EXPLORING HOW CO-TEACHER COLLABORATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH
CLASSROOM FIT

A Capstone Report

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APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE REPORT

This capstone report, exploring the association between co-teacher collaboration and classroom fit, has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore a problem of practice in one school division where most general education and special education co-teaching teams dissolved from one school year to the next. Utilizing a multiple case study design, nine special education teachers at the school division's three traditional high schools were interviewed to answer the following research questions: 1. What roles do high school special education teachers report that they currently play in planning, instruction, and assessment in co-taught classrooms? 2. What factors do teachers report impact collaboration between special education teachers and their general education co-teachers? 3. Is there an association between the level of collaboration between high school special education teachers and their general education co-teachers and the special education teachers' desire to extend a co-teaching partnership? Interviews were recorded and then transcribed to facilitate analysis. Findings were interpreted through the lens of a Conceptual Framework entitled Co-Teacher Classroom Fit, which is based on Person-Organization Fit research. After analysis, the research revealed the following conclusions: 1. Special educators play a variety of roles in the classroom; 2. A myriad of factors impact collaboration including co-teacher communication and special educator subject matter confidence; 3. Co-teachers exhibiting large amounts of parity in the classroom and shared decision-making when planning, instructing, and assessing desire partnership retention; 4. Co-teachers without high levels of parity and shared decision-making when planning, instructing, and assessing desire partnership retention if special educators perceive sufficient collaborative growth occurred during the school year.

Keywords: *Co-teaching, collaboration, special education*

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Chapter One: Introduction and Problem of Practice

One of the many challenges for professionals working during the global COVID-19 pandemic is the loss of regular face-to-face interactions. While in-person interactions are not required for collaboration, a digital wall may complicate communication efforts and serve as a potential barrier to true collaboration (Vapalahti & Marttunen, 2020). True collaboration occurs when co-equal partners complete joint work with shared decision-making and realize the professional benefits derived from working together (Little, 1990).

In school settings, two individuals who need to collaborate regularly are general and special education co-teachers (Friend & Cook, 1990). These professionals share a classroom and responsibility for educating the students in it. Research shows that when co-teachers are collaborating, students feel they are receiving stronger instruction (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020) and teachers have a positive perception of sharing the classroom with a colleague (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020; Stefanidis et al., 2018). Research on collaboration demonstrates that true teacher collaboration is the result of co-equal decision-making and shared responsibility for the classroom (Friend & Cook, 1990; Little, 1990). Additionally, research into Person-Organization Fit (PO Fit) provides evidence that educator collaboration with one another and shared pedagogical values with school colleagues result in teachers desiring to retain their job placements (Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). Thus, for schools to retain high quality staff members working in co-taught classrooms, it is important to explore the dynamics of co-teaching with a focus on collaboration.

This chapter begins with a brief history of special education and the introduction of co-teaching as an oft-utilized service delivery model for students with disabilities. By service delivery model, I am referring to the school-based supports offered to students with disabilities enabling access to the general curriculum (Friend, 2008). The historical overview describes how and why students with disabilities were denied access to a general education in the United States for a good portion of the twentieth century and only recently obtained legal protections to limit their segregation within schools from non-disabled peers. The historical overview also discusses when co-teaching was introduced within US schools as a service to support the efforts of students with disabilities to learn in the same classroom as their non-disabled peers.

After providing the historical overview, I introduce my problem of practice. The problem of practice focuses on the lack of consistent co-teaching teams within Key Public Schools (KPS) from one school year to the next. (To protect institutional and individual identities, pseudonyms are used when referring to the school division, schools where research occurred within the division, and research participants. Additionally, citations which may compromise participant confidentiality are altered to incorporate pseudonyms and/or remove identifying information including web addresses.) My research questions help address this problem by inquiring whether classroom level interactions between co-teachers help explain this lack of consistency.

As a general education social studies teacher working at Alpha High School (AHS) in KPS, I collaborate regularly with various school stakeholders including special education teachers, administrators, and parents to support student learning. When collaborating, I work with colleagues with whom I have long-established relationships

and colleagues with whom I have no prior working relationship. Working with new colleagues often requires additional time and effort because we had no prior experiences informing our interactions.

During the pandemic and as I considered the problem of practice for this research study, I began thinking about the regularity with which educators need to establish new relationships to support student learning. Due to my experience co-teaching and my dual certification in social studies and special education, I became interested in how often co-teachers need to establish new partnerships.

Research demonstrates that the lack of co-teacher team consistency is a problem outside of KPS resulting in anxiety and extra work for teachers (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009). Additionally, research shows that professional struggles, including isolation from colleagues, lead to special educators leaving their jobs at higher rates than general education teachers (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Professional relationships take time to develop (Gately & Gately, 2001) and building strong ties with colleagues is typically more challenging for special educators than general educators (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Since KPS' Strategic Plan shows the school division is committed to retaining a high-quality staff (Key Public Schools, 2018), the break-up of established co-teacher partnerships is a problem of practice for KPS.

When considering the problem of practice, I utilized research and my personal experience to start exploring potential reasons for co-teacher team dissolution within KPS. Not surprisingly, there are a myriad of classroom factors influencing co-teachers' satisfaction with their professional relationships, but the research suggests, one of the

greatest factors is the quality of collaboration between co-teachers (Cook & Friend, 1990). As such, I am exploring ways co-teachers collaborate in KPS high schools and whether collaboration influences special education teachers' desire to continue working with their general education colleagues. The intent of this exploratory research is to allow KPS stakeholders to better support co-teacher collaboration and reduce the dissolution of co-teacher partnerships.

Brief History of Special Education and the Need for New Service Delivery Models

Friend (2008) defines special education as "the vehicle through which children who have disabilities are guaranteed to receive within the public education system an education specifically designed to help them reach their learning potential" (p. 4). Over the past 150 years, special education has gained more recognition and legal support as a component of traditional schools, but practitioners still find themselves fighting recurring battles to ensure students with disabilities receive appropriate services and accommodations (Friend, 2008; Handler, 2007; Spalding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998).

Prior to the 1950s, students with special needs were marginalized in education and had their abilities questioned much like women and people of color (Yell et al., 1998). Students with disabilities were at best viewed as deficient and at worst were subjected to heinous acts like institutionalization (Handler, 2007; Spalding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998) or sterilization (Spalding & Pratt, 2015). Educationally, students with disabilities were typically taught in separate isolated schools or not provided with public education in violation of compulsory education laws (Spalding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998). It is estimated that five million children with disabilities did not attend school in 1940 (Handler, 2007), which translates into 88 percent of students with disabilities at the

time not receiving services (McLeskey & Landers, 2006). Students with disabilities in

public school rarely received the same level of instruction as their non-disabled peers

(Spalding & Pratt, 2015) and were not adequately served in the regular education system

(Stainback et al., 1985).

The legal basis for shifts in special education began with court decisions and

advocacy stemming from the Civil Rights movement (Spalding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al.,

1998). The Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) found that

separate institutions based on race were inherently unequal and in violation of the

fourteenth amendment's equal protection clause. The Brown case's decision held that if a

state provides education to certain students, it must provide education to all students. In

the ruling, Chief Justice Warren argued that,

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local
>
> governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for
>
> education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our
>
> democratic society. . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably
>
> be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education… in
>
> the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place.
>
> Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. (Justia, n.d., p. 493)

Separate schools based on race make equitable schooling impossible. The Brown ruling

made clear that educating students separately based on race is inherently unequal and

leads to minority students' feelings of inferiority. Thus, the Brown ruling began decades-

long attempts by the federal government to rectify these injustices by integrating public

schools and improving the quality of education for all students; however, lack of political

will lessened the success of these efforts and has led to continued de facto segregation in

US schools today (Rothstein & Santow, 2012).

Despite uneven success in implementing racial desegregation (Rothstein &

Santow, 2012), the Brown ruling galvanized advocates for special education who found

similar educational injustices for students with disabilities (Spalding & Pratt, 2015; Yell

et al., 1998). From a legal perspective, victories were achieved in Pennsylvania

Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

(1972) and Mills v. Board of Education (1972) (Friend, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). Both

cases led to students with disabilities gaining access to free public education.

Additionally, advocates won policy changes including Title VI of the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which created federal grants for students with

disabilities, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which required all

institutions receiving federal funds to make modifications or accommodations to avoid

exclusion of individuals with disabilities; however, arguably the most important piece of

legislation was an amendment to ESEA called P.L. 94-142 (Yell et al., 1998). This law,

called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, created legislative guidance

based on the PARC and Mills rulings by requiring states receiving federal funds to

provide "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) for students with disabilities from

the age of 3 to 21 (Henley et al., 2009). The reauthorizations of P.L. 94-142 in 1997 and

2004 led to a name change: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Currently, the law requires schools to help students access FAPE by providing education

in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Friend, 2008). This requirement has led to

schools making efforts to end the seclusion of students with special needs and start

educating these students in general education classes (Handler, 2007; US Department of Education, 2011; US Department of Education, 2019).

While the new laws introduced in the 1970s and 1980s increased opportunities for students with disabilities to receive a more inclusive education, it was the legal advances in the early part of the 21st century that placed mandates on state governments to ensure a more inclusive education was realized (Pugach et al., 2011). The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 tied the academic performance of students with disabilities to funding and legally required schools to educate as many students as possible in the general education setting. These two acts accelerated the inclusion movement by creating tangible penalties for failing to provide a high-quality education for students with disabilities in the LRE (Pugach et al., 2011). At this time, high stakes standardized testing became a common way for monitoring student progress (Friend, 2008).

The impact of the shift in policy is clear when analyzing data from the US Department of Education (Handler, 2007; Will, 1986; US Department of Education, 2011; US Department of Education, 2019). While in the mid-1980s roughly 4.1 million students were eligible for special education services, many were served in separate classes with over a quarter of those students spending more than 60 percent of their day in segregated classrooms (Handler, 2007). As of 2017, over 6.1 million students are provided special education services and 95 percent spend a portion of their day in the general education setting (US Department of Education, 2019). In fact, most students with disabilities spend most of their day in the general education setting with 63.5 percent of students with disabilities spending more than 80 percent of their day in general

education classrooms, 18.1 percent spending between 79 and 40 percent in general

education classrooms, 13.3 percent spending less than 40 percent, and only 5.1 percent

educated in other environments. As shown in Table 1, a consistent change in the past 30

years is the percentage of the day that students with disabilities spend in the general

education setting (US Department of Education, 2011; US Department of Education,

2019). For instance, in 2000 only 46.5 percent of students with disabilities spent 80

percent of their day in the general education setting (US Department of Education, 2011).

The percentage of students with disabilities spending 80 percent of their day in the

general education setting increased to 53.7 percent by 2006 (US Department of

Education, 2011) and then to 63.5 percent by 2017 (US Department of Education, 2019).

Additionally, the percentage of students who spend under forty percent of their day in the

general education setting is 18.6 percent as of 2017.

Table 1

Percentage of students with disabilities spending 80% of their day in a general education classroom

Year	Percentage of students with disabilities spending at least 80% of the day in the general education setting
1985	>25%
2000	46.5%
2006	53.7%
2017	63.5%

The aforementioned data illustrate shifts in how US public schools are educating

students with disabilities. There is a movement away from segregating students with

disabilities and an increasing push to serve students with special needs in the general

education setting. Starting in the 1980s, special education research began to focus on how to best serve students with disabilities in an inclusive setting (Pugach et al., 2011; Pugach & Winn, 2011).

Development of Co-teaching as a Service Delivery Model

Friend et al. (2010) define coteaching as the

partnering of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs, in a general education setting and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs (p. 11).

This partnering requires the teachers to collaborate by co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing students under their charge (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). A collaborative co-teaching model is relatively new to western education, only since the 1980s has it been explored as a method for providing services to students with disabilities (Friend et al., 1993).

An earlier form of collaborative teaching in the US is called team teaching (Friend et al., 1993). In the 1950s, team teaching was introduced as a method of having general education teachers plan collectively for large-group presentations for students. The initial goal of team teaching was to create interdisciplinary and individualized instruction while simultaneously reducing the planning burden on individual teachers and addressing the administrative issues related to teacher shortages. By the 1980s, team teaching was largely employed in middle school and looked different than its first incarnation with team teachers planning together but instructing separately. While this is

a different collaborative model than co-teaching in special education, the collaborative

element of team teaching helped inform special education reformers in the 1980s. In fact,

co-teaching was developed as a term to distinguish it from team teaching (Friend et al.,

1993). The special education reformers of the 1980s argued that increased collaboration

between general and special educators coupled with a smaller student-to-teacher ratio

was important for supporting students with special needs in the general education

classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995).

      Also during the 1980s, the federal government started to monitor and advocate for

more inclusive education. In 1986, Madeleine Will, the Assistant Secretary of Education

for the Office of Special Education said, "Although well-intentioned, this so-called "pull-

out" approach to the educational difficulties of students with learning problems has failed

in many instances to meet the educational needs of [students with disabilities]" (p. 412).

While Will stopped short of calling for full inclusion, she magnified the argument that

educating students with disabilities in separate settings led to poor educational outcomes

and stigmatization. Will said that pull-out services were too restrictive, failed to offer

sufficient student support, and did not prepare students for a rapidly changing world. She

made the argument that it is in the US' interest to prepare all students to become flexible

problem solvers who can work as productive and independent adults.

      Will (1986) did not suggest a singular strategy for change but advocated for

increased involvement of all stakeholders and a robust research effort to discover the best

way to serve students with special needs. The importance of Will's call to action was

highlighted in a survey of 256 university faculty in special education to identify the most

important articles in special education (McLeskey & Landers, 2006). Will's article was

ranked as the second most important, and many of the other top contenders also focused

on inclusion. Will's (1986) position is important because it marks the beginning of the

federal government's support of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

While the research community and the federal government became aligned that

inclusion was in the best interest of students with disabilities academically and

emotionally (Cook & Friend, 1995; Handler, 2007; McLeskey & Landers, 2006; Will,

1986), the process of implementing inclusion was uncertain. After Will's (1986) article,

many new service delivery models were proposed, but, by the late 1980s, co-teaching

was the most discussed method for helping students with disabilities access the general

curriculum (Cook & Friend, 1995).

Problem of Practice

During the 2018-19 school year, I participated in a principal-led co-teaching

committee at AHS. The committee attempted to provide guidance to co-teachers to

improve their relationship, commitment to one another, and student achievement. The

committee was disbanded when the principal took a new position at central office, but it

highlighted the importance of maintaining strong co-teaching teams and led to AHS's

Special Education Department surveying co-teachers annually to see if they desired to

continue their co-teaching partnership(s). These surveys led to AHS's Special Education

Department prioritizing teachers' requests for maintaining partnerships and increased the

consistency of AHS's co-teacher teams (J. Jones, personal communication, 1/20/22). At

other KPS high schools, special education teachers often reported subject and partnership

preferences to leadership (e.g., Fiona Interview, May 30, 2022; Karl Interview, June 17,

2022), but co-teacher preference requests were not prioritized when designing school

schedules as much as other concerns like maintaining consistent subjects for special

education teachers (G. Davis, personal communication, 6/13/22).

During my time on the committee, I noticed that decisions were often made based

on intuition and anecdotal data. When informally talking with me about co-teaching,

general education teachers (who were not on the committee) frequently criticized special

education co-teachers as doing nothing. Meanwhile, many special education teachers

discussed the power struggles in co-taught classrooms and the challenges they

experienced supporting multiple general education teachers over the course of a singular

day. Additionally, many committee participants (especially special education teachers)

discussed frustration at having to develop new partnerships every year. My interest in the

role of special education co-teachers in KPS was piqued during this committee

assignment. I felt KPS needed more data to better understand co-teaching collaboration

and the factors that increase teacher commitment to these partnerships if stakeholders

wanted to strengthen the practice of co-teaching. While the committee resulted in AHS

surveying co-teachers about their desire to remain together, little data was collected on

how co-teachers collaborate and no regular or standard trainings commenced addressing

collaborative problems raised by the staff or committee members. Exploring co-teaching

collaboration and its role in improving special educators' perception of fit within their

classroom and school could inform efforts by KPS stakeholders to improve co-teaching

collaboration and highlight the importance of retaining effective co-teaching partnerships.

My problem of practice is that **within KPS high schools, the majority of co-**

teacher teams are dissolved from one school year to the next. This is evident when

reviewing yearly class schedules. By reviewing master schedules of two high schools

(AHS and Beta High School (BHS)) for three years (2019-20 – 2021-22), I discovered that less than 20 percent of special education teachers (17 out of 93) worked with the same general education teachers from one year to the next. Most special educators worked with completely new co-teachers (65.6 percent) or with a combination of new and old partners (20 percent). Additionally, the number drops to six percent or only six teachers having the same co-teachers for three consecutive school years. This forces most co-teachers to develop new working relationships on an annual basis. The third high school in my research (Gamma High School or GHS) is not included in the co-teacher consistency data because partnerships were not recorded on the school's master schedule, and my requests for other materials to track co-teaching partnerships went unanswered; however, based on discussions with special education administrators and teachers, the dissolution of co-teaching teams at GHS likely follows a similar pattern as at AHS and BHS (G. Davis, personal communication, 6/13/22; J. Jones, personal communication, 1/20/22).

AHS's Assistant Principal supervising the Special Education Department, Edmund Smith, says that multiple factors make it challenging to maintain consistency of co-teacher teams including scheduling issues and staff attrition. Smith says that while institutional factors play a role in the dissolution of teams, sometimes classroom factors, like co-teachers struggling to develop collaborative relationships, result in team reassignment (personal communication, 1/18/22). Janet Jones, the Special Education Department Chair at AHS, says that her department has worked to keep compatible co-teachers together, but she notes that ten percent of co-teacher partnerships still end annually due to co-teacher relationship struggles (personal communication, 1/20/22).

Jones says this percentage is probably higher at other KPS schools. She bases her

assessment on the fact that AHS had more co-teaching teams dissolving because of

collaborative issues prior to implementing a survey during the 2018-19 school year. The

survey determined if teams wanted to stay together in the subsequent school year and

then Jones' department prioritized teacher requests when planning teacher schedules. As

noted above by Gina Davis, the guidance department chair at BHS, partnership

preferences do not receive the same level of prioritization at the other KPS schools

(personal communication, 6/13/22).

For KPS schools other than AHS (which already prioritizes staff's desire to

extend co-teaching partnerships), it is important to determine if co-teaching teams are

breaking up by co-teacher choice or if external factors are forcing the dissolution of co-

teaching teams. Since research demonstrates that collaboration is one of the most

important factors influencing teacher (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al.,

2020; Stefanidis et al., 2018) and student satisfaction (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears

et al., 2020) with co-teaching, it is important to explore how co-teachers are collaborating

and whether collaboration influences teachers' desires to retain their co-teaching

partnerships. This research into collaboration is important for all KPS high schools,

including AHS, because it will help determine whether collaboration factors into co-

teachers' desires to retain their partnerships or if other factors are more responsible for

inducing partnership change.

Addressing this problem of practice is important to KPS as evidenced by multiple

components of KPS's strategic plans. According to the plans, KPS wants to retain a high-

quality staff and have 95 percent of people who leave employment do so for external or

non-school related factors (Key Public Schools, 2018). While the frequent dissolution of

co-teaching partnerships does not mean staff leave the school, it complicates efforts to

build long-term collaborative relationships which may impact job satisfaction and

retention (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). When

looking at AHS and BHS for the 2021-22 school, 32 percent of the special education staff

was comprised of new teachers. This shows that teacher turnover is an issue within the

school division's special education departments.

Additionally, KPS is committed to ensuring that 80 percent of students with

disabilities spend 80 percent of their day in the general education setting, exceeding the

national average (US Department of Education, 2019). To meet this goal, KPS will need

to rely on co-teaching to help students with disabilities access the general curriculum.

Building consistent and collaborative co-teacher teams helps KPS achieve its goal of

educating more students in the LRE, and students with disabilities stand to benefit (King-

Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020) because they will receive instruction from

more experienced teams in the general education setting.

Since there is a relationship between job satisfaction and retention (Ingersoll &

Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), and schools with lower

teacher turnover tend to have higher student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000;

Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Kraft et al., 2016; Stronge et al., 2008), it behooves KPS to

make the working environment better for its employees. Reducing unnecessary work

burdens (like the yearly dissolution of co-teaching partnerships (Ashton, 2014; Moin et

al., 2009)) is one way to address this issue. Plus, improving collaboration between co-

teachers is likely to increase each teacher's agency within the classroom and comfort at

their job (Ebmeier, 2003). Since co-teaching is a common service delivery model

enabling students with disabilities to receive an education in the general education

setting, it is in KPS' interest to ensure it is functioning optimally.

　　　Thus, my problem of practice was developed to address the concerns outlined

above. To address my problem of practice that within KPS high schools, the majority of

co-teacher teams are dissolved from one school year to the next (See Figure 1.1 below on

page 16 for visual of research questions and methods), I will answer the following

research questions:

- What roles do high school special education teachers report that they currently

  play in planning, instruction, and assessment in co-taught classrooms?

- What factors do teachers report impact collaboration between special education

  teachers and their general education co-teachers?

- Is there an association between the level of collaboration between high school

  special education teachers and their general education co-teachers and the special

  education teachers' desire to extend a co-teaching partnership?

Figure 1.1 Research Question and Methods

Research Question	Methods
RQ 1 - What roles do high school special education teachers report that they currently play in planning, instruction, and assessment in co-taught classrooms?	Interviews with special education teachers provide details about the daily roles of SPED teachers in co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. Answers show whether work demonstrates a co-equal partnership with shared decision-making. Additionally, interviews provide insight into the nature of other processes essential to these roles like communication.

