning, and the need to know whether or not the students were learning the material. What became increasingly obvious was that the focus of the observations shifted from the presentation and content concerns of observing individually taught classes. Three themes emerged that highlighted the subtle and blatant differences between singly-taught and co-taught classes:

- Roles of the teachers
- Instructional strategies
- Assessment processes

Phase 3: What Are the Essential Components Needed in an Observation Tool for Co-Taught Lessons?

The supervisors thought it would be helpful to develop an instrument to guide their observations. The co-teaching observation guide (see Figure 1) was developed to assist the group in reaching consensus on the essential components in observing a co-taught lesson. Because it is widely accepted that co-teaching is a process and that co-teachers

How can I determine if a co-taught collaborative inclusion class is being taught as effectively as possible?

Questions I should be asking myself as I observe . . .

I. The Basics: Meaningful Roles for Each Teacher

1. Can the role of each teacher be defined at any given point in the lesson?
2. Is each role meaningful? Does each role enhance the learning process?
3. Do the teachers vary their roles during the course of the lesson?
4. Is each teacher well suited to the role(s) he or she is assuming?
5. Are both teachers comfortable with process AND content?
6. Is the special education teacher working with all students?

II. Strategies to Promote Success for ALL Students

1. What evidence is there that teachers engaged in co-planning the lesson?
2. Are the teachers focusing on process as well as content? Are they reinforcing important skills?
3. Are directions clear?
4. What strategies/modifications are being employed to assist struggling students?
5. What adaptations were made to materials in order to help struggling students complete tasks?
6. What strategies are being used to actively engage students?
7. How are students being grouped? Does it fit the task? Is it purposeful?
8. What reinforcement strategies are being employed?

III. Evidence of Success

1. Are struggling students answering/asking questions?
2. Are students engaged in meaningful work throughout the period?
3. How are teachers assessing the learning of each student?
4. What evidence is there that all students have been appropriately challenged?

Figure 1. The co-teaching observation guide.

continue to develop their skills as they work together through the years (Gately & Gately, 2001), the instrument is reflective in nature and based on a series of questions, grouped into the three following sections addressing the themes developed by the group discussions:

Theme 1. The Basics: Meaningful Roles for Each Teacher.

The concentration in this first section is on the basic co-teacher roles. Although not specifically delineated, the supervisor is to look at the elemental roles of co-teachers, such as grazing, tag-team teaching, teaching-on-purpose, and various roles dependent on types of groupings (Vaughn, Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997). Questions in this section lead the observer to target not only content but process, as well as the relationship each co-teacher has with all students.

Theme 2. Strategies to Promote Success for All Students.

The attention to how strategies are incorporated into a lesson characterizes the second section of the guide. The supervisors recognized that for co-teaching to be successful, evidence of co-planning needed to be easily seen through the strategies and modifications integrated throughout the lesson. In addition, we agreed with Page (2003) who stated, "An overarching goal of . . . supervision . . . is to help teachers develop practices that increase the achievement of all students" (p. 161).

Theme 3. Evidence of Success. Undeniably the most important section concentrates on the actual success of the students enrolled in the co-taught classes. The purpose of a co-taught class is to give students the opportunity to succeed in an inclusive setting; therefore, a continuous and conscious effort to assess student achievement is essential. Reflective questions make it clear that assessment must be an ongoing and conspicuous part of each lesson.

Phase 4: How Useful Is the Tool?

Discussions concerning the instrument's use ensued with the supervisors. The group believed that although the three areas of the guide were critical, only specific questions in each area might actually be used during an observation to avoid overwhelming the supervisor and the teachers. They stressed the importance of the preobservation conference and the need for a mutual decision made by the supervisor and the teacher as to what questions in each area would be used. Similarly, discussions in the postlesson debriefing would lead to the choice of questions for future observations.

Although the supervisors wanted a streamlined guide, they also needed clarification of the elements contained within the questions. For instance, they asked for a delineation of possible teacher roles, types of strategies that could be used, examples of modifications for materials, and types of assessments that could be incorporated eas-

ily within daily lessons. We are, therefore, working on a companion guide to the observation guide to clarify the reflective questions in a very clear and concrete manner.

We have received very positive feedback on the preliminary use of the observation guide. Supervisors felt more informed and empowered because they developed the guide over a period of time during which their awareness of the intricacies of co-teaching was expanded. The supervisors also noted that the guide helped them focus on essential components of co-teaching when they were observing and helped structure the writing of their observation reports. In addition, sharing the guide with the co-teachers in the preobservation meeting fostered a positive and trusting relationship between the supervisors and the co-teachers because expectations were clearly defined.

Conclusion

The current trend toward teaching students with special needs in inclusive, co-taught settings necessitated the development of a useful observation guide. The co-teaching observation guide gives some uniformity and fairness to the observations of co-teachers, thus avoiding the contradictory messages sent to the teachers, such as those in our opening vignette. In addition, the guide assists supervisors who typically rate teachers primarily on lesson procedures and content and who are unfamiliar with both the co-teaching model and inclusive settings.

We anticipate that our continuing collaborative efforts to refine the guide for supervisors will also have positive effects on teaching and the teachers themselves (Ebmeier, 2003). The guide, when shared with teachers, can indirectly influence actual practices within the classroom when teachers are not being observed and potentially increase teacher feelings of efficacy (Coladarsi & Breton, 1997). In addition, the guide's clarity about the three essential elements (i.e., roles, strategies, assessment) of a co-taught class will guide teachers on what the district values.

Moreover, the guide provides a springboard for ongoing conversations concerning the evolution of co-teaching practices for school districts committed to the success of students in inclusive settings; further, it will assist in efforts to determine how co-teaching effectively addresses the students' needs. The instrument is considered a work in progress. All of the co-teachers are being asked for their input, and supervisors are further field-testing the usefulness of the questions in guiding their observations.

We are encouraged by the success of the collaborative process used to develop the co-teaching observation guide and by the initial feedback from both supervisors and teachers, but we realize that we limited ourselves to addressing the fundamental question: What criteria should be used to judge teacher performance in a co-taught class or program? There were additional questions posed by

the group that require further investigation: Were the co-teachers to be treated as “one” and receive a single observation report? Could the special education supervisor comment on the general educator’s performance, even if the focus of the observation was the special educator? Should the general education supervisor and the special education supervisor observe the same lesson? Should they write one observation? The district involved in this significant collaboration effort intends to continue discussions to address these important questions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gloria Lodato Wilson, PhD, is an assistant professor of special education at Hofstra University’s School of Education and Allied Human Services. Her current research interests include the teaching and supervising of co-taught classes, student competency, and the effects of high-stakes testing on students with learning disabilities. Address: Gloria Lodato Wilson, Department of Special Education, School of Education and Allied Human Services, 230 Hagedorn Hall, 119 Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549-1190; e-mail: gloria.wilson@hofstra.edu

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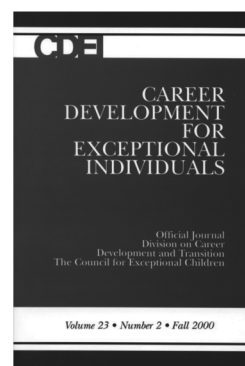
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