RQ 2 - What factors do teachers report impact collaboration between special education teachers and their general education co-teachers?	Interviews with special education teachers provide details about collaboration within the classroom by providing contextual and specific details on factors impacting collaboration. Participants discussed factors facilitating or hindering planning, instructing, and assessing with their co-teacher. Interview participants provide insight into whether they perceive themselves as co-equal partners with shared decision making. Additionally, participants discuss external factors impacting classroom collaboration. Master schedules show the number of co-teaching partners each special educator maintains, the number of subjects taught, and years of experience working with the same co-teacher.
RQ 3 - Is there an association between the level of collaboration between high school special education teachers and their general education co-teachers and the special education teachers' desire to extend a co-teaching partnership?	Through interviews with special education teachers, all participants address whether they want to maintain or dissolve their co-teaching relationship after the current school year and factors influencing that decision. Master schedules show the number of continuing co-teaching partnerships from one year to the next.

Research Purpose

The importance of exploring co-teacher collaboration is evident because the majority of high school co-teacher teams are dissolved annually. Additionally, AHS and BHS saw a 9.4 percent turnover rate for its special educators from 2019 to 2020 rising to a 23 percent turnover rate for its special educators from 2020 to 2021. If the higher rate persists into subsequent school years, it is not consistent with KPS' goal of retaining a high-quality staff. Creating continuing co-teaching partnerships will reduce the annual growing pains experienced by most co-teaching teams in KPS (Gately & Gately, 2001).

Such changes may help improve job satisfaction of special education teachers and reduce

teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Reducing annual dissolution of collaborative co-teaching teams can yield other

benefits like maximization of co-teacher knowledge and expertise (Ashton, 2014; Ruben

et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012) and increasing teachers' commitment

to their partnerships (Compton et al., 2015; Friend & Cook, 1990; Jones et al., 2013;

Mastropieri et al., 2005). Committed teachers spend more time supporting and interacting

with colleagues (Jones et al., 2013) preparing for class, and supporting students (Ebmeier,

2003; Jones & Youngs, 2012). To realize these goals, it is important to analyze the level

of parity existing in co-taught classrooms. Co-teacher parity is an important factor in the

relationship because it empowers teachers to utilize their unique knowledge and skills to

support student learning (Ashton, 2014; Ruben et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et

al., 2012).

Reducing the rate of annual co-teacher team dissolution and improving

collaboration amongst co-teachers is important when considering that KPS data reveals

gaps in achievement (State Department of Education, n.d.b) and graduation rates (State

Department of Education, n.d.a) between students with and without disabilities and that

co-teaching is an oft-utilized service delivery model to address those gaps. Achievement

and graduation gaps for students with disabilities are not unique to KPS. Nationally

achievement and graduation gaps exist for students with disabilities when compared to

their non-classified peers (Gilmour et al., 2019; Trainor et al., 2016).

While there is insufficient data to confirm that a strong relationship exists

between co-teacher collaboration and student achievement (Scruggs et al., 2007;

Murawski & Swanson, 2001), research shows that quality teaching plays an important

role in improving student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Stronge et al., 2008), and

some evidence indicates that quality co-teaching supports student learning (Bottge et al.,

2018; Walsh, 2012). Thus, it is important to discover dynamics that support strong

collaboration, which is an essential component of co-teaching (Friend, 2000; Friend &

Cook, 1990; Murawski & Lockner, 2011). Exploring collaboration within KPS will help

stakeholders create, develop, support, and maintain committed co-teacher teams from one

year to the next.

Key Terms

Advanced, Applied, and Standard Diplomas – The three high school diploma options

in the state where the research occurred. A standard diploma requires 22 credits (six

verified) while an advanced diploma requires 26 (nine verified). An advanced diploma is

more sought after for students looking to attend competitive colleges. A third option is an

applied studies diploma awarded to students with disabilities who do not meet the other

graduation requirements. The applied studies diploma is awarded by an IEP team (Key

Public Schools, n.d.b).

Classroom Fit – When co-teachers have a perception of belonging in the classroom as

demonstrated through professional fit with their co-teacher and collective responsibility

by co-teachers for the classroom and students (Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

Committed Teachers - Committed teachers want to remain in their current school and

classroom assignment and exert more effort than non-committed teachers (Ebmeier,

2003; Jones et al., 2013)

Collaborative teaching – A teaching style involving interaction between at least two co-equal teachers who are voluntarily engaging in shared decision-making as they work towards a common goal of improving student learning within a singular classroom (Friend & Cook, 1990).

Co-teaching – "Partnering of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs, in a general education setting and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs" (Friend et al., 2010, p. 11).

Developing co-teachers – Co-teachers on the beginning or compromising stages of Gately & Gately's (2001) co-teaching continuum. These teachers are in the process of developing their co-teaching relationship and need further growth when planning, instructing, and assessing to reach Gately and Gately's collaborating stage.

External Classroom Factors – Elements of the classroom design and instruction that are determined by school stakeholders other than the co-teachers (e.g., guidance counselors, administrators).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) – Students with disabilities are legally required to receive education with services at no cost to the student's family. Supports for students with disabilities may include specialized instruction, related services, and supplemental aids and services. If the school division is not able to directly provide special education services, the school district bears the cost for outside schooling including transportation (Friend, 2008).

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) – Document for a student with disabilities that

is prepared and reevaluated annually by a multidisciplinary committee describing the

student's current level of performance, needs, goals, objectives, evaluation criteria, and

services required (Friend, 2008).

Internal Classroom Factors – Elements of the classroom design and instruction that are

determined primarily by the co-teachers (e.g., planning, instructing, and assessing).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – Legally required educational setting for

students with disabilities. The only reason for varying from a general education setting is

if students need an alternative environment to achieve academic success. If a different

setting is required, all attempts are made to resemble the general education setting

(Friend, 2008).

Non-classified student – Student who is not legally classified as requiring special

education services.

Preparation – A course of study within a subject (Cannon et al., 2002). In other words, if

an educator teaches Advanced Placement Chemistry and regular Chemistry, they have

two preparations.

Quality teaching – While there is a debate on which variables are associated with quality

teaching and teachers, for purposes of this paper, quality teaching or teachers are

educators whose practices improve student outcomes as measured by standardized

assessments, pass rates, and/or social-emotional health. In this paper, strong or good

teaching are used interchangeably with quality teaching or teachers.

Service delivery model – A method for providing special education services to a student with disabilities. Services take multiple forms and are tailored to individual student needs.

Special education – "The vehicle through which children who have disabilities are guaranteed to receive the public education system and education specifically designed to help them reach their learning potential" (Friend, 2008, p. 4).

Students with disabilities – Student legally classified as requiring special education services.

Students with special needs – Another way of referring to students with disabilities.

True collaboration - when teachers are participating in joint work or collaborating as part of a co-equal partnership with shared decision-making and each party envisions the professional benefits of collaborating (Little, 1990).

True co-teachers – Co-teachers who are co-equal partners engaged in shared decision-making (Friend & Cook, 1990). Gately and Gately (2001) categorize co-teachers with these attributes as collaborating evidenced by their work co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

As I will show in my literature review, numerous classroom and institutional factors impact co-teachers' collaboration and perception of belonging in the classroom. When exploring my problem of practice of why co-teaching teams dissolve between school years, I am focused on the internal classroom factors (see Key Terms for definition of internal factors) or the interactions between co-teachers. I connect these factors to my conceptual framework called Co-Teacher-Classroom Fit. My framework is based on co-teacher collaboration research and P-O Fit research; however, while P-O Fit relies on both schoolwide and classroom data to determine why teachers stay or leave their positions, my framework is focused solely on internal classroom data. My framework aligns with my problem of practice by showing that strong collaboration amongst co-teachers leads to a higher perception of belonging in a co-taught classroom and the desire to continue rather than dissolve a co-teaching partnership.

Literature Review

Purpose and Description of Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide research support for my project. I divided the literature review into the following sections: 1. Co-teaching and student achievement; 2. Collaboration with a focus on its importance to co-teaching; 3. Institutional barriers to quality co-teaching; 4. Classroom barriers to quality co-teaching; 5. Teacher benefits from co-teaching.

Section one is primarily based on empirical research and is incorporated to provide a justification for co-teaching as a service delivery model. Additionally, this

section discusses why schools aim to reduce teacher turnover, which connects to KPS'

Strategic Plan. Section two provides a theoretical overview of collaboration, how it

develops, and why it is central to successful co-teaching. As a result, while all

information in section two was obtained from peer reviewed sources, information is not

primarily reliant on empirical research.

Sections three, four, and five are based primarily on empirical research. These

sections review barriers to co-teaching as well as benefits teachers receive from co-

teaching. More specifically, section three on institutional barriers is sub-divided into

randomness of co-teaching assignments, lack of co-planning time, lack of professional

development, and standardized testing. Section four on classroom barriers is sub-divided

into compatibility, experience co-teaching, differences in knowledge and skill, and

perceptions of classroom ownership. Section five is not sub-divided and provides an

overview of co-teaching benefits for the teachers. The goal of these sections is to

understand factors that may prevent or compel co-teachers to strengthen their

relationship. These sections inform why certain co-teaching partnerships are more

successful than others.

For inclusion in the literature review, most studies met the following criteria: 1.

Empirical studies from peer reviewed journals. 2. Except for seminal studies, publication

after 2004 to ensure relevancy and responsiveness of co-teachers to standardized testing

mandates. 3. Studies focused on secondary co-teaching in the United States.

When analyzing the association between co-teaching collaboration and special

education teachers' desire to extend their co-teaching partnerships, I first relied on what

is mentioned directly or implied through the research on co-teaching; however, since

many studies do not focus on the dissolution of co-teacher partnership, I extended my

analysis by utilizing other research studies and articles that discuss reasons for teacher

retention or partnership dissolution.

1. Co-teaching and Student Achievement

The purpose of schooling is to increase student knowledge and skills (Mastropieri,

et al., 2005). As a result, a common educational research focus is to determine in- and

out-of-school variables that correlate with student achievement (e.g., Darling-Hammond,

2000; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Stewart, 2007). While researchers have not found a

panacea for improving student achievement, many studies have noted that quality

teaching is positively correlated with student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000;

Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Stronge et al., 2008).

Research into improving student outcomes is complicated because there is no

consensus on how to measure many common variables including student achievement

and teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Stronge et al., 2008); however, certain

teacher characteristics and actions have correlated more with improved student

achievement. For instance, Darling-Hammond (2000) found that teacher knowledge of

educational pedagogy and years of experience were correlated with teacher effectiveness.

Stronge et al. (2008) observed teachers deemed more and less effective through prior

value-added statistical analysis and found effective teachers had certain characteristics

and techniques in common. Stronge et al. observed that effective teachers provided a

higher degree of differentiated assessments, stronger organization, asked a larger number

of higher-order thinking questions, and demonstrated more respect and fairness in student

interactions. Additionally, effective teachers had higher behavioral expectations and students in observed classes engaged in fewer off-task behaviors.

The importance of the teacher in the classroom is a reason why school divisions aim to reduce teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Kraft et al., 2016; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Higher quality schools as measured by student outcomes tend to have less teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Kraft et al., 2016). Teachers' desire to remain in a school or classroom assignment is associated with the degree of fit for the school (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

Ingersoll and Collins (2017) analyzed a series of factors that influence teacher desire to remain in their current teaching assignment. One of the most important factors was teacher control and power over activities enabling them to perform their job as they see fit. When teachers lack power, the authors found, students do not respond to teacher requests and school leaders are less likely to support teachers in times of need. The lack of this decision-making power lowers teacher commitment and increases the likelihood of teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). My first research question explores special education teachers' role in planning, instruction, and assessment to provide insights about the distribution of power in co-taught classrooms.

While retaining quality teachers correlates with positive student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Kraft et al., 2016; Stronge et al., 2008), there is less evidence of a strong relationship between co-teaching and academic gains for students with disabilities (Friend et al., 2010; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Robinson & Young, 2019; Scruggs et al., 2007; Sinclair et al., 2019; Solis et al., 2012).

Prior to 2007, two seminal systematic literature reviews analyzed the influence of co-teaching on student performance. Murawski and Swanson (2001) focused on quantitative research and found that research demonstrated that co-teaching was moderately successful in improving student outcomes but acknowledged data on student outcomes was limited. Similarly, Scruggs et al. (2007) analyzed qualitative studies and discovered some patterns for successful implementation of co-teaching but reported a lack of focused research on student learning outcomes. Since 2007, few research studies have focused on the relationship between co-teaching and improved student outcomes at the secondary level. Two exceptions are studies by Bottge et al. (2018), who researched how a targeted math intervention benefitted students in co-taught classes and those receiving resource room instruction, and Walsh (2012) who looked at standardized test achievement by students in co-taught classrooms. In each study, there was a correlation between math test gains and the quality of co-teaching services.

Despite the lack of a strong research base demonstrating a link between co-teaching and academic gains, multiple studies on student perceptions of co-teaching reported better learning environments in collaborative co-taught classrooms (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020). In collaborative classrooms, teachers reported effective co-planning sessions (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020), higher levels of parity between co-teachers (King-Sears et al., 2020), and an overall effective co-teaching partnership (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020). Additionally, research on student perceptions of co-teaching shows that students feel they receive greater assistance in co-taught classrooms (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020; Ruben et al., 2016), experience more collaboration with non-disabled students

(Solis et al., 2012), and perceive that the teachers share responsibilities and enjoy working with one another (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020).

The fact that students perceive that the learning environment is better in collaborative co-taught classrooms (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020) suggests that it is important for schools to maintain these learning environments. Given this, my second research question looks at factors that impact collaboration between co-teachers. One reason why maintaining collaborative classrooms is challenging is high levels of special educator attrition (Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). This retention issue is partially explained by special education teachers feeling more isolated from the larger school community than their general education colleagues resulting in less job satisfaction and a reduced commitment to their school placement (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013). My conceptual framework builds off this concept by focusing on the co-taught classroom as a location within the school that has the potential to reduce special educator isolation. Through collaboration, special educators can become more connected to their co-teachers and increase their perception of fitting within the co-taught classrooms (e.g., Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Collaborative teacher relationships are important for all educators to feel a commitment to their school, but these interactions are more likely to determine commitment levels for special education teachers than general education teachers (Jones et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to facilitate the creation of collaborative co-teaching teams to increase co-teachers' commitment to their school and classroom assignment.

2. What Is Collaboration?

In education, interdisciplinary collaboration involves two or more professionals with different skills sets working together towards a common goal (Stone & Charles, 2018). Bronstein (2003) goes further to say that the process involves multiple professionals working towards goals that cannot be achieved independently. Little (1990) conducted an early literature review of collaboration in schools and found that true collaboration rarely occurs. She said that interactions are on a spectrum from independent to interdependent with independent interactions being more transactional and interdependent joint work being truly collaborative.

The Role of Collaboration in Effective Co-teaching

Theoretically, co-teaching is the partnering of general and special education teachers to jointly deliver instruction to a diverse group of students, some with special needs, with the purpose of increasing accessibility of all learners to the general curriculum (Friend & Cook, 1990; Murawski, & Lochner, 2011). The overall goal of this working relationship is to improve the outcomes for students with disabilities who are accessing the curriculum in the general education classroom (Mastropieri et al., 2005).

Successful co-teaching includes high levels of collaboration between the general and special education teachers (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend & Cook, 1990; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Friend and Cook (1990) define collaboration as a "style for interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaging in shared decision-making as they work towards a common goal" (p. 72). Murawski and Lochner (2011) break collaboration between co-teachers into three components: co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. I utilize this breakdown in my first and second

research questions when looking at three categories to gather evidence on special

educator work and collaboration as well as in my conceptual framework when looking

for areas where collaboration may impact special educators' perception of classroom fit.

Collaboration is an important component of a successful co-teaching relationship,

but it is a skill that requires development (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend, 2000; Friend &

Cook, 1990). The basis for collaboration is effective and on-going communication (Cook

& Friend, 1995). Conditions necessary for collaboration include a mutual goal, voluntary

participation by participants who are equal partners, shared participation, accountability,

and resources (Friend & Cook, 1990). Since co-teacher pairings often occur by

administrative action as opposed to teacher choice (Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004;

Sinclair et al., 2019), some partners may find they are compatible while others are not

(Mastropieri et al., 2005).

The process of individualizing and differentiating instruction by co-teachers

requires compromise, valuing one's partner's unique knowledge and skills, and

reimagining pedagogical practices to utilize the strengths of two co-equal teachers to

maximize the academic outcomes that are possible with lower student-to-teacher ratios

(Friend & Cook, 1995). Co-teachers need to design purposeful lessons that meet the

needs of their diverse learners. Scholars (e.g., Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend, et al., 2010;

Scruggs, et al., 2007) have suggested the following co-teaching models to maximize

outcomes in co-taught classrooms:

- one-teach, one-observe whereby one teacher leads whole-class instruction and the

    other collects social, behavioral, and/or academic data on a student or group of

    students;

- one-teach, one-assist whereby one teacher takes the lead and the other drifts around

  the room assisting where needed;

- station teaching whereby co-teachers divide content into sections and present

  separately in unique spaces within the classroom;

- parallel teaching whereby teachers present the same content simultaneously to

  smaller groups affording greater opportunities for response and feedback;

- alternative teaching whereby one teacher leads instruction with a larger group while

  a small group needing more assistance works with the other teacher;

- team teaching whereby the co-teachers share instruction with the larger class

  seamlessly working together to meet pedagogical goals.

While scholars stop short of prescribing how often to utilize each approach, multiple

authors recommend basing decisions about co-teaching models on teacher comfort and

lesson objectives (Cook & Friend, 1995; Gately & Gately, 2001). Teachers less

comfortable with co-teaching are more likely to rely on one-teach, one-observe and one-

teach, one-assist (Cook & Friend, 1995; Faraclas, 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014).

Research into co-teaching models demonstrates that the one-teach, one-assist

model is employed most often in co-teaching classrooms. Scruggs et al.'s (2007) seminal

literature review into qualitative research on co-teaching found one-teach, one assist as

the dominant model. Since that literature review, multiple studies have reinforced that

finding including two quantitative studies (Bottge et al., 2018; King-Sears et al., 2020),

one qualitative study (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014), and two mixed method studies

(Faraclas, 2018; King-Sears et al., 2014). Since scholars argue that co-teaching models

should vary based on lesson objectives (Cook & Friend, 1995; Gately & Gately, 2001),

the pervasiveness of one-teach, one-assist either casts doubts on the importance of

utilizing various models or serves as evidence that the majority of co-teaching teams lack

experience or comfort moving beyond the one-teach, one-assist coteaching model. As a

component of my first research question, I ask teachers to report the models they utilize

in the classroom to better understand the special educator's role during classroom

instruction.

Gately and Gately (2001) contend that the entire process of developing into

collaborative co-teachers is an evolution and is not something that occurs simply and

immediately. This evolution is evident in several studies of co-teaching whereby

participants note changes in their collaborative relationship or perceptions of co-teaching

over time (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Keefe &

Moore, 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Ricci et al., 2019; Swanson

& Bianchini, 2015).

Gately and Gately (2001) suggest that co-teaching relationships evolve and move

through three stages: beginning, compromising, and collaborative. The authors argue that

co-teachers' interactions become more seamless and beneficial to students as they

progress through the stages but, since there are multiple components to these

relationships, progression is not uniform. Gately and Gately suggest that observable

developmental components of a co-teaching relationship include interpersonal

communication, physical arrangement, familiarity with the curriculum, curriculum goals

and modifications, instructional planning, instructional presentation, classroom

management, and assessment. When answering my second research question, I look to

acquire information on many of these components. Additionally, Gately and Gately's

argument about the evolution of the co-teaching relationship connects to my conceptual

framework, which anticipates that co-teachers who reach the collaborative stage in

multiple aspects of their relationship are more likely to perceive a sense of fit in their

classroom.

There is agreement amongst scholars that good collaboration is important for

successful co-teaching and, at the same time, that developing collaborative relationships

is not easy and cannot occur by administrative fiat (e.g., Cook & Friend, 1995; Gately &

Gately 2001; Mastropieri, et al. 2005; Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Trent, 1998). Friend

(2000) suggests that certain myths have arisen in US education to make it seem like

collaboration in schools is a forgone conclusion. According to Friend, four common

myths are that everyone is collaborating, more collaboration is better, collaboration is

about feeling good and liking others, and that collaboration comes naturally. Friend

contends that teachers are more comfortable working with students than collaborating

with colleagues. She says collaborative work takes time but efforts should focus on

improving student achievement because it is the only outcome that truly matters. While

improving the working relationships between colleagues is a good byproduct of strong

collaboration, it is not the ultimate end goal. Thus, Friend says the purpose is not to build

a collaborative co-teaching relationships for the sake of collaboration but to benefit

student learning.

Developing co-teaching partnerships as outlined in this section is important to

support student learning but difficult to realize (Friend, 2000). Collaborative co-teaching

takes time and progress is not uniform (Gately & Gately, 2001). Additionally, not all co-

teacher pairs are equally set up for success. Research has demonstrated that barriers often

exist for co-teachers at the institutional level (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015;

Faraclas, 2018; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri, et al. 2005; Ruben et al., 2016;

Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2019) and at the classroom level (Ashton,

2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-

Sears et al., 2014; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Sinclair et al., 2019; Simmon & Magiera,

2007; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015). In order to increase the likelihood that co-teachers

will remain committed to their assignment and to each other, it is important to identify

and reduce these barriers. While my study is not focused on measuring these institutional

barriers, they undoubtedly influence the experience of co-teachers and may be reported as

participants discuss their classroom experience and perception of fit.

3. Institutional Barriers and External Classroom Factors

While the compatibility of co-teachers is important for a successful co-teaching

partnership (e.g., Solis et al., 2012; Stefanidis et al., 2018), institutional barriers and

external classroom factors (see Key Terms) can prevent or complicate this relationship

(e.g., Ashton, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Solis et al., 2012). Twelve research studies are

incorporated into this section that highlight these institutional barriers including one

quantitative study (Stefanidis et al., 2018), ten qualitative studies (Ashton, 2014;

Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri

et al., 2005; Moin et al., 2009; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Rubens et al., 2016; Simmons &

Magiera, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2019), and one mixed methods study (Faraclas, 2018).

Major barriers identified across these studies include randomness of co-teaching

assignments, absence of co-planning time, lack of professional development for co-

teachers, and standardized testing.

Randomness of Co-teaching Assignments

One barrier occurring at the beginning of a co-teaching partnership is the number and random nature of co-teaching assignments (Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). Special education teachers often find themselves working with many general educators over the course of a single day (Sinclair et al., 2019). The time demands of working with multiple partners complicate the ability of co-teachers to forge strong working relationships. Additionally, co-teachers are often paired without any teacher input (Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). For instance, in Sinclair et al.'s (2019) interviews with 21 co-teacher pairs, two-thirds indicated that they were placed together with little input. The co-teacher participants said placements were haphazard; however, even if co-teaching partners are well matched, it does not mean the pair will remain connected from year to year (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009). As was the situation for two teachers in Ashton's (2014) qualitative case study of a secondary co-teaching team, the only reason for the continuation of their partnership was the concentrated advocacy by the co-teachers themselves. In another qualitative study of ten co-teaching teams, co-teachers expressed anxiety about needing to consistently switch co-teaching partnerships (Moin et al., 2009).

Teachers want stability and control over their jobs (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). When teachers have no choice of placement, it increases the possibility of a pairing with conflicting pedagogical philosophies that can manifest in a toxic classroom environment (Ashton 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019). The inability to influence important school choices like placement is a factor that contributes to lower teacher commitment to their job and increased teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017). This knowledge informed my

third research question. It is important for KPS to determine if co-teachers want to remain

together from one year to the next. As shown through my framework, collaboration will

help inform this choice because it increases co-teachers' perception of classroom fit.

Absence of Co-planning Time

Another institutional challenge for co-teachers is that co-planning time is not

regularly incorporated into the school schedule (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015;

Moin et al., 2009; Ruben et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2019), and multiple qualitative

research studies have documented the challenge this poses for co-teachers (Compton et

al., 2015; Moin et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 2019). Without common planning time,

teachers need to negotiate opportunities to meet and prioritize planning meetings above

other professional requirements. This may mean meeting outside of school hours or not

meeting live and communicating via email (Compton et al., 2015; Moin et al., 2009).

When co-planning is not adequate, the special education teacher becomes more of an

outsider by feeling unprepared (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019),

attending a class with little knowledge of the daily objectives (Moin et al., 2009; Sinclair

et al., 2019), and feeling the class lacks sufficient collaboration (Moin et al., 2009;

Sinclair et al., 2019; Stefanidis et al., 2018).

The importance of providing this co-planning time is highlighted in Stefandis et

al.'s (2018) quantitative survey study of 147 secondary co-teachers across four states.

The regression analysis found that co-planning effectiveness was positively correlated

with the quality of the co-teachers' relationship and both variables helped predict whether

co-teachers perceived benefits from co-teaching. In other words, co-planning time

enables teachers to engage in shared decision-making about how to utilize instructional

time and plan for assessments. Giving partners time to plan together improves their

perception of their co-teaching relationship because they can discuss how to leverage

each other's strengths. The findings by Stefandis et al. reinforces Murawski and

Lochner's (2011) advice not to underestimate the importance of co-planning sessions.

Murawski and Lochner argue that without co-planning, teachers are working reactively or

in parallel and are not coteaching effectively. The importance of co-planning highlighted

in the aforementioned studies is why I incorporate co-planning into my conceptual

framework and consider it as an important factor influencing perception of classroom fit.

It is also why my first research question asks about the special educator's role in co-

planning instruction.

Lack of Professional Development

Another institutional problem that can influence co-teaching is a lack of training

and administrative support for co-teachers (Moin et al., 2009; Sinclar et al., 2019).

Training is often sparse and co-teachers are often left to their own devices (Ashton, 2014;

Sinclair et al., 2019). For example, in Moin et al.'s (2009) qualitative study of nine co-

teacher pairs in six different schools, no teachers received training about co-teaching

outside of a workshop or short seminar. This lack of training is noteworthy because

research shows that training or guidance from school leaders can improve co-teaching

relationships by helping co-teachers improve communication, parity, and collaborative

responsibilities regarding planning, instruction, and assessment in a co-taught classroom

(Faraclas, 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2015). Additionally, half the teachers interviewed by

Sinclair et al. (2019) indicated a desire for professional development that would improve

knowledge of how to best utilize both teachers in a singular classroom. This finding

shows that many co-teachers are interested in improving their craft, but the opportunities

provided by their institutions are lacking. This finding reinforces Friend et al.'s (2010)

advice that professional development is important to improve knowledge of effective co-

teaching.

Faraclas (2018) demonstrated the impact professional development can have on

co-teaching relationships. In this study, a randomized experimental pretest-posttest

design with a control group was utilized to determine the effects of professional

development on co-teaching dyads. In the study, participants received training over 15

weeks that included instructional lessons, hands-on activities, and observations with

feedback. On the post-test and through observations, dyads with the treatment

demonstrated increased parity in the co-teaching relationship and improved collaboration

in the classroom.

Standardized Testing

Multiple qualitative studies have identified high stakes testing as a factor that

increases co-teacher frustration and complicates attempts to improve collaboration

(Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Mastropieri et al., 2005). One teacher interviewed

in Compton et al.'s study (2015) said that collaboration ceased as accountability tests

approached. In Ashton's (2014) case study, Keith (the general education teacher) tended

to drive curriculum planning because of high-stakes testing pressure. Val, the special

education teacher, worked hard to make sure none of the "special education stuff" (p. 59)

interfered with Keith's work. Even if co-teachers are more collaborative, standardized

testing demands and pressure placed on teachers may alter the environment co-teachers

have fostered.

Institutional barriers can increase the challenges associated with co-teaching. Research shows that institutional challenges include lack of teacher input when developing co-teacher teams (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009; Sinclair et al., 2019), coordinated co-planning time (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Moin et al., 2009; Ruben et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2019), professional development (Moin et al., 2009; Sinclar et al., 2019; Solis et al., 2012), and addressing the teachers' stress created by standardized testing (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Mastropieri et al., 2005); however, even if leaders work to remove institutional barriers, the development of strong collaborative teams is not a foregone conclusion. The development of a collaborative team takes time (Faraclas, 2018), but the work is important because creating collaborative partnerships provides the best opportunities for improving student outcomes (Bottge et al., 2018; Mastropieri, et al 2005; Simmon & Magiera, 2007; Walsh, 2012).

4. Classroom Barriers and Internal Classroom Factors

School leaders can clearly play a role in forming collaborative co-teaching relationships by reducing institutional barriers, but challenges still exist at the classroom level between the general and special education co-teachers themselves. Sixteen studies incorporated into this section highlight these barriers, including 12 qualitative studies (Ardnt & Liles, 2010; Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Sinclair et al., 2019; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015; Thompson, 2012; Young, 2011), two quantitative study (Stefanidis et al., 2018; Vannest et al., 2011), and two mixed methods studies (Bennett & Fisch, 2013; King-Sears et al., 2014). Two major classroom barriers highlighted in these studies were co-teacher compatibility problems

and challenges with co-teacher collaboration. Additionally, several factors contributed to collaboration challenges, including a lack experience collaborating, differences in teacher knowledge and skills, and different perceptions of classroom ownership.

Compatibility

Scruggs et al.'s (2007) review of qualitative literature in special education found compatibility between co-teachers is a critical variable in determining the success of co-teaching. Cook and Friend (1995) say that not every teacher is comfortable with co-teaching, but to increase the likelihood of compatibility co-teachers should have certain qualities, including flexibility, commitment to the concept of co-teaching, strong interpersonal and communication skills, and openness to feedback. Jones et al.'s (2013) survey study shows the role that a commitment to a shared concept of teaching plays in compatibility. While Jones et al.'s study focused on beginning teachers rather than co-teachers, it demonstrated that having common goals for improving student learning with colleagues increased teachers' perception of fit at their schools. Special education teachers participating in the study indicated a stronger commitment to their assignment when teachers within the school demonstrated shared goals and responsibilities for improving student outcomes. This finding is reinforced at the classroom level through multiple qualitative studies showing that compatibility stems from co-teachers equally sharing responsibility for the success of all students (Aston, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015). Taken collectively, this information informed my second and third research questions and links to my framework because co-teachers who share values are more likely to perceive a sense of fit within their classrooms.

Compton et al.'s (2015) interview study of seven itinerant special education teachers highlighted how views of collective responsibility can impact compatibility within the classroom. In the study, certain general education teachers did not want to bother collaborating; however, when both teachers were invested in working collectively and communicating, participants viewed their placements as more positive. The teachers who shared a sense of collective responsibility were more compatible, which led to stronger co-teaching partnerships.

A review of case studies by Mastropieri et al. (2005) shows that major compatibility issues may result in the cessation of a co-teaching partnership. In one case study involving a middle school social studies class, despite an outwardly positive relationship, the co-teachers were incompatible in their beliefs regarding inclusivity in the classroom and behavior management. Ultimately, the teachers split the class in two and instructed separately. The authors argue that valuing the other teacher's expertise is an important factor in determining whether teachers are compatible and open to collaboration. Such a consideration could support the identification and creation of co-teacher pairs that are more likely to excel.

Amount of Experience Collaborating

While compatibility is a prerequisite for co-teaching success, not all compatible co-teachers form strong working relationships. One reason why compatible teachers may struggle is that few have received advanced training in collaboration through their degree programs (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Thompson, 2012; Young 2011). Additionally, barriers stemming from preservice experiences include general and special educators taking different classes and receiving their education in separate locations

(Arndt & Liles, 2010; Young, 2011). These preservice divisions can make it harder for general and education teachers to fully understand each other's role and can increase the need for training in collaboration.

Despite these preservice divisions between general and special educators, there is evidence that practice and experience can improve perceptions of co-teaching and collaboration (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Faraclas, 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2015). A few examples of this improvement include Pellegrino et al.'s (2015) case study whereby preservice teachers reported becoming more familiar with how to collaborate even though they still felt anxiety about working in a co-taught classroom, Ashton's (2014) case study which provides an example of a collaborative relationship growing over time, and Faraclas' (2018) mixed-method study demonstrating that co-teachers participating in a training improved their working relationship over that of the control group. A takeaway from these studies is that if compatible partner pairs respect each other's skills and are committed to co-teaching, collaboration can improve.

Stefanidis et al. (2018) found that younger teachers were more likely to perceive co-teaching as beneficial. This finding highlights the importance of preparing young teachers to collaborate and then providing experience with co-teaching at the outset of their careers. This will help younger teachers develop communication skills necessary for co-teaching and improve the collaborative culture within school buildings.

Differences in Teachers' Knowledge and Skills

Once on the job, a common collaboration problem, especially at the secondary level, is a knowledge gap between general and special education teachers. General educators may lack an understanding of how to help students with disabilities access their

curriculum (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015), while special

educators often lack content knowledge (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Ashton, 2014; Keefe &

Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). This dilemma is partially explained by the varied

class assignments imposed on special educators complicating their ability to develop

expertise in a certain subject (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019).

In Keefe and Moore's (2004) interviews with eight co-teachers, general education

teachers expressed frustration at special education teachers' lack content knowledge. The

special educators' perceived lack of knowledge complicated collaboration because

general education teachers viewed them as a hindrance to fulfilling instructional goals.

Multiple other qualitative studies describe collaborative challenges stemming from the

general education teachers' views that support for students with disabilities is primarily

the responsibility of the special educator (Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Compton et al., 2015;

Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005).

Different Perceptions of Classroom Ownership

Special education teachers often hold less power and regularly do not have parity

in co-taught classrooms (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2014; Compton et al., 2015;

Faraclas, 2018). One reason for a lack of parity is that general education teachers feel

pressure to evaluate student progress towards achievement on state mandated tests and

view the class as their possession (Bennett & Fisch, 2014; Compton et al., 2015);

however, the similar pressure imposed on special educators to document students with

disabilities' progress towards the goals of Individualized Educational Plans or IEPs is

often not understood or is minimized by general educators (Ashton, 2014).

This difference in professional responsibilities is evident in King-Sears et al.'s (2014) student surveys. While student participants indicated a good working relationship between co-teachers, 85.7 percent of the students still perceived the general education teacher as responsible for planning class instruction (King-Sears et al., 2014). This difference in perceived job responsibilities has an impact on the power dynamics at play in co-teaching and can complicate the collaborative relationship (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2014; Compton et al., 2015).

Documenting IEP goals requires completion of paperwork and participation in meetings (Cook & Friend, 1995). These special educator responsibilities can potentially lessen collaborative time for co-teachers and contribute to classroom parity issues. For instance, Vannest et al.'s (2011) study that utilized hand-held Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) to map time usage by special education teachers discovered that only 37 percent of the day was spent on academic instruction or support. Vannest et al. found that paperwork and other responsibilities like meetings, supervision, and planning time account for most of special educators' professional day. A couple of qualitative studies reinforced Vannest et al.'s findings on special educator time, with participants voicing concerns that other responsibilities interfere with co-teacher collaboration (Ashton, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019). General educators may not fully understand the administrative time pressures placed on special educators, or they may resent when demands interfere with collaboration. When a special education teacher is not available to collaborate and the reasons are not communicated, the general education teacher may assume a larger role in instruction (Sinclair et al., 2019).

In a study where preservice teachers observed co-teaching relationships, one participant's journal noted that a general education teacher chastised a special education teacher as a way of "marking his territory" (Bennett & Fisch, 2014, p. 27). There are many examples in research of special education teachers viewed as support staff or a teaching assistant by general education teachers (Ashton, 2014, Bennett & Fisch, 2014, Bottge et al., 2018; Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015). In certain instances, special educator co-teachers assist students with disabilities but are not allowed to make decisions impacting the larger class (Ashton, 2014, Bennett & Fisch, 2014, Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015). In other cases, special educators fade into the background and have little to no visible role in daily instruction (Bottge et al., 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015). This unequal power balance may prove challenging for the relationship and in some cases is heightened by institutional inequities. In my study, I explore if these issues are a barrier to collaboration in KPS when answering my second research question. Additionally, parity issues factor into the degree to which co-teachers practice true collaboration (Little, 1990) and may influence special educators' perception of classroom fit.

While classroom collaboration challenges increase with heightened content and accountability demands in secondary school (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Keefe & Moore, 2004), they are not insurmountable. Multiple studies have explored the impact of training on collaboration and found teachers became more open and knowledgeable about collaboration with experience (Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Faraclas,

2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Thompson, 2012). This training and support is important to strengthen collaborative co-teaching partnerships.

5. Co-teaching Benefits (for Teachers)

Improving co-teaching collaboration benefits students and teachers alike. Seven studies incorporated into this section highlight the benefits that teachers derive from the co-teaching experience. Those studies include four qualitative studies (Ashton, 2014; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Rubens et al., 2016) and two quantitative study (King-Sears et al., 2020; Stefanidis et al., 2018). Additionally, one longitudinal qualitative study is included that focuses on team teaching (but not exclusively co-teaching) as professional development (Smith et al., 2020). This latter study is included because it demonstrates that strong co-teaching can yield benefits for participating teachers.

Multiple sources suggest that teachers benefit by experiencing positive co-teaching. Strong collaboration improves teachers' perception of the quality of the co-teaching experience (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020; Stefanidis et al., 2018) and working with another professional has the potential to improve professional knowledge and skills (Ashton, 2014; Ruben et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012).

The strengthening of teacher knowledge and skills is exemplified in the experiences of participants in Ashton (2014) and Ruben et al.'s (2016) case studies. In Ashton's (2014) qualitative case study, the general education teacher said that his special educator partner helped him identify gaps in student learning while the special education teacher appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the math curriculum. Ruben et

al.'s (2016) case study focused on the experience of teacher candidates working with general and special educators in a variety of settings including co-taught classrooms. All stakeholders indicated that collaboration in the classroom was positive and helped improve their knowledge of strategies related to differentiation and increase their knowledge and focus on metacognitive skills.

Smith et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study on team teaching as a form of professional development may help explain why the co-teaching experience is beneficial for teacher participants. In the study, the authors showed that teachers improved both their instructional and content knowledge through authentic experiences like co-planning, co-instructing, and then collectively co-assessing their performance. Participants in the study also expressed that the experience required less additional work than other professional development because it was embedded within their regular job responsibilities.

Co-teaching has the potential to improve teacher knowledge and skills because it incorporates many of the components of strong professional development including a focus on content knowledge that is relevant for both co-teachers, active learning, coherence of purpose, collective participation by stakeholders, and sufficient training duration (Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001). For instance, strong co-teaching includes active learning through the experience of co-teaching, coherence by working to become a stronger collaborative team, collective participation because teachers work together in a co-taught classroom, and significant duration because co-teaching occurs daily throughout the school year.

With clear direction and support from school leadership, co-teachers can learn from one another in a more systematic manner while fulfilling their daily job

responsibilities (Ashton, 2014; Ruben et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012). This learning experience is likely to increase co-teachers' perceptions that co-teaching is beneficial (Ashton, 2014; Ruben et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007; Solis et al., 2012), improve collaboration (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020; Stefanidis et al., 2018), strengthen co-teacher commitment to their classroom assignment, and increase teachers' desire to continue the co-teaching partnership. Thus, understanding co-teachers' perception of these benefits connects directly to my second research question.

Conceptual Framework: Co-Teacher-Classroom Fit

As previously noted, while there are debates on the characteristics of effective teachers, evidence exists that quality teachers help students improve academically more than weak teachers (e.g., Bottge et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Stronge et al., 2008). In co-taught classrooms, quality teaching is partially dependent on collaborative partnerships between general and special education teachers (Friend & Cook, 1990). Co-teachers must feel a sense of belonging in their classroom and school to increase their commitment to their co-teaching partner and students (Friend & Cook, 1990; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). Committed teachers exert more effort than non-committed teachers (Ebmeier, 2003; Jones et al., 2013) and want to remain at their current school and classroom assignment. Ebmeier (2003) says that increased commitment is partially the result of higher levels of personal efficacy stemming from teachers' personal perception of their own teaching competence. In co-taught classrooms, parity with a co-teacher is necessary for this sense of efficacy (Bottge et al., 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Swanson & Bianchini,

2015). Without parity, one teacher is the lead and the other serves as an assistant.

Research shows that special education co-teachers are more likely than their general

education colleagues to lack agency or parity in the co-taught classrooms (Scruggs et al.,

2007; Solis et al., 2012) and shift their school assignments or leave the profession (Smith

& Ingersoll, 2004). Thus, creating an environment whereby co-taught classrooms have

"co-equal partners engaged in shared decision-making" (Friend & Cook, 1990, p. 72) will

contribute to increased teacher commitment (Ebmeier, 2003; Jones et al., 2013) and

translate into an improved instructional environment for students (e.g., King-Sears et al.,

2014; King-Sears et al., 2020).

Committed special education teachers are more likely to remain at their current

school and to want to retain their current teaching assignment (Jones et al., 2013);

however, most special education co-teachers need time to develop a relationship with

their co-teacher that fosters this sense of commitment (Gately & Gately, 2001). Often

teachers are assigned a co-teacher and not given the opportunity to select a partner

(Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). Once assigned, assuming the

co-teachers are compatible (Cook & Friend, 1995; Scruggs et al., 2007), they begin to

develop a working relationship. To engage in true collaboration (see Key Terms) or joint

work as described by Little (1990), the co-teachers must strengthen multiple areas of their

craft including communication, physical arrangement, familiarity with the curriculum,

instructional planning, presentation, assessment, and classroom management (Gately &

Gately, 2001). Since personalities and context influence the evolution and development

of co-teaching partnerships, the developmental path is not linear. Instead, some partners

may first negotiate and strengthen assessment practices while others work on their

classroom management. Regardless of the path, Gately and Gately (2001) say that all

facets of co-teaching must move from the beginning stage (where teachers remain

separate in their practices) to the compromising stage (whereby there is increased

interaction but also conflict) to the eventual goal of the collaborating stage (where there is

joint work, understanding of each other's strengths, and parity). The authors argue that

while some partnerships get stuck at the beginning stage leading to high levels of

dissatisfaction, teachers progressing through the stages discover diminished feelings of

frustration and an increasing sense of comfort within the classroom. Murawski and

Lochner (2011) argue that there are three facets of co-teacher collaboration: co-planning,

co-instructing, and co-assessing. It is only when all three facets move into the

collaborative stage that co-teachers demonstrate the parity and shared decision-making

required for collaboration discussed by Friend and Cook (1990).

Research into Person-Organization Fit (P-O Fit) provides insight into why

collaborating increases commitment. A sense of belonging or connection to one's school

and classroom requires congruence of values and compatibility with colleagues and the

school at large (Youngs et al., 2015). This sense of belonging is an important determinant

of job satisfaction and whether individuals choose to remain with their organization or

retain their role within the organization. While P-O Fit is primarily focused on

institutional factors, I am utilizing the framework's logic to analyze the sense of

belonging developed through co-teacher collaboration at the classroom level. When co-

teachers are collaborating, their relationship has evolved to where they are sharing certain

values and views of their co-taught classroom (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013;

Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears

et al., 2020; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Ricci et al., 2019; Swanson

& Bianchini, 2015). I hypothesize that when co-teachers collaborate when planning,

instructing, and assessing, or, at least, progress their relationship to the point of making

collaborative growth in at least one of these domains, it is evidence of co-teachers sharing

pedagogical values. Using Young et al.'s (2015) reasoning, co-teacher collaboration or

collaborative growth will lead to a desire by co-teachers to extend their partnership

beyond the current school year.

   Pogodzinski et al. (2013) identified three components of school environments

impacting teachers' commitment to their school and teaching assignment: professional fit

amongst teachers, trust, and collective responsibility. Colleague support is particularly

important for special education teachers to feel a sense of belonging to their school due to

their varied job demands and the ambiguity of their role (Jones et al., 2013). Special

education teachers who feel more connected to their colleagues are more likely to

continue teaching and not request a move to another assignment. Colleagues' support is

evident when co-teachers are collaborating because they are supporting one another in the

classroom and have a sense of collective responsibility for their students.

   There are three methods for measuring P-O Fit: Perceived fit, subjective fit, and

objective fit (Youngs et al., 2015). Perceived fit asks the research subject about their

sense of belonging; subjective fit directs questions to colleagues of their own values and

the values of their organization; and objective fit casts a wide net to determine individual

and institutional values. Multiple studies have demonstrated that there is a strong

correlation between perceived fit, job satisfaction, classroom commitment, and job

retention (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). A couple

qualitative studies on co-teaching provide additional support for the connection between job satisfaction and perceived fit (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009). In the studies, special education teachers who indicate positive and supportive interactions with their co-teachers desire to continue the co-teaching relationship beyond the current school year.

For this paper, my Conceptual Framework is called Co-Teacher–Classroom Fit (see Figures 1.2 (for initial framework) and 1.3 (revised framework) on page 54). Co-teachers whose planning, instructing, and assessing (Murawski & Lochner, 2011) evolve into the collaborating stage (Gately & Gately, 2001) are engaged in true collaboration (Little, 1990) and will consider themselves "co-equal partners engaged in shared decision-making" (Friend & Cook, 1990, p.72). Co-teachers in Gately and Gately's (2001) collaborating stage have a higher sense of perceived fit in their classroom assignment and thus higher job satisfaction and commitment (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

Through research, my Conceptual Framework evolved as I identified co-teachers whose collaborative relationship was still developing but still communicated a sense of classroom fit. For special education teachers in Gately and Gately's (2001) beginning or compromising stages of collaborative development to communicate a sense of classroom fit, the special education teacher perceived collaborative growth with their co-teacher when planning, instructing, and/or assessing, which the authors say is indicative of a co-teaching partnership making collaborative progress. Collaborative growth amongst beginning or compromising co-teachers is often represented by more "give and take" (Gately & Gately, 2001, p. 42) between co-teachers or flexibility in classroom roles. Increased co-teacher role flexibility or responsiveness to suggestions and requests, results

in special educators perceiving a greater degree of compatibility with their co-teacher and

more shared responsibility in the classroom resulting in increased classroom commitment

and perception of classroom fit. Meanwhile, co-teachers who do not perceive

collaborative growth are "stuck" (Gately & Gately, 2001, p.42) in the co-teacher

developmental process. Special educators not experiencing collaborative growth do not

perceive collective responsibility or a sense of professional fit with their co-teacher

resulting in higher degrees of frustration and lower perceptions of classroom fit

(Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

When reviewing my findings, two of Pogodzinski et al.'s (2013) school

environment components, professional fit amongst teachers and collective responsibility,

helped inform my data analysis as to factors influencing co-teacher commitment. Trust

did not factor into my analysis because Pogodzinski et al.'s study said it was not

significant for determining teacher commitment and my measures for this research

project do not focus on trust. By utilizing P-O Fit research on special education teachers

(Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013), I argue that co-

teachers who have a higher level of perceived classroom fit desire to remain in their co-

teaching partnership beyond the current academic year (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009).

This lens helped focus my analysis of co-teaching collaboration and classroom fit within

KPS.

Figure 1.2 Original Framework

Co-teacher – Classroom Fit

Desire to extend the co-teaching partnership

Co-equal partners engaged in shared decision making

Co-plan   Co-Instruct   Co-Assess

Perceived Fit (Increasing job satisfaction & commitment)

Beginning Compromising Collaborating
(Co-teaching partnership evolves nonuniformly through stages)

Teachers assigned to co-teaching partnership

Figure 1.3 Revised Framework

Co-teacher – Classroom Fit

Desire to extend the co-teaching partnership

When co-teachers are **co-planning, co-instructing**, and **co-assessing**, they are co-equal partners engaged in shared decision making

Plan   Instruct   Assess

Co-teaching partnerships evolve non-uniformly through Gately & Gately's stages (Beginning to compromising to collaborating) with **collaborative growth** influencing the desire to extend the co-teaching partnership

Co-teachers determine to how support student learning

Perceived Fit (Increasing job satisfaction & commitment)

Teachers assigned to co-teaching partnership
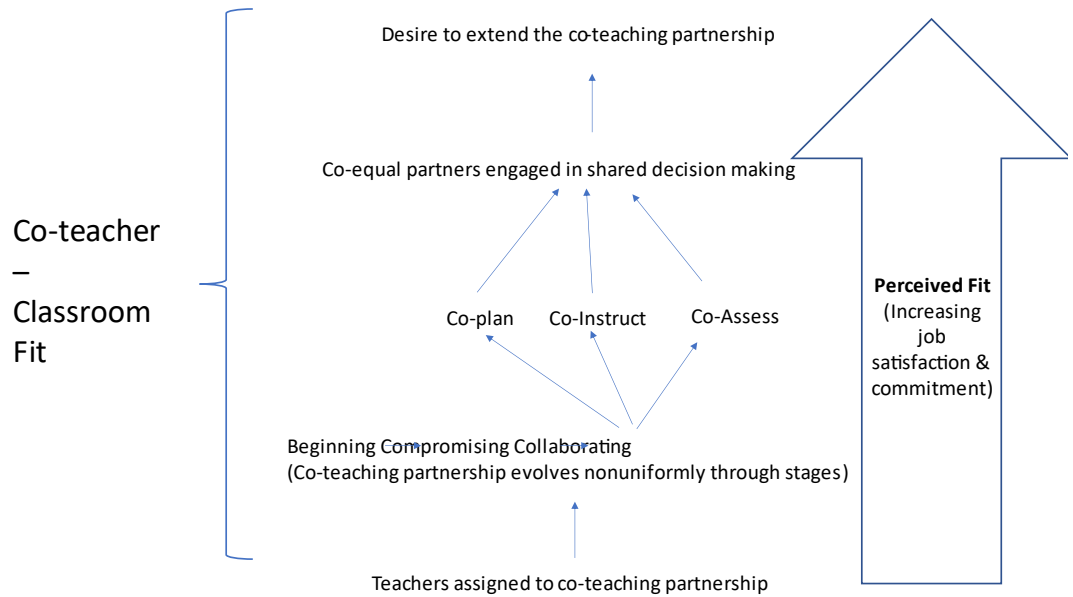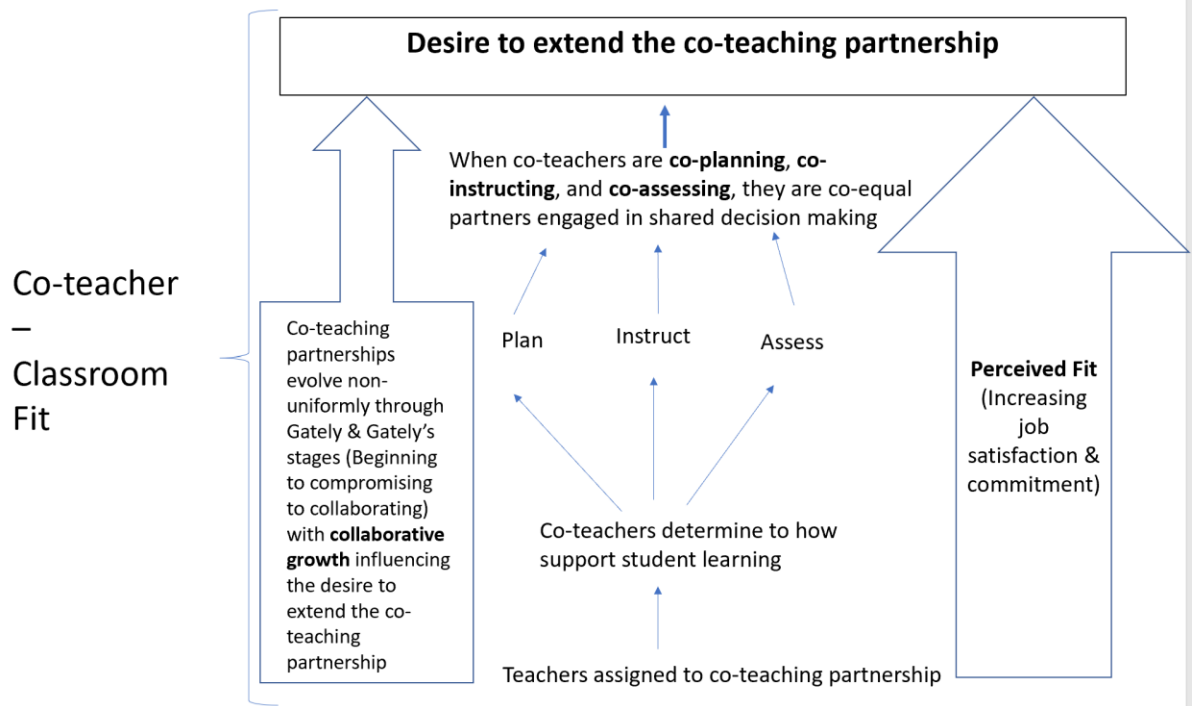
Chapter 3: Methodology

Need for Research

Within KPS high schools, the majority of co-teacher teams are dissolved from one school year to the next. The literature makes clear that this is a problem of practice because it forces co-teachers to regularly establish new collaborative co-teaching relationships resulting in increased stress and work to build new relationships (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009) and potentially lowering job satisfaction (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Assessing special educators' views of collaboration within co-taught classrooms is informative for understanding whether classroom-level or internal factors (see Key Terms) are responsible for the dissolution of co-teaching teams by impacting special educators' perception of co-teacher-classroom fit.

For KPS, this information may support efforts to keep collaborative co-teaching teams together by improving special educators' perception of fit within co-taught classrooms. To achieve this end, it is important to learn which co-teaching teams desire to remain together beyond the current school year and how collaboration factors into the decision to extend their partnership. My research questions support these ends by (i) exploring roles special educators play in three facets of collaboration: planning, instructing, and assessing; (ii) exploring factors that special educators report impact collaboration between general and special education co-teachers; and (iii) analyzing if there is an association between the level of collaboration between general and special education co-teachers and the special educators' desire to extend the co-teaching

partnership. Finding answers to these questions will help address my problem of practice by evaluating whether classroom factors impact special education teachers' perceived level of classroom fit and their desire to remain with the same collaborative team from one school year to the next. Through my research, stakeholders will gain more insight into the dynamics of co-teaching and how to support co-teacher collaboration with the aim of reducing co-teaching team dissolution.

Researcher's Role

As previously noted, I am an employee of KPS, working at AHS. I am a social studies teacher with licensure endorsements and graduate degrees in social studies and special education. Currently I work in a team-taught classroom with a general education English teacher. Presently, I am not working in a co-taught classroom; however, I have co-taught for two years during my teaching career including a remedial class for students who did not pass the mandated state assessment in ninth grade social studies and a 12th grade government class. In my experiences co-teaching, the remedial class was truly collaborative using the description provided by Little (1990), but the government class was a struggle.

In the remedial class, I worked with a reading specialist. We met daily to assess student progress and plan the next day's lessons. During class, both myself and my co-teacher led direct instruction and then often divided the class and worked with small groups of students. Meanwhile during the government co-teaching experience, the special educator failed to attend class for over 50 days during the year (I took attendance), and, despite my efforts, did not collaborate when assessing students, occasionally assisted students during instruction, and did not meet with me for planning sessions.

As I conducted research and analysis for this project focused on co-teaching at KPS, my personal experience helped me interpret findings; however, I aimed to reduce bias by substantiating claims from multiple sources and/or through literature. I also understand the challenge of working and researching in the same location and how it may lead to questions of objectivity. In general, my interactions with special education teachers are limited to the staff at AHS. I have very limited interactions with staff at KPS' other two high schools: BHS and GHS. Regarding staff at AHS, I avoided interviewing participants with whom I have previously collaborated in a classroom setting.

To avoid any conflict of interest with the school division, I am maintaining control over all data I obtained over the course of the study. KPS' only requirements are voluntary participation of participants, approval of building principals, and anonymity of participants and schools in final reports. Controlling the data helps protect the confidentiality of participants. Communicating these and other procedures to participants enabled me to gain their trust and acquire specific information regarding co-teacher collaboration within KPS.

Research Design

The goal of this research project is to learn about special education co-teachers' perception of collaboration in co-taught classrooms and how that collaboration factors into the continuation or dissolution of co-teacher teams. This research aligns with my problem of practice because the dissolution of co-teacher teams is a problem across KPS high schools, and research shows that collaboration is an important factor when determining if special educators perceive a sense of fit in their co-taught classrooms.

My research project is qualitative following a multiple case study design to explore processes and perceptions related to co-teaching (Creswell, 2014). Through interviews, special education teachers working in KPS high schools described how they participate in co-taught classrooms, factors influencing collaboration with their co-teachers, and whether the level of collaboration when co-planning, co-instructing, and/or co-assessing factors into desires to maintain their co-teaching placement beyond the current school year. Participants helped answer my first two research questions by describing daily work and factors that support or hinder collaboration between co-teachers. Participants' commentary on how collaboration impacts their perception of classroom fit and desire to retain their co-teaching partnership helped address my third research question.

All interviews were conducted in the final three months of the 2021-22 school year. Due to the rapid pace of interviews, transcription and analysis occurred after interview completion opposed to following each interview; however, analytic memos were recorded following interviews to note initial thoughts and observations. Following the completion of interviews in late June 2022, I began my analysis. The procedures used for analysis are discussed later in this section.

This exploration contributes to an understanding of special education teachers' perception of collaboration when co-teaching and its impact on their perception of classroom fit and desire to extend or cease their co-teaching partnership. The data and analysis will help KPS stakeholders determine how to strengthen collaboration within co-taught classrooms.

Setting

KPS is located on the east coast of the United States and borders a major city. The school division has over 28,000 students in primary and secondary school (Key Public Schools, n.d.a). There are 22 elementary schools, six middle schools, and four high schools.

With regards to achievement, KPS is a high-achieving school district with a 95 percent graduation rate and is ranked in the top two percent of school districts in the country according to the US Challenge Index (Key Public Schools, n.d.a); however, only 72 percent of students identified as needing special education services graduated with at least a standard diploma in 2018 (State Department of Education, n.d.a). As previously noted, standard diplomas demonstrate completion of sufficient high school credits to warrant graduation but do not require as rigorous of a course load as advanced diplomas (Key Public Schools, n.d.b) which college-bound high school graduates in KPS tend to pursue.

According to data from the State Department of Education (SDOE), a clear achievement gap in standardized test scores exists in the county between students with and without disabilities. In KPS, 475 high school students with disabilities took standardized math assessments in the 2018-19 and 258 students took standardized state English assessments (State Department of Education, n.d.b). During the 2018-2019 school year, the average pass rate on English, Social Studies, Math, and Science standardized exams for non-classified students was 84.4 percent while students with disabilities passed at a rate of 57.2 percent (State Department of Education, n.d.b).

In KPS, there are three traditional high schools and one magnet high school. For purposes of this project, research focused on the experiences of special educators at the three traditional high schools in KPS: AHS, BHS, and GHS. According to names published on school webpages, the three traditional high schools employed approximately 90 special education teachers for the 2021-22 school year.

As previously noted, KPS adopted a new strategic plan in 2018 aiming to reduce the achievement gap and retain a high-quality and engaged workforce (Key Public Schools, 2018). Collectively these goals demonstrate the desire of KPS' leadership to retain a highly committed staff. KPS leaders have regularly indicated through presentations that co-teaching is one method for achieving this level of commitment by promoting engagement and collaboration amongst the staff while also reducing the achievement gap; however, as previously noted, most co-teacher teams dissolved from one year to the next. Additionally, master schedules show that over 20 percent of special educators from two schools left their assignment between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. While this may be an anomaly due the pandemic (numbers from the previous school year were lower), it behooves KPS to explore ways to strengthen the special educator experience to potentially improve staff retention. As the literature discussed in Chapter 2 suggests, co-teacher collaboration may help address retention issues by improving job satisfaction (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). and perception of fit (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). As a result, research into collaborative co-teaching connects to KPS' student achievement and teacher retention goals.

Participants

Nine participants provided the interview data for this research. Of those nine participants, three worked at each of KPS' three traditional high schools. Four of the participants are male and five are female. All the participants have multiple years of co-teaching experience. None of the participants are new to the teaching profession but experience within their schools range from two years to over 20 years. All participants are certified in special education, and one has an additional licensure endorsement in the subject she co-teaches. While some participants discussed their racial, ethnic, or gender minority status, not all participants revealed this information. As a result, a full listing of participants' racial, ethnic, or gender status is omitted from this description.

Data Collection Procedures

Since the goal of the research is to understand the special educators' collaborative role in the classroom, I conducted interviews with KPS special education teachers who are currently co-teaching to gain a contextual understanding of opportunities and challenges they faced. Through these interviews, special educators provided insights about their role and details about the classroom and institutional factors supporting and detracting from co-teaching collaboration.

Authorization and Recruitment

Following my committee's approval of my capstone research in March 2022, I applied for and obtained approval from the University of Virginia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research on April 18, 2022 (UVA IRB-SBS #5079). Following IRB approval, I gained approval to conduct research within KPS on April 21, 2022.

KPS' approval required authorization from each building principal prior to collecting school specific data. AHS' principal wrote an initial endorsement of my research as part of my application to KPS, and thus, AHS approval was granted as soon as KPS approved my research. I received authorization from BHS April 25, 2022 and GHS on April 28, 2022.

Following my research approval at each school, I contacted the guidance department chairpersons to get access to each school's master schedules from the past three school years (2019-2020, 2020-21, 2021-22). Obtaining the current year's master schedule allowed me to identify current co-teaching partnerships. Previous years' master schedules enabled me to identify co-teaching teams with multiple years' experience, novice teams, and the number of co-teaching teams dissolved between school years. My initial intention was to utilize criterion sampling with the goal of recruiting four special educators currently co-teaching per KPS high school with two from each school working in an experienced co-teaching team and two in new teams (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The goal of interviewing multiple special education co-teachers from each high school was to reduce the chances of one participant possessing outlier opinions and thus distorting my findings.

Guidance departments were responsive at AHS and BHS, and I started sending my first round of recruitment emails within days of authorization (See Appendix A for recruitment letter). It was more of a struggle working with the administration at GHS. My contacts at GHS' guidance department did not respond in a timely manner and often did not answer my questions. GHS's master schedules were not received until mid-May and then the documentation did not list co-teaching teams. As a result, I made the decision to

review individual schedules of special educators on the GHS website. Teacher webpages did not list co-teaching assignments but indicated whether the teachers were co-teaching. I sent recruitment emails to GHS special education teachers whose webpages indicated they were co-teaching, but I was not able to distinguish between teachers working in experienced or new partnerships prior to recruitment.

When sending recruitment letters, my first contact was an email sent from my UVA email account to the potential participant's KPS email address. Since KPS teachers get outside emails flagged, I provided my KPS email in the recruitment letter to allow participants to verify my identity. When possible, I maintained as much communication as possible with participants from non-KPS communication tools, but multiple participants used KPS email as their main communication device for contacting me and coordinating interviews.

To recruit participants, I sent up to three recruitment letters. The first recruitment letter was my previously mentioned email. If participants did not respond to the email, I sent a printed letter to their KPS school mailbox. Then, I followed the printed letter with a second email. In the second email, I made clear that it would be the last time I would attempt to recruit them for my study. Multiple participants commented that they would not have responded had it not been for the printed letter since they were conditioned to not respond to unidentified emails originating from outside of KPS.

My first interview was conducted on May 4, 2022, and my last interview was conducted on June 17, 2022 (the final day of school). Out of my initial goal of twelve, nine special education teachers participated. While I intended to recruit an equal number of teachers working with experienced or new teams, more teachers in experienced teams

responded to my requests. Of the nine participants, only three worked with at least one

new co-teaching partner.

Special Educator Interviews

Prior to conducting interviews, I emailed the participants a copy of the consent

letter approved by IRB (See Appendix B for letter). The letter describes the purpose of

the research, confirms that participation is voluntary, and shares efforts taken to promote

confidentiality (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Additionally, the letter asks permission to

record each interview to aid in the collection of accurate data and discusses the deletion

of recordings after transcription.

When I met the participants for interviews, I answered any questions pertaining to

the letter and collected their signed consent. During this process, I also verbally

confirmed that participants consented to the recording and transcription of the interviews.

For the interview, I utilized a protocol based on a study by Guise, et al. (2016)

(see Appendix C for interview protocol). While the study by Guise et al. focuses on the

co-teaching relationship between teacher candidates and a cooperating teacher, many of

the interview questions are relevant for my current project. Additionally, the questions

are well-written to provide open-ended responses and reduce bias (Rossman & Rallis,

2017). Certain questions on student teaching were removed because they were outside of

the scope of the current research project. A few questions were added to the protocol to

close gaps between the original protocol and my research questions. Specifically, I added

questions about how co-teachers plan, instruct, and assess. While Guise et al.'s (2016)

protocols served as the basis for the interview, additional probing questions were asked to

elicit clear and stronger responses (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Probing questions evolved

organically during the interview and were not incorporated into the protocol.

When conducting the interviews, the intention was to meet all participants in

person. For the first three interviews, I met this objective meeting with participants in a

room of their choosing at their home school. Prior to my fourth interview, I contracted

COVID, forcing isolation. Since it was late in the school year and the likelihood of

conducting interviews would decrease during summer recess, I made the decision to start

interviewing via the phone. My procedures remained largely the same. The main

difference was that participants emailed me a copy of their signed consent prior to

starting the interview. My final six interviews were all conducted in this manner.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analyzing Interview Transcripts

After obtaining permission, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

While I initially intended spacing out interviews so transcription and analysis could occur

after each interview (Johnson & Parry, 2015), the abbreviated time to conduct interviews

prior to the end of the school year coupled with the bout of COVID made this untenable.

As a result, I wrote memos following the completion of interviews to record my initial

thoughts and operational decisions but decided to transcribe and analyze after conducting

all the interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Once all interviews were complete, I relied on a company called rev.com to

complete the bulk of my transcription work. Once receiving the transcriptions, I assigned

each transcript a number to decouple it from the participants identification and deleted

the recorded transcript. My initial coding was in vivo or utilizing the participants' own

words to establish initial codes (Miles et al., 2020; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). During this

process, I utilized memos to keep an on-going record of my thoughts. Following the

suggestion of Miles et al. (2020), I also kept an on-going list of prepositions and

assumptions. Whenever I started noticing a pattern, I would note it on this list. Later in

my analysis, I revisited this list and determined which ideas were supported by the data

and which were not.

After completing my in vivo coding, I reviewed my memos and started

developing intermediate or second cycle coding whereby patterns are identified and

codes start getting sorted in categories and sub-categories (Johnson & Parry, 2015; Miles

et al., 2020). During the second round of coding, all participant comments were

categorized as a classroom process, the participant's perception of the classroom co-

teaching experience, or thoughts on the external factors (see Key Terms on page 19 for

definition) influencing the co-teaching relationship. When categorizing comments, I

found that certain statements described concrete actions and came across as more

objective while other statements were value laden and seemed more subjective and likely

to vary based on the individual's mindset. Consequently, I categorized the former as

"classroom process" and the latter as "classroom perception."

Additionally, certain statements described non-classroom related forces

potentially impacting and related to collaboration. Since these non-classroom related

statements were valuable for understanding collaboration but not the focus of my

research, I categorized them as "external factors."

When coding "classroom perceptions" I identified something unique about

participant word choice. All nine participants described interactions with their co-

teachers as either unified or siloed. Unified statements communicated a jointly owned

classroom while siloed statements described less collective decision-making by co-

teachers and the need for special educators to make individual choices about their work.

When I noticed this pattern, I quantified it by looking for opportunities where the

participants could refer to their co-teaching team collectively or as separate units

operating independently within the same classroom (see chart on page 126 to see the

results of this analysis). If I identified a participant statement describing collective action

by co-teachers (e.g., "**we** kind of have an idea (laughs), what **we're** doing that day, but

we may adjust according to students pay through the motivation" (Bonnie Interview, May

31, 2022, p. 6)), it received one collective check mark and one opportunity check mark. If

a statement described co-teachers' actions as separate and independent (e.g., "But **she is**

the person who decide(s) the content or **sometimes she will skip a chapter in the**

book." (Julia Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 10)), it received only an opportunity check

mark. If a participant changed between unified and siloed statements about their

partnership within the same response, each switch was counted as an opportunity and the

requisite number of collective checkmarks were applied. Finally, if the co-teacher had

multiple partners, I made the determination of whether to record singular or separate data

sets based on whether the participant's answer described co-teaching experiences

holistically or referenced separate experiences in the different partnerships. If a

participant discussed multiple partnerships similarly and collectively, then one data set

was collected; if the participant described multiple partnerships separately and did not

perceive them as equal, data was collected on each partnership. I decided to only count

holistic statements as one check mark as opposed to multiplying the response by the

number of partners. I made the decision not to multiply because the goal of recording the

data was to see how statements varied within co-teacher teams as opposed to measuring

the aggregate number of statements across teams. The reason for not quantifying

statements about each individual partnership regardless of perception is that participants

tended to discuss similarly collaborative relationships collectively making separate

scoring impossible. Overall, finding these numbers helped me better understand whether

special educators perceived their co-teaching partnership as a singular unit or two

individuals working in the same classroom.

After finishing the second round of coding, I completed the advanced coding

stage where I identified connections between categories and subcategories identified

during the second round of coding and turned those connections into a discussion of the

special educators' role in collaborative co-teaching within KPS (Johnson & Parry, 2015).

It was during this stage that I inductively sorted my participants into two categories: those

working in true collaborative partnerships and those in developing partnerships (Rossman

& Rallis, 2017). Using these inductive categories, I considered how the patterns applied

to the participants in each category and used this understanding to develop a narrative

discussing special educator work in co-taught classrooms, factors influencing

collaboration, and special educators' perception of classroom fit with co-taught

classrooms.

Presenting Results and Discussion

When presenting my findings, I rely on insights from my analytic memos and

provide a theme directed narrative of special education teachers' experience collaborating

in co-taught classrooms. For each theme or pattern, I define the pattern and sub patterns.

Then, when discussing each pattern, I divide the description by the two categories of

special educators: true collaborative partnerships and developing partnerships (see Key

Terms for definitions). After describing all my findings, I interpret those findings by

comparing the experiences of the two categories of special educators and relate those

ideas to my research questions. Finally, I utilize my findings to make recommendations

about special education and co-teaching to the school division.

Limitations

The initial goal was to interview four teachers at each high school with varying

levels of experiencing working with the same co-teacher. Due to issues with timing and

the response rate, only three teachers were interviewed at each high school and most

participants had experience working with their co-teacher in previous school year. Fewer

participants means that the data does not provide as full of an understanding of the

special educator co-teacher experience as would a more robust data set. Additionally,

since data shows that most co-teaching teams are dissolved from one year to the next, the

participants may not represent the lived experiences of most special educators within the

school division.

When reporting my findings, the limited data occasionally led the utilization of

the same or similar quotes to describe multiple aspects of the special education co-teacher

experience. While this is not ideal, fewer participants meant I needed to base my findings

on a smaller amount of data. I determined that I would rather have evidence sound

repetitious opposed to failing to report certain findings.

Regarding data analysis, I am a singular researcher. Working independently

makes it challenging to employ certain techniques that would increase research

credibility like having independent coders for qualitative research. In response to this

limitation, I planned on employing member checking to ensure accuracy of interviews

whenever possible; however, interviews were not transcribed until the summer and,

during the summer, participants proved unresponsive to requests for follow up questions

or member checking. Also, due to a lack of funds and knowledge of software

applications, I conducted qualitative analyses without the aid of technology. While this

does not mean that findings are less credible, it may have led to certain oversights that are

not missed with more efficient analytical tools.

Ethical Concerns

The goal of the research is to ascertain special education teachers' collaborative

role in co-taught classrooms. While it is possible that the research will show a lack of

collaboration potentially upsetting colleagues discussed by the participants,

confidentiality is designed to reduce this risk. Additionally, since research indicates that

special education teachers are likely the co-teachers with less power, any intervention

designed by KPS in response to this research will likely result in more power for the

participants. It is difficult to see how such interventions would put a participant in a

precarious position. The most challenging professional outcome is if a participant's

identity is revealed to their co-teacher or supervisor after portraying their relationship as

negative. While confidentiality aims to reduce this outcome, it is difficult to guarantee

when the research is conducted within one county's schools.

To reduce this risk, multiple considerations are built into the study's design

(Johnson & Parry, 2015; McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Rossman and Ralis, 2012). First,

approval was obtained from UVA's IRB ensuring the research is ethical and procedures

reduce risk (Johnson & Parry, 2015; McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Rossman and Ralis, 2012). When looking at protections built into the study, all participants are legal adults and volunteers. Participants sign a consent letter to participate in the research verifying that participation is voluntary. No observations are required for this research. Interview data is all based on participants' perceptions of reality and participants could ask for removal from the research at any time. This means that all information is restricted to what participants are comfortable disclosing. While interview participants were purposefully selected, I did not disclose the criteria for participant selection or who was participating to anyone.

Additionally, when handling data, I requested permission to record interviews, but then destroyed recordings after transcription and assigned identification numbers to each transcript to de-identify the data. The list of identities is maintained separately from the data and only present if the need arises to make further contact with participants. All transcripts are stored off-line on my computer desktop and backed up on flash drives that are locked in secure rooms. I am also maintaining complete control of the data and will delete it a year after the project is complete. While most information is reported in aggregate, when discussing individual interview data in my report, all participants are de-identified and details are changed to protect participant identities.

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

Findings

In KPS, most co-teaching teams dissolve from one year to the next. The purpose of this research is to explore if and why co-teacher collaboration is related to co-teacher team continuity. To better understand this problem of practice, three research questions explore work performed by co-teachers, co-teacher interactions impacting collaboration, and whether collaboration influences special education teachers' desire to extend their co-teaching partnership beyond the current school year. My Conceptual Framework, Co-Teacher-Classroom Fit, is utilized as a lens for interpreting findings by analyzing how, if at all, the collaborative relationship between co-teachers factors into special educators' perception of fit and co-teacher partner retention.

To begin this section, I discuss my research findings to provide a foundation for my research questions. After reporting out my key findings, I address each research question in my interpretation section. When interpreting the findings, I compare experiences of different categories of special educators interviewed during the study and discuss how those interpretations are relevant to my problem of practice and my research questions.

Special Education Co-Teacher Categories: "True" and "Developing"

Categories Explained

During data analysis, the following categories of participants emerged (Miles et al., 2020): 1. Teachers practicing "true co-teaching" (Little, 1990), meaning they are collaborating by engaging in a co-equal partnership with shared decision-making (Friend & Cook, 1990); 2. Teachers whose co-teaching relationship is "developing," meaning

that components of their relationship are still in the Gately and Gately's (2001) beginning or compromising stages. Co-teachers in the beginning stage are more guarded in their interactions while those in the compromising stage experience more interaction and negotiation of their classroom roles. In the next few paragraphs, I will describe how I determined and named my categories.

During my analysis, the participants' descriptions of their work processes and personal perceptions of their co-teaching relationship with their general education co-teacher informed my categorization as "true" or "developing". I did not categorize teachers based on each individual component of Gately and Gately's (2001) framework but on the stage that best aligns with the full body of evidence gathered about a given pair of co-teachers. In other words, if most comments by a participant showed co-teachers were collaborating but classroom management procedures were still in the compromising phase, I categorized the co-teachers as "true co-teachers".

For this paper, I coined the phrase "true co-teaching" as opposed to Gately and Gately's "collaborating" label when categorizing participants who have reached the most advanced developmental stage of co-teaching to reduce confusion since the term collaborating is used frequently throughout the paper and for additional purposes other than just Gately and Gately's categorization. I derived my term true co-teaching from Little's (1990) term "true collaboration," which she uses to describe when teachers are participating in joint work or collaborating as part of a co-equal partnership whereby each party envisions the professional benefits of collaborating.

For the category "developing co-teachers", I merged the beginning and compromising stages on Gately and Gately's (2001) continuum. Categorizing study

participants as "beginning" or "compromising" co-teachers sounds logical but became problematic when categorizing my data; while in my study there was clear evidence of participating co-teachers reaching Gately and Gately's collaboration stage, the participants' descriptions of beginning and compromising actions were not robust enough for me to confidently discern when teachers moved their co-teaching relationship from the beginning to the compromising stage. Categorization into the beginning and compromising stages is even more difficult since Gately and Gately discuss how a myriad of co-teaching factors (including curricular knowledge, instructional practice and planning, classroom management, and assessment) progress unevenly through the stages. For instance, co-teachers' classroom management work may be categorized at the beginning stage while assessment procedures are considered in the compromising stage. As a result, I refer to co-teachers who describe most of their collaborative experiences in the beginning or compromising stages of Gately and Gately's continuum as "developing co-teachers."

Overview of Co-Teaching Partnerships

During my research, the nine special educators interviewed participated in 18 co-teaching partnerships. Five of the co-teaching partnerships were categorized as "true", 12 as "developing", and one lacking sufficient data to warrant a categorization. Only one participant (Bonnie) had both a "true" and "developing" partnership. All the other participants were exclusively categorized as working in "true" or "developing" partnerships. Considering Bonnie fell into both categories, four participants had at least one true co-teaching partnership and six participants had at least one developing co-

teaching relationship (see Figure 1.4 below on page 75 for a visual snapshot of

participants).

Figure 1.4 – Co-Teachers and Partnership Description

SPED Teacher	Number of partnerships	Categorization of partnerships	Continuation of partnership
Alex	2	2 = True	Yes for both
Bonnie	2	1 = True 1 = Developing	Yes for both
Colin	2	1 = True 1 = Not categorized (lack of data)	Yes for both
Danielle	4	4 = Developing	1 Yes, 3 No
Earl	2	2 = Developing	1 Yes, 1 No
Fiona	1	1 = True	Yes
Ian	2	2 = Developing	Yes for both
Julia	1	1 = Developing	Yes
Karl	2	2 = Developing	No for both

True Co-Teaching Partnerships

The four participants engaged in at least one true co-teaching relationship have

worked with their partners for multiple school years. One of these teachers works

exclusively with one co-teacher (Fiona) while the other three work with two co-teachers

(Alex, Bonnie, and Colin). Of the three teachers working with multiple co-teachers, one

participant (Alex) reported true co-teaching with both partners and two participants

(Bonnie and Colin) reported true co-teaching with one of their two partners (one of

Colin's partnerships did not have enough data to receive a classification as true or

developing and Bonnie's second partnership was classified as a developing partnership).

All four teachers exclusively teach one subject with two different preparations. (A

preparation is a course of study within a subject (Cannon et al., 2002). In other words, if

an educator teaches Advanced Placement Chemistry and regular Chemistry, they have

two preparations.)

The four teachers involved in true co-teaching partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) described consistently sharing decision-making with their general education co-teacher when planning, instructing, and assessing. Additionally, the participants in true co-teaching partnerships perceived relationships as co-equal and the co-teachers as possessing aligned views regarding classroom focus as shown through descriptions of shared values, views of flexibility, and perceptions of classroom ownership.

My research reveals that all true co-teaching partnerships desired to extend their working relationship beyond the current school year. My Conceptual Framework highlights that co-teachers who exhibit parity in the classroom and decision-making are likely to perceive a greater sense of classroom fit and desire to extend their co-teaching relationship. I will explore this idea further when interpreting finding later in this section.

Developing Co-Teacher Partnerships

The six special education teachers in developing co-teaching partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl) worked with 12 different general education teachers. Six of the developing co-teacher partnerships were teamed in a prior school year and six were new working relationships. All participants in developing partnerships co-taught in one core subject with three assigned one preparation (Danielle, Ian, and Julia) and three assigned two different preparations (Bonnie, Earl, and Karl).

The co-teaching teams classified as developing did not express the levels of shared decision-making and parity expressed by true co-teaching partnerships. As previously noted, Bonnie is the only participant in a developing partnership who also experienced working in a true co-teaching partnership.

Six developing co-teaching teams desired a partnership extension following the 2021-22 school year, while six did not. Gately and Gately (2001) discuss that collaborative growth or progress is an important factor in the development of a co-teaching relationship. The authors describe how some co-teaching teams get "stuck" (p. 42) and experience frustration while others continually progress their relationship leading to greater levels of professional satisfaction. The importance of collaborative growth is incorporated into my Conceptual Framework and is a lens utilized to help explain reasons for the continuation or dissolution of co-teaching partnerships, especially those categorized as developing. This discussion occurs later in this section when findings are interpreted.

Organization of Finding Section

My findings are sorted into the three categories: Processes, Perceptions, and External Factors (the three categories are described in my Analysis Procedures section which begins on page 65). To summarize the differences, processes and perceptions are internal classroom factors (see Key Terms on page 19 for definition) influencing co-teacher collaboration. Processes are largely objective actions occurring between the co-teachers and perceptions are subjective interpretations, made by the special education participants, of co-teacher interactions. External factors are referring to decisions made by school personnel other than the co-teachers that impact collaboration (e.g., guidance counselors, administrators).

The process section has two sub-headings: 1. communication and 2. co-teacher interactions when planning, instructing, and assessing. I divided this section into two sub-categories because, while my Conceptual Framework focuses on the importance of co-

teacher interaction when planning, instructing and assessing, communication procedures

impact all three of those facets but does not fall entirely into one of those arenas. The

perceptions section has four sub-headings: 1. subject matter confidence, 2. value

alignment, 3. general educator flexibility, and 4. power. When analyzing the findings,

these four sub-codes emerged with subject matter confidence being a perception that

special educators had about themselves and the other three sub-categories highlighting

views that the special educators had regarding their co-teaching partners. The external

factor section does not have any subheadings. The lack of sub-headings is because

external factors were not the focus of the research and there is less detail about external

factors in participant responses; however, I felt it was important to report these finding

because research demonstrates that external factors have the potential to impact co-

teacher collaboration (e.g., Ashton, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Solis et al., 2012).

For the processes and perceptions categories, I discuss the results from the true

partnerships followed by a discussion of the developing partnerships to facilitate

comparison. For the external factors section, I discuss results collectively because I did

not identify any patterns separating the experiences of special educators in true

partnerships versus developing partnerships.

Processes

I define processes as observable interactions taking place between co-teachers as

described during interviews. My definition is based on a description of a process from

Miles et al. (2013). Processes in my findings include co-teacher communication methods,

frequency, and purposes and co-teaching interactions when planning, instructing, and

assessing. An understanding of these processes in co-taught classrooms will help me

answer my first research question regarding roles that special education teachers play in

co-taught classrooms. As previously noted, I separated communication from co-teacher

interactions because it met my definition of a process but did not fall exclusively under a

singular sub-category of co-teacher interactions (planning, instructing, or assessing).

When looking at processes, I focus on examples of sharing of leadership and

responsibility or the lack thereof to help discern areas of stronger or weaker collaboration

between co-teachers. Research demonstrates that true co-teachers regularly share

leadership and responsibility for the classroom (Friend & Cook, 1990; Gately and Gately,

2001; Little, 1990). Thus, focusing on leadership and responsibility enables me to explore

how the lived experiences compare for co-teachers in true and developing partnerships.

Additionally, looking at classroom processes through the lens of leadership and

responsibility highlights evidence from interviews that will allow me to answer my

second research question about factors influencing co-teacher collaboration and consider

whether differences between true and developing co-teachers factor into perceptions of

Classroom-Fit.

Frequent Communication in Shared Spaces Benefits True Co-Teaching Partnerships

As mentioned earlier, Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona were the four special

education teachers in at least one true co-teaching partnership (Bonnie is also a member

of a developing partnership). During my research, the participants shared how frequent

communication allowed for the co-teaching pairs to share ideas and support one another.

The participants also communicated how shared classrooms or participation in Personal

Learning Communities (PLCs) facilitated communication and benefitted their co-

teaching teams.

Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona all described their co-teacher communication as on-going or a constant dialogue and said face-to-face communication was their preferred modality. For instance, Alex worked with two different co-teachers. Alex had co-taught for over 18 years and considered her current partnerships as some of the strongest in her career. When describing communication frequency with her current partners Alex said, "we make lessons together…we're constantly discussing…we're in PLCs together" (May 4, 2022, p. 7). Alex reported that the constant dialogue enabled her to work with both co-teachers and strengthen the class for her students. She also noted that she and her co-teachers regularly sought each other out to discuss their co-taught classes.

The other three participants in true partnerships (Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) partially attributed the on-going communication to sharing a room with the general education teacher with whom they co-taught the most frequently. For instance, Fiona laughed when discussing her proximity to her co-teacher because of the shared classroom. She said we are "together all day…literally…we'll sit down together and try to figure out what we want to do" (May 30, 2022, p. 5). I noted in my journal during the interview that Fiona appeared to appreciate the shared room and work environment with her co-teacher and found it comical (not problematic) that the partners were almost too connected.

In Bonnie's case, she discussed how sharing a room facilitated "pre-planning" and "adjust[ing] according to students'" daily motivation (May 31, 2022, p. 6). I interpreted Bonnie's comments to mean she realizes that it is important to have a good plan but the constant dialogue with her co-teacher allowed for the partners to adjust plans based on the students' daily needs and readiness for the new lesson and material.

Colin described how his most frequent co-teacher, Lisa, surpassed his expectations of her as a co-teacher to support frequent communication. Lisa advocated successfully for shifting Colin's self-contained class from a room, located elsewhere in the school, into Lisa's classroom during what was time originally scheduled for Lisa to have a vacant room and planning period. Colin described the move appreciatively: "She actually volunteered her room for my instructional studies course" (May 20, 2022, p. 19). Colin went on to discuss how the goal behind shifting his self-contained class was to aid on-going communication between himself and Lisa and simplify Colin's day, but the move also led to the added benefit of Lisa supporting Colin's self-contained class during her planning period. While shifting rooms was unique to Colin, all the participants with shared spaces (Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) indicated that regular proximity facilitated communication and benefitted their work product.

Another feature cited by multiple participants (Alex and Colin) as contributing to co-teacher communication was participating in Personal Learning Communities or PLCs. In education, PLCs are utilized to break down barriers existing between teachers by promoting a collaborative environment for teachers to work together and learn from one another (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). PLC meetings are designed to enhance discussions between teachers who teach the same subject matter and/or work with the same student population. While PLC research is not focused on the co-teaching relationship, literature has shown that effective PLCs meet regularly and are comprised of participants who are open to collaboration, utilize inquiry to take actionable steps to improve student outcomes, and are committed to continuous improvement (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; DuFour, 2004). As previously noted, I am an employee of KPS and, as an employee, I

know that all teachers are required to participate in PLCs by administration to aid in

teacher collaboration and instructional continuity; however, only special educators at

AHS (Alex, Colin, and Earl) indicated that they participate in a PLC with their co-

teacher(s).

   Alex and Colin reported similar benefits of PLC participation as to what is

reported in the literature (noted in the previous paragraph) by saying PLC meetings

greatly enhanced communication with their co-teacher and other general educators who

taught same subject. When discussing these PLC meetings, Alex and Colin described

how all the subject area teachers with the same preparation (see Key Terms for

definition) participated in these meetings and would share ideas and materials with the

goal of strengthening each other's instructional practice. When discussing his PLC

meetings, Colin described how Lisa (Colin's true co-teacher. Colin did not share enough

information on his other co-teacher for the partnership to receive a categorization) created

shared Google Slides and Calendars to facilitate PLC collaboration and discussion. As

Colin described, "we're all on the Google Slides, the calendar, you know, going over all

that, making sure everything's in place, it works out" (May 20, 2022, p. 5). In Colin's

PLC meetings, group members would view the resources Lisa created as a basis for

developing joint plans. Colin described the importance of his PLC for improving the

lessons in the co-taught classrooms: "When you describe the planning process, that all

goes on in the PLC" (May 20, 2022, p. 9). Colin lauded how shared online resources

provided all group members access to instruction materials before, during, and after the

PLC meetings. He also noted that participating in these meetings gave the special

educators a strong understanding of the long- and short-term plans for their subject. Alex

added that participating in a PLC, in addition to the other co-teacher meetings, enabled

Alex and her co-teachers to have a constant dialogue about planning, which enabled

either co-teacher to "jump in" to any lesson (May 4, 2022, p. 7). Both Colin and Alex

expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate in PLC meetings and indicated

that they led to a more robust dialogue between themselves and their co-teacher.

Participants reported that the purpose of communication with their co-teachers ran

the gamut of classroom responsibilities. When referring to the wide-ranging topics for

communication, Colin described that "teaching is never ending" (May 20, 2022, p. 10). I

interpreted his comment to mean that it is hard to describe all the topics co-teachers

discuss. Some of the topics of co-teacher communication reported by all four participants

in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) included planning, instructing,

assessing, classroom management, and individual student needs. Additionally, Bonnie

and Fiona also reported discussing learnings from professional development with their

co-teachers. All four participants in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona)

indicated that while frequent communication allowed for advance planning, on-going

communication also enabled co-teachers to adapt more easily when the need arose. As

Bonnie described, the main reason for co-teachers changing plans was to support student

learning: "[M]aking sure [the students] understand the first part opposed to [moving on

and] them not understanding any of it" (May 31, 2022, p. 10). When situations required

co-teachers to adjust their plans, the participants communicated that more frequent

conversations made it easier to change. For instance, when discussing the need for

adaptability Fiona said, "if we see something, we'll talk about it" (May 20, 2022, p. 8) In

general, participants in true partnerships reported frequent two-way communication as

beneficial to enhancing the classroom product, their personal comfort, and the student experience.

Communication between Developing Co-Teachers Is Less Frequent and Less Extensive

Unlike the true collaborative partnerships, the six special educators in developing partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl) reported both less frequent and less extensive communication. Regarding frequency, a commonality for participants in developing co-teaching relationships was struggling to find opportunities to meet with their co-teachers. Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl each discussed how communication took place in the few minutes before or after class, during lunch, or at the end of the day.

Danielle discussed more difficulty balancing co-teacher meetings than other participants. While all other participants had at the most two co-teaching partners, Danielle worked with four different co-teachers (see Figure 1.4 on page 75 for the number of co-teacher pairings for each participant). Danielle described the hectic pace of her day and how it was challenging to find regular times to meet with all of her co-teaching partners: "One [co-teacher] I strictly see in the classroom…[another co-teacher], we meet in the hallways" (May 30, 2022, pp. 9-10). Later in the interview, Danielle discussed how working with four partners necessitated regularly switching classrooms and complicated other aspects of her day as well: "When I'm running in the hallway [to get to class], I'm racing to get to the bathroom before I'm late to my next class and other [times I] have three students that I ran into that I just had mini-meetings with" (May 30, 2022, p. 19). Danielle made it clear during the interview that having four partners made

her job demands and co-teacher communication more complicated than if she had less co-teaching partners.

When categorizing communication frequency for co-teachers, I identified four patterns in my research: on-going, moderate, brief check-ins, and non-existent. On-going communication was identified only in true collaborative partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona); as noted and discussed in the previous section, on-going communication was described as occurring daily and covering a wide variety of the classroom topics including planning, instructing, and assessing. Moderate levels of communication between co-teachers occur less frequent than daily and focus on less extensive topics than in on-going communication. Moderate communication topics extend beyond individual IEP needs but tended to focus only on planning, instruction, or assessment, not all three, as was the case with true partnerships. Brief check-ins, by contrast, were momentary, infrequent, and normally focused on only a specific student concern. Non-existent communication refers to co-teachers failing to engage in communication unless it was deemed absolutely necessary.

Moderate Communication. Bonnie, Earl, and Danielle described moderate levels of communication in at least one developing partnership. In each of these moderate communication experiences, participants indicated that meetings occurred at least weekly and involved co-teachers seeking each other out.

Bonnie and Earl described their moderate communication meetings as occurring during lunch in empty classrooms or during their co-taught classes when students were completing independent work. For instance, Bonnie (who also experienced a true partnership) said her developing co-teaching partner "will come downstairs and we will

check in sometimes during my class or we will talk over lunch" (May 31, 2022, p. 8). For

Earl these meetings were more impromptu: "We don't really have a set time…maybe just

like a couple minutes after class, sometimes during advisory period, lunch, or

PLCs…ours is kind of week by week" (June 7, 2022, pp. 4-5). These two participants

said face-to-face meetings were the primary form of interaction. Bonnie noted that email

communication was unreliable and often led to less effective lessons whenever the

general educator was absent. As Bonnie described, "our communication is solid…face-

to-face," but on days when her partner was absent Bonnie continued, "I would just walk

into the class kind of like blind" (May 31, 2022, p. 12). A lack of consistent email

communication made it harder for Bonnie to plan for her co-teacher's absence. In the

case highlighted above, Bonnie was unaware of the entire lesson plan making it difficult

to instruct the students. This example demonstrates that the moderate level of

communication in Bonnie's developing partnership did not provide her with the same

knowledge of class plans as in her true partnership where she said each partner, "know[s]

exactly what's happening day-to-day" (May 31, 2022, p. 7).

   Earl who has two co-teachers and works at AHS discussed how PLC meetings

served as an additional opportunity for communication (like Alex and Colin who work at

AHS, Earl was in a PLC with his co-teachers); however, Earl said the PLC meetings

improved communication in one co-taught class with moderate levels of communication

more than the other partnership with non-existent communication. In the class with

helpful PLC meetings, Earl described how his partner built their class schedule and daily

agenda around PLC discussions. When describing this process, Earl said that after a PLC

meeting his partner would typically say, "this week we're kind of [doing] topic, X, Y,

and Z…[My partner has] been doing it for over 10 years so she has a lot of curriculum

already" (June 7, 2022, p. 4). While Earl noted that because of his partner's experience,

she generally took the lead when planning, the PLC allowed Earl to have a better

understanding of the class direction. Earl said this knowledge occasionally facilitated him

directing planning or taking the lead during instruction: "I took like a week, and it was

just me" (June 7, 2022, p. 8).

In Earl's other partnership (with non-existent communication), the general

educator elected not to align ideas with the PLC. Earl expressed dismay when describing

that his partner "kind of does her own thing" (June 7, 2022, p. 4). This lack of

coordination with the PLC made PLC meetings more of a source of frustration for Earl

rather than something purposeful. When discussing planning with this partner Earl said,

"there really wasn't too much…it was tough" (June 7, 2022, p. 5). During the interview,

Earl discussed the benefits of continuity promoted by the PLC and wished each co-

teaching partner would ascribe to it.

The third partnership with moderately frequent communication involved Danielle

who I previously noted had four different co-teaching partners. Danielle, said the

dialogue between herself and her strongest co-teaching partner, Hermine, mainly

occurred via email and planning took place independently. Danielle described one

planning experience as ""Hey, I'll do a vocab exercise," and I will create the vocab

exercise and shoot it to [Hermine] so she can see it" (May 30, 2022, p. 11). Danielle said

the number of different co-teaching partners necessitated such communication with

Hermine and contributed to Danielle lacking time to meet with Hermine in person.

Danielle noted that while she was happy that "she can run any part of the class" (May 30,

2022, p. 9) with Hermine, collaboration was limited. Work was independent and Hermine normally took the lead when planning and instructing due to Danielle needing to balance time with four different co-teachers (e.g., "[Hermine] still plans most of the curriculum." (May 30, 2022, p. 16); however, because both Danielle and Hermine sought each other's feedback and effectively utilized email for communication, Danielle indicated that she felt communication was stronger with Hermine than with her other partners: "It's probably the best co-teaching experience I've had in my career" (May 30, 2022, p. 12).

In these partnerships with moderate communication, the participants described co-teacher meetings as an opportunity to provide updates on student progress, discuss the class schedule, or work on planning; however, there was less evidence of co-teachers discussing all aspects of the class like in true partnerships. For instance, Earl described that his role and focus during co-teacher conferences was to "cater to those" students [with IEPs]" (June 7, 2022, p. 4) as opposed to supporting co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing work more generally. In Bonnie's developing partnership, moderate communication contributed to her playing "more of the supportive role in [the] class" (May 31, 2022, p. 6) while on-going communication in the true partnership facilitated Bonnie and true co-teacher being more "interchangeable" (May 31, 2022, p. 6) when planning, instructing, and assessing.

Brief Check-In Communication. Ian, Julia, and Karl all participated in at least one developing partnership where they described communication as a brief check-in meeting initiated by the special educator. Interestingly, the three partnerships with the check-in communication (one of Ian and Karl's partnerships and Julia's only partnership) had similar dynamics: the special educator had been teaching for years, and the general

educator was new to the profession. These brief meetings took place at varied times: immediately before class ("Before the students come in, the two of us will be in the same classroom." (Julia, Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 6)), during a planning period ("[We] had common planning periods." (Karl, Interview, June 17. 2022, p. 14)), or after school ("After school typically." (Ian Interview, May 10, 2022, p. 7)). In each circumstance, Ian, Karl, and Julia discussed how they sought out meetings with their general education co-teacher and not vice versa. All three participants described the purpose of "check-in" communication as an opportunity for getting updates on the class agenda, checking in on individual students, or providing the general educator feedback. As Karl described, "my role was more managing the classes…checking in with [students] to make sure they were understanding things" (June 17, 2022, p. 9). Karl reported that he would then relay his knowledge of student progress to his co-teacher during check-in meetings.

Ian, Julia and Karl each stressed that their brief check-in meetings often focused on providing feedback to their general education co-teacher. Feedback primarily stemmed from the special educators observing a component of the general educator's craft during instruction that required improvement to better support student learning. Since Ian, Julia, and Karl all had more experience than their co-teaching partners with whom they met for brief check-ins, they each felt compelled to provide constructive feedback. Karl discussed how a "big part of the year…was helping her…find materials and suggestions for lessons" (June 17, 2022, p. 10). Ian said that a main reason for meeting with his co-teacher was to "understand where we're going and to also give pointers" (May 10, 2022, p. 6). Finally, Julia described how she regularly provided

feedback and "after several months…she seems to have accepted me better" (June 17, 2022, p. 4).

While the participants' suggestions were sometimes heeded by their co-teachers, all three special educators noted some frustration with the new general educators. Ian noted his partner would accept feedback and address the problematic behavior in the short term but eventually go back to the ineffective method. For instance, Ian's partner was prone to lecture at the end of the period leaving students confused about new information and without sufficient practice time. Ian pointed out the issue to his co-teacher but noted "there is only so much I can do because I've allowed [him] to have more power in that regard" (May 10, 2022, p. 10). (When referencing power, Ian discussed that he felt the general educator should have the final say in most class decisions except for student accommodations. I will expand upon this idea later in the findings section when discussing special educator perceptions of power). Karl noted how his novice partner seemed "reluctant to accept [his] advice as a special educator" (June 17, 2022, p. 11) and always needed to clear Karl's suggestions through an experienced general educator. Finally, Julia discussed how her partner would often not understand IEP requirements, and it was a challenge to get her co-teacher to provide accommodations for students with special needs. When describing discussions about accommodations Julia said "we still haven't 100 percent agreed on that yet…I always remind her that…these kids need more" (June 17, 2022, p. 8). In each of these circumstances, the purpose of communication focused primarily on improving the general educator's craft and rarely led to an increased role for the special educator within the classroom (the exception was Julia who noted that her role during classroom instruction increased over time). Both Ian

and Julia described changes in their partner's behavior after providing feedback. For

instance, after providing feedback to his co-teacher about lecturing too much towards the

end of the period, Ian said, "I've been able to help him change the lessons" (May 10,

2022, p. 7). Meanwhile, Karl indicated that communication did not lead to changes in his

partner's behavior, and his partner was often "very stressed out" (June, 17, 2022, p. 12)

because she was insistent on solving all problems independently. The lack of progress

Karl experienced when attempting to support his co-teacher may partially explain why he

was less satisfied with his paring than Julia and Ian. While Ian and Julia experienced

some growth in their collaborative relationship, Karl's experience made him feel more

"stuck" (Gately & Gately, 2001, p. 42) and kept the relationship from progressing. In

Karl's case, when I asked him about why he did not want to continue working with his

partnership in the subsequent year he said, "[lack of] openness to suggestions that I

would make" (June 17, 2022, p. 13) made it harder for him to connect with his co-teacher

"personality-wise" (June 17, 2022, p. 13).

      Non-Existent Communication. While the three check-in communication

interactions described above were brief and produced uneven results, five co-teaching

relationships were described by participants as having non-existent communication. Of

these five partnerships, Danielle participated in three, Karl in one, and Earl in one. In all

these classes, the co-teachers did not seek each other out and work remained in separate

spheres. Danielle described the three partnerships as, "I'm very much the observer" (May

30, 2022, p. 9). Karl said with dismay "I would've preferred more engagement from my

co-teacher (June 17, 2022, p. 9). As previously noted, when I asked Earl about his

communication with his co-teacher he said, "this year there really wasn't too much"

(June 7, 2022, p. 5). When teachers in these classes did talk, they indicated it was out of necessity and to discuss a specific student's needs. Also, Danielle, Earl, and Karl said that in each of these classes, they decided their own level and type of class involvement independent of their co-teacher. For instance, when Karl's co-teacher commented that certain accommodations were not necessary because "[the students] are all at this grade level, so therefore it means they can all do X, Y, and Z" (June 17, 2022, p. 5), he took it upon himself to address "any weaknesses or challenges [the students were] experiencing" (June 17, 2022, p. 5). Not surprisingly, special educators involved in these partnerships found little to no opportunities for growth and looked to terminate the relationships at the end of their respective school years.

True Co-Teacher Interactions Show High Levels of Decision-Making Parity

Planning. All four participants in true co-teaching partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) described sharing leadership and responsibility when planning, instructing, assessing. Alex and Colin said that general educators tended to take a larger role in planning but were responsive to feedback and altered plans based on special educator recommendations. For instance, Alex described how one of her co-teachers asked for feedback during planning sessions: "This is what I'm thinking about doing. What are your thoughts?" (May 4, 2022, p. 8). Colin described his co-teacher, Lisa, taking a similar approach:

> "Take a look at this Google Slides that I've put up for, for the kids. You know, would that be, is that sufficient? Will that work?" Like I said, always valuing my input and, you know, [Lisa] respects who I am as a teacher and likewise from my side. (May 20, 2020, p. 10)

In both examples, the general education co-teacher took the lead on directing planning, but the special education co-teacher knew their feedback was welcomed and carried equal weight.

Meanwhile, Bonnie and Fiona described working with their co-teachers for the entire day and collectively planning out each component of the class including goals, assessments, activities, and resources. Fiona described her involvement in all stages of planning as follows:

> [W]e'll sit down together…then we'll try to figure out what it is that we want to do: what story we're gonna go over, or teach that week. And then we plan out how we're gonna attack it. And we talk about what resources we'll need, or what additional supporting materials the students will need to be able to access it. We come up with creative activities for the kiddos, and then we also like to review grades, or talk about what we're seeing in the students and network, and then try to figure things out from there. (May 30, 2022, p. 5)

While Bonnie's description of daily planning was not as extensive, she discussed planning daily with her co-teacher and the importance of being on the same page. Bonnie said that "we sit down…we have calendars, we try to provide the kids with calendars, so they know exactly what's happening day-to-day" (May 31, 2022, p. 7). Bonnie went on to describe how daily planning allowed for the co-teachers to scaffold instruction and assessments to ensure students learned the material:

> [In] the beginning, we would do tickets…like mini check-ins just to make sure that they have essentially…got what…we hope they retain. Our units are about a month long, so we'll set up and do like a quiz and then a test…before you move

on to the second part of the unit, making sure that they understand that first part,

as opposed to getting to the end of the unit [and] not really understanding any of

it. (May 31, 2022, p. 10)

Both Bonnie and Fiona communicated how they developed all stages of their plans in

tandem with their co-teacher. While this seemed more extensive than Colin and Alex, all

four special educators communicated that their voice had power in designing or adjusting

plans.

Instructing. Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona all said they were regularly involved

in classroom instruction in their true co-teaching partnerships. Colin and Fiona said the

general educator often, but not always, took the lead during the presentation of new

material; however, both co-teachers had a large role in classroom instruction and either

teacher could lead the class. To highlight collaboration during instruction, Fiona

described a typical day in her co-taught classroom:

So, students come in. We greet them. They jump into silent reading. Either myself

or my co-teacher will give the instruction on what they need to do at

the beginning, in terms of the silent reading. And then we'll start the

transition into the lesson of the day…The transition, we'll take turns

on who's gonna lead that transition. And then we instruct. (May 30,

2022, p. 6)

Fiona and Colin described themselves as comfortable leading and contributing to lessons

on a regular basis even if the general educator took the lead during instruction more

often. Meanwhile, Alex and Bonnie said that the presentation of new material was

equally divided between the co-teachers (for Bonnie, this is in reference to her true

partnership since she also worked in a developing partnership). For instance, Bonnie said

during most block periods there were two opportunities to present new material. She said

that one co-teacher typically presented new material during the first opportunity and the

other co-teacher took the lead during the second opportunity.

> We go back and forth... We'll do one teacher, one assist, but then we'll
>
> tag and switch. So like if she does the content lesson then we'll switch so
>
> that I am leading the lab portion of the class. (May 31, 2022, p. 10)

Alex, on the other hand, said that the presentation of new material was determined during

planning and that co-teacher responsibilities varied based on the topic. Alex said

normally "We just take turns, you know, who's going to be teaching, the other person

needs to be with the students, and walking around and helping them" (May 4, 2022, p. 9);

however, Alex also described one lesson serving as an example of how both teachers co-

led and instructed together:

> We were doing a jam board activity. She was doing part of the activity, I was
>
> doing the other part, and it just kept going back and forth between us asking
>
> students, you know, at different times, different questions. They were responding.
>
> They were actively participating, and so, it was just back and forth, and back and
>
> forth, just keeping the flow going... Keeping the lesson moving forward, and it
>
> worked really, really well- (May 4, 2022, p. 12)

> Regardless of who was leading the presentation of new material, all four

participants (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) described regular participation and shared

responsibility during instructional presentation by using phrases like "volley back and

forth" (Fiona Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 5), "bounce things off"(Colin Interview, May

20, 2022, p. 12), "passing the pen" (Alex Interview, May 4, 2022, p. 4), and "tag and switch" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 10) to describe the interactions with their general education co-teachers. In each circumstance, the participants described the regular model for delivering instruction as one-teach and one-assist although Alex and Bonnie reported utilizing team teaching during laboratory time and for activities requiring small-group instruction. When the special educators were in an assisting role, all four participants described working with all students (not just students receiving special education services). Examples of assistance included "circulating around the room, making sure kids are on task, answering questions that need to be answered, refocusing kids that need to be refocused," (Colin Interview, May 20, 2022, p. 9) and "work[ing] with smaller [groups] depending on the student[s'] needs" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 10).

    Assessing. While each of the participants in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) described a shared role with their co-teacher when assessing students, they emphasized different parts of this role. All four participants described grading assessments that determined course grades and actively modifying assessments or advising how to modify assessments to meet IEP requirements. For instance, Colin communicated that his partner (Lisa) trusted him to "to grade…and to come up with assessments as well" (May 20, 2022. 10) that were determinant of course grades. Colin also described how he provided input to create "shortened assessments, and things of that nature" (May 20, 2022, p. 11) to support individual students.

    Alex, Bonnie, and Fiona described how they viewed a large part of their responsibility as assessing student progress on formative work and then using that

knowledge to help inform instructional planning. As Fiona described, "we like to review grades or talk about what we're seeing in individual students…and then try to figure things out from there" (May 30, 2022, p. 5). To gain this knowledge, Fiona and Bonnie described grading written assignments collectively with the general education teacher. For instance, Fiona said that "as the work comes in, either of us will just take the work and grade it" (May 30, 2022, p. 7). Bonnie said the co-teachers "do a lot of [joint] grading during their planning time. Like the projects or group grading" (May 31, 2022, p. 14). Bonnie described a typical conversation with her "true" co-teacher during these grading sessions as: "Okay, you do this one, I'll do this one. And then we'll compare" (May 31, 2022, p. 14). Meanwhile, Alex said she observed the students when her partners were introducing new material to assess the students' progress, student understanding of the new material, and inform future instruction. While observing students, Alex said she was always asking herself "Are we losing them? Are they understanding?" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). Alex stated that her assessment of student learning was based on "what I see them writing down, or what they're asking or not asking during the lesson" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). Alex then used her observations to inform planning with her co-teachers. For instance, Alex relayed how after one set of observations she told her co-teachers: "Too much information we gave them, we're losing them" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). After this recommendation, Alex recalls, "[We] change[d] it up a little bit with the next group" (May 4, 2022, p. 11).

When describing co-teacher work allocation, Alex said her teams did not work on everything collectively but divided up planning and assessment responsibilities to ensure no co-teacher had a disproportionate amount of work. Alex argued that a division of labor

helped each teacher manage all their classroom responsibilities. She described this

process as follows:

> Who's gonna do what? Is one teacher gonna do most of the planning and
>
> the other teacher's going to do most of the grading? How is that going to be
>
> split? How is it gonna be equitable?... I think it makes a huge difference when the
>
> kids see that you're on the same page, and that you like working with each other.
>
> (May 4, 2022, p. 20)

In Alex's partnerships, the "general education teacher tend[ed] to be the one do[ing] the

most of the writing of lessons", and Alex "[did] most of the grading" (May 4, 2022, p.

10).

A commonality amongst all four special educators in true co-teaching

partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) was that they shared responsibility and

leadership when planning, instructing, and assessing within the co-taught classroom. This

collective responsibility by co-teachers when planning, instructing, and assessing was

something that distinguished true collaborative partners from developing co-teachers.

Later in this section when interpreting findings, I will elaborate on this observation and

discuss how it relates to my first research question regarding the role of special education

teachers in co-taught classroom.

Interactions in Developing Partnerships Show General Educators with more Control

The amount of shared responsibility and leadership between co-teachers in

developing partnerships when planning, instructing, and assessing was quite varied.

Some special educators reported having leadership responsibilities in certain aspects of

the co-taught classroom while others classified their role as more of an assistant or observer.

Planning. Regarding planning, three participants in developing partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, and Earl) noted a role for the special educator in at least one partnership (three total co-teaching partnerships) while Danielle, Earl, Ian, Karl, and Julia said the special educator's role in planning for at least one of their partnerships (nine partnerships in total) was minimal or non-existent.

Bonnie, Danielle, and Earl described a planning role for special educators in at least one developing partnership; however, they indicated that the general educator took the lead in most circumstances. Bonnie and Earl said the responsibility levels were partially determined by the wealth of materials possessed by the general educator. For instance, as previously noted, Earl discussed how his partner had "been doing it for over 10 years, so she has a lot of the curriculum already" (June 7, 2022, p. 4). I interpreted Earl's statement to mean that he was comfortable using his co-teacher's pre-established lessons as opposed to collectively building lessons from scratch. Later in the findings section when describing the participants' perceived confidence in the subject matter, I discuss how Earl's co-teacher (with whom he experiences moderate levels of communication) encouraged him to take a more active role in planning and instruction. This indicates that relying on past lessons was partially Earl's choice.

Bonnie meanwhile discussed how she enjoyed planning with her co-teacher in the developing partnership and described that the process was "not stressful…it is productive" (May 31, 2022, p. 13). Bonnie noted that her partner was "very thorough…outlining the objective[s] for the class" (p. 8). I took this latter comment to

mean that Bonnie had a say in planning, but the class direction and lesson plans largely

stemmed from Bonnie's co-teacher. I interpreted Bonnie's statement in this way because

it varied from how she described planning in her true collaborative partnership. In the

true partnership Bonnie said, "We have common planning, we do a lot of pre-

planning…So we kind of have an idea (laughs), what we're doing that day, but we may

adjust according to students'…motivation" (May 31, 2022, p. 6). In the true partnership,

Bonnie described all components of planning as collective ("we") while, in the

developing partnership, Bonnie's word choice indicated the general education teacher

took the lead when directing class objectives and plans.

      Both Earl and Bonnie said their primary planning role, in previously referenced

developing partnerships, was in suggesting modifications for students with special needs.

Bonnie said her value was really apparent in "simplify[ing] and break[ing] down parts [of

the subject the students] don't understand" (May 31, 2022, p. 11). Earl discussed how

once modifications were determined, his co-teacher would ask "can you adapt this?"

(June 7, 2022, p. 5). Since instructional plans were already strong, Earl said he focused

his energy on these modifications.

      In Danielle's co-taught class with Hermine (the previously referenced partnership

whereby communication largely occurred via email due to challenges meeting during the

school day), lessons were divvied up and planned separately; however, feedback was

primarily sought over email. This asynchronous planning system was created largely due

to difficulty coordinating meeting time (as noted earlier, Danielle was working with four

different co-teachers); however, Danielle indicated that her general educator co-teacher

"still designs most of the curriculum" (May 30, 2022, p. 16). (While Danielle used the

word "curriculum," I believe she really meant lessons because of the statement's

placement within a larger segment of the interview discussing planning.) Danielle said

this uneven division of planning responsibilities was partially the result of Danielle

lacking access to certain classroom resources that made planning easier and lessons

stronger. For instance, many electronic resources, like the online textbook used in KPS,

require access codes that were not made available for special educators. As Danielle

described, "what I've discovered is the general education teachers have access to parts of

the curriculum that I don't have access to…like the textbook…I can't even get into the

textbook" (May 30, 2022, p. 16). Interestingly, Danielle was the only participant who

mentioned having this issue and the reason for the lack of access was not further

explained by Danielle. While it may have impacted other special educators' ability to

plan, Danielle was the only participant who felt strongly enough to argue that the lack of

access impacted her work product.

In the other nine developing co-teaching partnerships experienced by Danielle,

Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl in which special educators played a minimal role in planning,

the participants primarily described their role as reactive and trying to ensure that the

lesson plans presented to them by their co-teacher included appropriate modifications for

students with disabilities. For instance, Ian, Julia, and Karl, who were previously

described working in one developing partnership with novice general educators, made

general planning suggestions based on classroom observations of their co-teacher's

instructional practices (e.g., Ian provided feedback that his novice co-teacher "lectured a

lot [towards the end of the period] and didn't give the kids enough time for independent

work" (Ian Interview, May 10, 2022, p. 7)).; however, these suggestions were "usually

done after we see the lessons" (Ian Interview, May 10, 2022, p. 7) as opposed to

proposing specific ideas during joint planning sessions. Ian, Julia, and Karl all reported

that proactive planning did not occur because their novice partners struggled to get

planning done in advance. For instance, Julia described how her partner would say, ""Oh,

I'm just trying to do my lesson plan right now." So she would have no time to talk with

me… it's very unfortunate" (June 17, 2022, p. 6). Julia relayed this story to describe why

she normally enters class uninformed of the plan. Julia was not alone in this experience.

Ian also mentioned "I can literally walk in and find out what he's teaching that day" (May

10, 2022, p. 6).

   While this issue of last-minute planning occurred in all partnerships where the

general educator was new to the profession, the experience of being uninformed about

plans was not limited to partnerships with novices. In all nine partnerships where the

participants reported minimal collective co-teacher planning (six in addition to the novice

partnerships), the participants described occasions where they entered the classroom with

no prior knowledge of the lesson.

   For instance, Karl described how his experienced general educator co-teacher had

a great deal of previously created classroom content and posted all materials online at the

beginning of the semester. In this class, the general educator expected both the students

and Karl to seek out whatever information they needed from this resource. Karl described

looking for plans online when he said, "I would mostly look online myself to see what

materials were being presented to the students" (June 17, 2022, p. 7). Karl's co-teacher

considered all plans as set and ready to "plug and play" (June 17, 2022, p. 7) meaning the

co-teachers never met to discuss or alter the plans. The difference between this situation

and the other eight partnerships with limited joint planning was the availability of a

resource for discovering upcoming plans (the other participants did not describe having

access to an online resource with advanced plans); however, in Karl's circumstance he

felt a lack of power to significantly alter plans because "she had everything already

developed…months in advance" (June 17, 2022, p. 7).

 Instruction. Overall, special educators in developing partnerships reported

having more responsibility during the instructional phase of the class as compared to

planning or assessing. Danielle, Earl, and Ian reported that in four partnerships (two for

Ian and one for both Danielle and Earl) the special educator took on a limited role in

providing instruction. Ian described his role in the following manner:

> [A] lot of times, not always, I will do the warmups. Then the general education
>
> teacher will teach new lessons. I will go around the room and either check for
>
> understanding or correct misbehavior (May 10, 2022, p. 4).

Ian went on to say that all special educators should strive to have a regular role in

instruction because "it's important for the special education co-teacher to have some

opportunity to speak to the class in general" (May 10, 2022, p. 4). Danielle and Earl also

reported introducing new content in at least one of their co-taught classrooms but with

less frequency than their general education co-teachers.

 Special educators in seven of the twelve developing partnerships reported feeling

comfortable speaking up when the general educator was providing instruction (Bonnie in

one, Danielle in one, Earl in two, Ian in two, Karl in one). The most reported role for

general educators in all the developing teams was assisting the general educator in

providing instruction by keeping students on task and answering questions. For instance,

Bonnie described her role during instruction in the developing class: "She'll work her way through notes and then I'll just go around, and I will make sure that the students are understanding what she's saying and able to work through the problems on their own" (May 31, 2022, p. 6). In seven developing partnership classes (Bonnie in one, Danielle in three, Julia in one, Karl in two), participants communicated that the assisting role, as described by Bonnie in the previous quote, was their primary contribution to class instruction. Ian and Julia also described having a heavier hand in classroom management to ensure that "when the general education teacher [was] trying to teach new material [, the special educator's role was] to make sure kids [were] focused and that they [were] not distracting each other" (Ian Interview, May 10, 2022, p. 4).

In five developing classes (three of Danielle's and two of Karl's), the special educators defined their own roles in the classroom because of a lack of co-teacher communication and coordination about how to best utilize each co-teacher in the classroom. For instance, Karl said, "[my co-teacher] didn't require so much of me" (June 17, 2022, p. 8). In another instance that was previously referenced, Danielle described her role as, "I'm very much the observer in the classroom. I might help pass out papers…and be an extra set of eyes and ears. So I'm more inclined to…help individual students" (May 30, 2022, p. 9). In three of Danielle's classes, she only felt empowered to support individual or small groups of students opposed to leading instruction for the entire class. The role of supporting individual students that Danielle carved out for herself in the three classes where she felt like an "observer" is not unique. All special education participants (true and developing) reported serving in the support and assist compacity at some point during co-taught instruction.

In all twelve developing classrooms, special educators said they sought out opportunities to support individual students even if they were not pre-planned with their co-teacher. In one example, Julia described increasing her instructional role after her general education co-teacher "invit[ed]" (June 17, 2022, p. 6) her to work with students during practice or work time. In the all developing partnerships, special education teachers independently carved out their own opportunities to work with individual students in multiple ways including by meeting with "kids [who] come in late" (Ian Interview, May 10, 2022, p. 19), "work[ing] with a small group of students (Danielle Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 17), "practice[ing] with the students" (Julia Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 12), and "simplify[ing] and break[ing] down parts [of an assignment] they don't understand' (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 11). Each participant in a developing partnership described working with students during instructional time regardless of how they categorized the collaborative relationship with their co-teacher.

Assessment. It was rare for special educators in developing partnerships in my research to report sharing any responsibility when assessing. Only Earl and Julia indicated they had any role in grading assessments. Earl said he graded whenever one of his co-teachers needed help "lessening their load" (June 7, 2022, p. 8); however, he indicated this happened rarely and in only one of his two co-taught classes. Meanwhile, Julia said she had a regular role in grading, but it was challenging for her because it was only her second year with the subject matter, and she was just learning the content. As Julia said, "it's harder for me…but she's still asking me to grade them…I will have to look…many, many times" (June 17, 2022, p. 10). While Julia was grateful that her co-teacher "did respect the scores I give to the children" (June 17, 2022, p. 10), the comment

previously referenced about the difficulty Julia experienced grading assignments in a timely manner, left the impression on me that Julia felt her co-teacher could have been more considerate of the additional time needed for Julia to review the assessments.

The only other role special educators played in assessing students was offering feedback on draft assessments before they were administered, which occurred in Karl and Julia's classes. As Julia describes, "she always sent [it] to me first…and I will give her feedback" (June 17, 2022, p. 10). Karl's partnership with the novice general education teacher, he describes him and his co-teacher "coming up with questions" (June 17, 2022, p. 10); however, Karl's situation differed from Julia's in that both his general educator partners "wanted to do the grading" (June 17, 2022, p. 10). In general, developing participants communicated that the special educator role in assessment was largely relegated to observing student understanding of formative classwork and offering supports to individual students during instruction.

Summary. While the planning, instructing, and assessment process was less collaborative for teachers in developing partnerships than for those in true partnerships, some special educators in developing partnerships described collaborative responsibilities growing over time. Examples include Julia gaining assessment responsibilities or Ian regularly leading the warm-ups during instruction. This growth is something that Gately and Gately (2001) said is important for the improvement of a collaborative relationship and provides evidence that a partnership is not stuck. I will elaborate on this idea when interpreting findings later in this section when discussing my third research question regarding how collaboration impacts special educators' desire to continue or end their co-teacher partnerships.

Perceptions

When evaluating Co-Teacher-Classroom-Fit, teachers' individual perceptions of their classroom experience factor heavily in this determination (Ashton, 2014; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Moin et al., 2009; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). As such, it is important to understand how special education teachers perceive their collaborative experience with their co-teachers. When analyzing interview data, four themes emerged related to this perception: the special educator's confidence in the subject matter, the alignment of the co-teachers' values, the general educator's flexibility and adaptability when their special education co-teacher makes suggestions, and the distribution of power and views of classroom ownership in the co-taught class. In this section, I discuss findings of the special educators in true co-teaching partnerships and then those in developing partnerships.

High Levels of Subject Matter Confidence for Special Educators in True Partnerships

For purposes of this report, I define confidence in the subject matter as the special educator feeling comfortable presenting new material to students in the co-taught class on a daily basis. All participants in true collaborative partnerships communicated high levels of subject matter confidence. For example, Colin said, "we're able to teach the same exact lessons and not miss a beat if one of us isn't there" (May 20, 2022, p. 12). All special educator participants in true partnerships attributed this confidence to familiarity with the subject matter and their partners: "[It was] just right up my alley…And so that's why I [felt] more comfortable. And obviously I've work[ed] with [my co-teachers] for a number of years so [it was] kind of seamless" (Colin Interview, May 20, 2022, pp. 16-17). All the co-teachers in true partnerships had worked together for multiple school

years. In addition, each special educator in true partnerships had had the opportunity to

teach the same subject matter for consecutive years (ranging from two to sixteen). The

participant with the most extensive experience was certified in one course she co-teaches

and helped develop the curriculum for the other class she teaches. Colin made a comment

exemplifying how experience increased confidence and translated into his ability to have

a stronger classroom role. As Colin described, "yes, it's definitely comfortable" (May 20,

2022, p. 6) and added:

> [I]t's kinda funny because whenever [Lisa] has a sub, she really doesn't have a
>
> sub because she has me…So, the same content that [the students] would have
>
> received from Lisa, I'm gonna provide that same exact content…That's the
>
> beauty of it. (May 20, 2022, p. 12)

 Meanwhile, Alex described how difficult it was earlier in her career when she had less

comfort with the subject matter in her assigned courses:

> It was like, "Okay. This year, you're gonna teach da da da." And then, my first
>
> couple years here, I had like, five different subjects I was in, and it was like, "Oh
>
> my goodness gracious." You know? I was thrown...(laughs) I'll never forget, I was
>
> thrown into Algebra, I'm like, "I don't know algebra. (laughs) I don't know algebra
>
> at all, you guys." And I had to learn it, so it was always, you know... You never
>
> knew what you were gonna get from year to year. (May 4, 2022, p. 16)

  Overall, quotations such as these suggested that familiarity with the subject matter bred

confidence allowing the special educators to contribute to more areas of the class than if

they were first learning the curriculum. My framework argues that co-teachers are only

truly collaborating when they exhibit shared decision-making (Friend & Cook, 1990)

when planning, instructing, and assessing (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Alex's experience aligns with Gately and Gately's (2001) argument that teachers can only make a certain degree of collaborative progress until both teachers possess some comfort with the subject matter. I will expand on this idea in my interpretation section when considering how subject matter confidence relates to my research questions regarding factors influencing collaboration and how collaboration impacts special educators' decision to extend their co-teaching partnerships.

Varied Subject Confidence Levels for Participants in Developing Partnerships

Unlike the teachers in true partnerships, participants in developing partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl) had varying levels of subject matter confidence. Three of the six special educators in developing partnerships (Danielle, Ian, and Karl) had confidence in at least one preparation or a course of study within a subject (Cannon et al., 2002). To quantify this differently, of the nine different preparations taught by participants in developing co-taught classes, special educators perceived themselves as confident in five classes. Most of the teachers with perceived confidence taught the same preparation for multiple and/or consecutive years. Two participants (Danielle and Karl) that exhibited high levels of confidence had considered a licensure endorsement in the co-taught class's subject matter. Danielle was one of these teachers, and she described her comfort level in the following manner: "I'm very familiar with…the curriculum. I've taken all the courses on it. I just don't have the endorsement to teach it by myself" (May 30, 2022, p. 9). Danielle went on to describe how her knowledge contributed to her confidence to lead the class: "I can take over the class in a heartbeat" (May 30, 2022, p. 12).

Most participants who did not express confidence in presenting new subject matter had two or fewer years' experience with the subject matter (Bonnie and Julia). Earl was the exception having over two years' experience in both his preparations, but still lacking confidence in his subject area knowledge. In one instance, Earl remarked,

I'm still kind of figuring out some things. It's definitely not

my background. So, I struggle with some topics. With that, you

know, the kids are like, hey, is this right? I'm like, oh, let's figure it out together,

(laughs) (June 7, 2022, p. 3)

Earl's lack of confidence included a preparation for which he was considering getting a licensure endorsement.

Sometimes I'll jump in and [my co-teacher will] be like, "Hey, do you want

to take this?" And I'm like, "Yeah, sure." So, you know, I

think it all…really kind of depends on, on the topic, how comfortable I am with

it and then…we can go from there…You know, there are some sometimes where

yeah, I'll take over and lead, but for a majority, yeah. It's, it's…assist.

(June 7, 2022, p. 7)

In this instance, Earl's comment suggested that his general education co-teacher (in the preparation he was pursuing licensure) was confident in Earl's abilities and was willing to turn over more instructional responsibilities to him, while Earl seemed to lack confidence in his own knowledge and skills. Other developing special education co-teacher participants (Bonnie and Julia) with less subject area experience than Earl also seemed more likely to defer instructional responsibilities to their general education co-

teachers. For instance, Julia described her reasons for not providing new content to the

students:

> When she's teaching, I'm also a student learning. And then later on, I can help the
>
> kids…So no, we are not practicing really that co-teaching. I think if I... After
>
> another year or two, I would know more and then the patterns of what she's
>
> teaching. I think... If she wants to offer me the time [to instruct], I will. (June 17,
>
> 2022, pp. 16-17)

During my research, Earl's reluctance to take on a greater instructional role appeared to

be an outlier. In general, participants with more subject area experience and knowledge

felt more comfortable with increased classroom responsibilities when compared to those

with less experience and knowledge. Julia's experience is more indicative of participants

I interviewed with less subject area knowledge. Participants, like Julia and Bonnie (in her

developing partnership), with less subject area knowledge, were more comfortable

deferring instructional responsibilities to their general education co-teacher and preferred

working with students individually or in small groups. Subject area confidence and its

association with class responsibilities is elaborated on in my interpretation section when I

discuss factors influencing collaboration between co-teachers.

True Partners Report Aligned Classroom Values

Not surprisingly, all special educators in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin,

and Fiona) perceived an alignment of their individual pedagogical philosophies with that

of their co-teachers. While there were small variations in philosophies, all participants in

true partnerships described co-teachers sharing a student-centered pedagogical outlook.

When describing value alignment, Alex said,

I've been very lucky because both of the teachers that I work with, we have very

similar styles, and very similar ideals. Our ultimate goal is for the students, and

so, I've been very lucky in that, very, very lucky. (May 4, 2022, p. 3)

Similarly, Bonnie stated regarding her partners, "they're good people and I feel like their

intentions in education are, are pure. Like, they're here because they really, really

genuinely care for the kids" (May 31, 2022, p. 9).

In addition to direct statements about value alignment, participants in true

partnerships also indirectly communicated this alignment by discussing how both co-

teachers worked collectively to support students with special needs in the classroom. For

instance, Fiona commented that, "we work hard to make sure that we address all of the

learning styles of students in the classroom" (May 30, 2022, p. 4). This aligned directly

with Fiona's philosophy of "all students need[ing] a champion" (May 30, 2022, p. 3) to

meet them at their place of learning. Colin's description (referenced earlier in the

communication section) of Lisa supporting not only the students they share responsibility

for in the co-taught class but also Colin's self-contained students (May 20, 2022, p. 19),

demonstrated a shared goal of helping all students succeed.

In addition to the aligned pedagogical values, Bonnie and Fiona discussed how

their minority gender, sexual orientation, or racial status within their school and/or

subject contributed to a shared worldview. This shared outlook contributed to a deeper

connection between co-teachers and led to rich discussions about how they could

collectively serve students and build a strong classroom together. Bonnie expressed the

value in having two women teaching a subject where women are often underrepresented:

"I'm a Black female, and she's a white female. I think that perspective, I think that seeing

two women as the head of the class is very positive" (May 31, 2022, p. 12). She went on

to describe how their gender helped them develop a shared mission for the class focused

on showing diversity when looking at scientific contributions.

Relatedly, Fiona discussed how having two teachers of racial minority status

influences the classroom in a positive way.

Being able to have another Black man as my co-teacher, it has been really nice.

And I think it allows students to really gain something that they normally

wouldn't have in our school setting. So, to have two Black teachers, myself and

then my co-teacher, who is also LGTBQ. So the students really get to, like, be

themselves. And we create this space that is just so welcoming and encouraging.

And it's just really awesome to see in person. (May 30, 2022, p. 10)

Fiona also discussed how she previously worked at a Title I school and noted that the

increased affluence and lower diversity of her current school division was "quite a culture

shock" (May 30, 2022, p. 10) for her and an initial source of bonding for her and her co-

teacher since both were racial minorities in the school division. She also reported that the

co-teachers' joint minority status helped Fiona acclimate to the school and helped them

together improve student learning because they jointly strove to bring more diverse

perspectives into the classroom. In each of these circumstances, the co-teachers' shared

minority status contributed to a perceived alignment of classroom priorities and

facilitated the ability to truly collaborate. In both Bonnie and Fiona's circumstances, the

shared worldview and perspective on running the classroom increased the special

education teachers' compatibility with their colleagues, which Youngs et al. (2015)

argues is important for improving teacher's sense of fit.

Unaligned Classroom Philosophies Contribute to Co-Teaching Challenges

All participants in both true and developing partnerships expressed that providing accommodations to help all students succeed in the general education classroom was of paramount importance for special education co-teachers and largely influenced their educational philosophy. As Ian said, "The hill I will die on is the students' accommodations. That's the one area there is no negotiation" (May 10, 2022, p. 3). However, unlike in the true partnerships discussed in the previous section where participants (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, Fiona) reported that both co-teachers designed the co-taught classroom both theoretically and in practice with the goal of helping all students succeed, multiple developing participants (Danielle, Julia, and Karl) reported that some general educator partners ascribed to this premise theoretically, it but did not always translate into practice.

Danielle, Julia, and Karl, all reported collaborative challenges stemming from their co-teachers' reluctance to provide mandatory accommodations. For instance, Danielle said that concerns over pacing of instruction and content coverage led to disagreements between herself and multiple of her co-teachers over the requirement to reduce work for certain students with disabilities. Danielle described the disconnect between herself and her general education co-teachers by saying, "they have the expectation like I do that all kids can learn, but they want everybody to get to the same point…[N]ot everybody needs to learn all the same information all the time" (May 30, 2022, p. 8). Danielle was referencing how her co-teachers struggled to follow the accommodation of reducing the length of student assignments without compromising learning standards.

Karl expressed frustration over his co-teacher's concept of "trust but verify" (June 17, 2022, p. 11). At the beginning of the year, Karl provided his co-teachers with a summary of the accommodations of students with disabilities in their co-taught class. As previously discussed, Karl worked with two co-teachers: one novice teacher and one teacher with over 5 years of experience. Karl's co-teacher with more experience accessed the full IEP independently to ensure the accommodations communicated by Karl were accurate. Karl said that this was not simply to check for accuracy, but rather, he perceived that his co-teacher was more accustomed to working with academically advanced students and did not feel students in her class needed as much support as the IEPs communicated. As Karl said, his co-teacher "was less flexible when it came to students that had any differences…that needed more time or needed modifications on an assignment and reducing the number of questions" (June 17, 2022, p. 13). Then during class instruction, the same general educator would provide work guidelines for students but then largely allowed students to work independently for the period. The expectation in the classroom, Karl said, was that the students would email the general educator if issues arose on an assignment. Karl felt many students in the class needed more support to complete assignments. He described this situation by saying, "in my experience, it's usually rare that students will [ask for help]…[T]hey need a little bit more encouragement" (June 17, 2022, p. 9). When discussing both of his co-teachers' philosophies and support for classified students, Karl said: "There's a lot of teachers who are very flexible and very open to kids who have special needs…[In] both these cases, it was a bit more of a struggle" (June 17, 2022, p. 13).

When making notations during interviews, I noted that participant statements regarding co-teacher disagreements about what constitutes an adequate support for students with disabilities tended to elicit emotional responses by participants. This emotion was detected in participants' tone of voice when answering questions. I believe responses about providing accommodations and services were emotional because these actions are central to special educators' professional role in the school and the educational philosophies participants expressed during the interviews. When the co-teachers failed to agree on accommodations, it became more difficult for the special educator participants to feel like a cohesive co-teaching unit with shared values. For instance, Karl recalled making suggestions about student accommodations and encountering the following attitude from his co-teacher: "This is how I do it, this how I've been doing it, and I don't need any help or recommendations" (June 17, 2022, p. 13). Karl described how his co-teachers' lack of receptiveness to his suggestion led to him "request[ing] to be assigned different teachers for next year" (p. 12). Karl said his decision was largely based on the disagreements regarding how to support students with disabilities.

The other difference I noted in values between developing co-teachers related to classroom management and was generally not a major cause of participant concern. Three participants (Earl, Ian and Julia) in developing partnerships indicated that they preferred a more strict or lenient approach to discipline than their co-teacher. Earl described how the class was more relaxed without the general educator by saying, "when she's not there and I'm kind of like, all right, you guys can do whatever you want" (June 7, 2022, p. 7); however, Julia and Ian indicated they preferred a stricter management of

off-task behaviors than their co-teachers. Often a desire for stricter classroom

management led to the special educators policing student behaviors. Ian said that students

referred to him as "the heavy" (May 10, 2022, p. 4) meaning he was a stricter

disciplinarian. Julia said that she would manage off-task behaviors during her partner's

instructional presentation "with the least disruption to her [co-teacher]" as possible (June

17, 2022, p. 13).

The other difference in styles related to the presentation of material, with two

participants (Ian and Karl) saying they would have preferred less lecture by their co-

teacher (e.g., "[she] really didn't have the understanding of…what I feel [was] effective

teaching…so [she] defaulted to what she was comfortable with…just lecturing." (Karl

interview, June 17, 2022, p. 13)). In general, the interviews indicated that co-teacher

differences on instructional presentation or classroom management were handled on a

case-by-case basis and did not lead to a singular outcome regarding perceptions of

classroom fit.

General Educators Demonstrate Flexibility in True Partnerships

I define flexibility as the general educator's willingness to alter ideas or actions

after consultation with their special education co-teacher. In the case of true co-teaching

partnerships, all participants (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) described their general

education co-teachers as highly flexible with nothing off limits for discussion and

adaptation.

Planning. Flexibility is most apparent when participants in true partnerships

discussed co-planning. In one example that was previously referenced, Fiona discussed

how co-planning sessions tended to start with a discussion of student progress:

"We…talk about what we're seeing in the students…and then try to figure things out

from there" (May 30, 2022, p. 4). In this example, Fiona was describing how the co-

teachers allowed student assessment data to inform planning so class objectives were

more responsive to student needs. Using data to inform plans required flexibility on

behalf of both co-teachers because they needed to change plans regularly to ensure daily

objectives were appropriate for their students' skill and knowledge levels. Alex, Bonnie,

and Colin described similar experiences with student assessments leading to changes in

planning and instruction. Colin highlighted the importance of this flexibility when he

commented that "sometimes [the students], don't have great days" (May 20, 2022, p. 13).

What I inferred from Colin's comment was that some days students do not understand the

key ideas from a lesson and moving on too quickly can leave many students behind.

Colin said that a big part of co-teaching success was being "open-minded…[and] willing

to be flexible" (May 20, 2022, p. 22).

Alex discussed that her partners may have some strong lessons from previous

years, but they were always willing to make changes after their co-planning sessions.

When thinking of these sessions, Alex described typical comments from her co-teachers

that highlight flexibility:

Sure. Whatever you want to do. Which ones do you want to, you know, maybe

eliminate, or what information do you want to chunk? Where do you think we

need to spend more time on so that we really get the objective met by what we're

trying to do in this lesson? (May 4, 2022, p. 8)

All the participants in true partnerships expressed appreciation that their partners did not

view plans as static and had a willingness to make changes to support students with

special needs.

Instruction. Participants in true partnerships also described flexibility carrying over to classroom instruction. All participants in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) discussed how their general education co-teachers were flexible with either co-teacher taking the lead during instruction. For example, Alex said "we just take turns, who's going to be teaching, the other person needs to be with the students" (May 4, 2022, p. 9). I interpreted "be with the students" as supporting them while the other teacher presented new information. Fiona described how flexibility regarding who was leading instruction occurred more organically in her room and was less pre-planned:

> We volley back and forth…he'll say something [and then] I'll say something.
>
> [That way] students can start having a dialogue off of different things I'm saying
>
> or he's saying. (May 30, 2022, p. 5).

This instructional flexibility enabled both co-teachers to have a substantial role leading instruction. While research shows that this shared approach to instruction benefits students (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020), Bonnie and Colin both discussed how it reduced teacher stress in the event of an unexpected co-teacher absence. As Bonnie describes, "if I have a meeting, it's no big deal, [she'll say], "Okay go ahead. I got it. Or if [my co-teacher has] a meeting [I'll say], "Go ahead. I got it"" (May 31, 2022, p. 13). In Bonnie's example, since both co-teachers had experience leading instructional presentation, neither teacher was stressed by running the class independently.

Assessment. All four participants in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) also described how their input led to changes in students' assessments. For instance, Colin described his typical input as, "maybe we should modify this for this particular student…especially those who have shortened assessments" (May 20, 2022, p.

11). Colin went on to describe how these suggestions were always valued by his co-teacher, Lisa. Lisa demonstrated this value by making time to conference with Colin and then the partners would collectively design the best assessment for their class. All the participants in true partnerships described how general educator flexibility communicated that the general educators valued special education co-teachers as professionals with unique and important input and expertise. As Fiona said:

> He refers to me as the expert, in terms of what the students will need when
>
> it comes to assessing them and looking at how we can incorporate the resources
>
> for them. And also when it comes to having to grade. (May 30,
>
> 2022, p. 5)

While this statement was made by Fionna, it was reflected by all participants in true co-teaching partnerships. The valuing of the special educator's unique skillset led to the general education teacher taking their co-teacher's feedback seriously and altering ideas and actions accordingly. Later in my interpretation section, I will continue discussing general educator flexibility when analyzing how various classroom interactions between co-teachers impact collaboration.

General Educator Flexibility in Developing Partnerships is Necessary for Growth

Participant perceptions of general educator flexibility varied greatly in developing partnerships. Unlike true partnerships where flexibility was noted by participants during planning, instructing, and assessing, most participants in developing partnerships discussed flexibility primarily as it related to instruction. Additionally, I noted that it was common for participant perceptions of general educator flexibility to form during times co-teacher conflict or tension. Often tense moments occurred when participants provided

feedback to their general education co-teachers. In the experiences described below, some of the general educators were responsive to feedback (at least one co-teacher working with Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, and Julia) and some were not (at least one co-teacher working with Danielle, Earl and Karl).

In positive experiences, special educators discussed providing feedback on instruction and having general educators shift plans. For instance, Bonnie and Julia relayed that they provided feedback on instructional pacing after observing students' formative class work. Bonnie noted, "if [student progress] is worse [than we anticipated], we adjust" (May 31, 2022, p. 7). In other words, if the class was not learning the material, Bonnie and her co-teacher adjusted instruction. Julia described a specific example where the class was reviewing many terms and Julia said, "I feel if it's overwhelming for me, it's probably overwhelming for half the class" (June 17, 2022, p. 13). After providing this feedback, Julia's co-teacher concurred, "yes, we definitely need to review" (June 17, 2022, p. 14). In both these circumstances, Bonnie and Julia felt their co-teachers were responsive to instructional feedback.

Danielle, Earl, and Julia noted flexibility in at least one of their co-teaching partnerships when they requested more classroom leadership and the general educator acquiesced. Examples of this increased leadership included Danielle and Earl wanting to teach more lessons and Julia wanting to have a regular role in supporting instruction and working with students. In the case of Danielle, she was happy that her co-teaching relationship with Hermine (the co-teacher she planned with over email) evolved to the point where Danielle could run any part of the class [she] want[ed] to run" (May 30, 2022, p. 9). In Earl's case, he shared an experience (in the co-taught class where he was

considering licensure) that highlighted his co-teacher's openness to Earl increasing his

instructional role. Earl described wanting to teach a specific unit where he really liked the

subject matter and told his co-teacher "I got this" (meaning a series of lessons), whereby

Earl designed the lessons and ran instruction. After having the experience, Earl said "I

think that [leading instruction] was probably the best time of the year" (June 7, 2022, p.

8). Earl was describing how leading instruction during one unit was his favorite

experience in the co-taught class.

Julia's co-teaching relationship progressed from an early experience where her

co-teacher "never introduced [her] to the students" (June 17, 2022, p. 19) to her co-

teacher "always ask[ing] [her], would I like to participate…[or] create some problems for

the kids to answer" (p. 20); Julia said that she assumed her general education co-teacher

had a previous bad experience co-teaching and took a while to start accepting Julia as a

partner. In each of these circumstances, the developing participants gained more of a role

in the classroom through consultation with their co-teacher.

As previously noted, Ian, Julia, and Karl co-taught with and regularly gave

feedback to their novice general education co-teachers. All three participants used these

interactions and responses as a gauge of partner flexibility. Ian noted that working with

new general educators was a process for both co-teachers until the new teachers "find

their footing" (May 10, 2022, p. 10). Both Ian and Julia were pleased with the growing

flexibility of their co-teachers. Ian noted regarding his co-teacher, "he's open to change

and because we connect well, I know that he's going to move into a direction

continuously where the class will be successful" (May 10, 2022, p. 13). Julia noted that

she provided more feedback and that it was better received in the second year of their

partnership. "I know her teaching style, and she's accepting my feedback more. So I feel I'm more respected and I'm being more helpful to all the students" (June 17, 2022, p. 18). Meanwhile, Karl found his novice general education co-teacher more challenging to work with and less flexible than Ian or Julia's novice co-teacher. Karl noted that when he offered feedback, his co-teacher would seek out the advice of another content area teacher and then ignore thoughts shared by both Karl and the general educator mentor teacher: "She always wanted to start stuff from scratch…which resulted in her being very stressed out…and that was a challenge" (June 17, 2022, p. 12). This quote suggests that, in Karl's opinion, his co-teacher's lack of flexibility led to higher stress and less effective lessons. Karl's experience contrasted with the previously referenced experiences of Julia and Ian, who indicated that general educator flexibility contributed to growth in their collaborative co-teaching relationships. In Karl's case, a lack of flexibility and inability for his general education co-teacher to accept his expertise seems to have prevented the collaborative relationship from progressing.

In addition to Karl's challenges with his novice partner, Karl also found challenges with co-teacher flexibility in his partnership with a more experienced general education co-teacher. Additionally, Danielle and Earl described experiences in classes where they perceived little to no general educator flexibility.

In Earl's experience, he felt one of his co-teachers (previously referenced as having non-existent communication with Earl) wanted complete ownership of the class. Her desire for control and independence made her unopen to suggestions from Earl or other teachers in her department. As Earl recalled:

It's tough because everyone else [in the department] has the same curriculum,

except for the teacher I was with…I think it would've been a lot easier if you're

on the same page with everyone else in the department. (June 7, 2022, p. 9).

Earl added that the "communication wasn't that great" (June 7, 2022, p. 9) and that he

felt his co-teacher's desire for independence made her unresponsive to feedback, so he

offered less over time because early attempts were not productive.

Danielle and Karl were frustrated with the constant struggle of getting co-teachers

to provide accommodations. In one circumstance, Danielle recounted an example of this

problem:

I said, "Well, this kid needs to have the work reduced. Do you want me to do

that?" And he said, "Oh, no, no. I'll do it." And then after that, every time it was,

"Well, they have to do all of it. They have to... They need all of this." (May 30,

2022, p. 8)

Danielle indicated that her partner insisted on reducing the assignment himself instead of

letting Danielle help. Despite this initial insistence, Danielle found her co-teacher

unwilling to modify future assignments or let Danielle do so on behalf of the student in

need of the modifications. Danielle reported that this episode, and ones like it, made her

increasingly frustrated with this partnership because she viewed her co-teacher's mindset

as inflexible and in violation of the student's IEP. Meanwhile, in a previously noted

example, Karl's more experienced co-teacher was used to working with students in

accelerated classes and did not want to alter her plans to support students with

disabilities.

I feel like her expectations were…these are all…upper-level students…they

shouldn't need a whole lot of extra support…I think it differs from me. I'm

just always more attuned to…trying to understand each individual student and

provide…whatever support I can, to address any, any weaknesses or challenges

that they're experiencing…modifications were a bit challenging in that class for

me to implement... Took more effort than, I guess, I would've liked... I said,

"We're legally obligated. We have to provide these accommodations." [It] was

always met with a little bit of resistance. (June 17, 2022, pps. 4-5)

 Karl reported that these types of interactions made him feel frustrated and increasingly

less inclined to conference with the general educator about altering the class to support

student learning. Overall, Karl described his co-teaching experiences in the following

manner:

There's a lot of excellent teachers there who are very flexible and very open to

kids who have special needs, kids who have IEPs and need accommodations

and modifications that I can make. Like, they're just very open to that, and it's

very easy, to work in that environment. But these, both these cases, it was a

little bit more of a struggle. (June 17, 2022, p. 12)

Each of these stories highlights how a lack of flexibility can contribute to a co-teaching

partnership not progressing or getting stuck as described by Gately and Gately (2001).

Not surprisingly, all the participants (Danielle, Earl, and Karl) mentioned in this section

who did not experience flexibility and growth desired to discontinue their partnerships at

the conclusion of the school year.

Large Degree of Parity in True Partnerships

Overall, the participants in true co-teaching partnerships expressed a sense of

agency in the classroom and a large degree of power sharing; however, even in these

strong relationships, there were a few examples of participants' words showing a

perceived power imbalance with power stemming from the general education teacher.

When describing my data analysis procedures in the methods section, I discussed

quantifying participant language as unified or siloed to help better understand whether

participants viewed themselves as a collective unit with their co-teacher or as two

individuals working within the same classroom. Below is a chart (Figure 1.5 on page

126) illustrating the results from that analysis.

Figure 1.5 – Perception of Unified Work and Co-teacher Team Outcomes

Percentage range for unified statements	Partnership Category	Number of co-teaching teams	Number of co-teaching teams the SPED wants to continue into the subsequent school year
84 – 100%	True	4	4
38 – 52%	Developing	5	5
22 – 37%	Developing	7	1

My analysis of participant language demonstrates that all four participants in true

partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) referred to actions within their co-taught

classroom(s) as collective or unified at least 84 percent of the time with one participant

describing work within one classroom as collective 100 percent of the time (see Figure

1.5 above for percentages and to compare results). As I will discuss later, the percentage

of collective statements made in true partnerships was at least 32 percentage points

higher than developing partnerships with the highest levels of collective action. The high

percentage of collective statements in true partnerships is evidence that Alex, Bonnie,

Colin, and Fiona held a perception that their co-taught classes were jointly run. This

finding supports my categorization of these partnerships as true collaborative efforts and

aligns with Little (1990) who said collaboration occurs when "teachers' decisions pursue

a single course of action in concert" (p. 520). In other words, teachers are collaborating

when they engage in joint work whereby there is shared responsibility. By referring to

work produced and actions completed by co-teaching partners as collectively ("we"), it

shows that the special education participants perceive a degree of equality, joint control,

and parity in the classroom with their co-teachers.

 Alex and Bonnie both compared their shared responsibility as co-teachers to the

shared responsibilities of parents raising children. As Alex described:

 Don't go and ask Mom, and then come to Dad and...try to get a different answer.

 And so, we've been very lucky that we're on the same page usually, pretty much

 on everything that we're doing. (May 4, 2022, p. 3)

Bonnie similarly described:

 They'll go ask one parent that parent says no, and they'll go ask the other

 parent?...And we know that they've already asked the other teacher. And so

 they're looking for a different answer. Like, "What... Well, what did the other

 teacher say?" Like, I'm not gonna change my answer because you're asking the

 question twice. We both have a presence in the classroom. (May 31, 2022, p. 11)

Alex and Bonnie's parent metaphors highlighted how co-teaching teams viewed their

actions as collective and that they needed to present a unified message to students.

 Little (1990) notes that "teachers are motivated to participate with one another to

the degree that they require each other's actions to succeed in their own work" (p. 521).

This reliance on one another comes from realizing that a partner is bringing valued and

differentiated skills into the classroom. Respect for these diverse skills was exemplified

by Alex when describing how she appreciated her co-teachers' skills and vice versa. Alex

recalled her general education teacher appreciatively saying, "I just could not do what

you do. You just have so many different things you have to take care of all the time, you

know?" (May 4, 2022, p. 22) In this quote, Alex's co-teacher was describing how Alex

was able to support the co-taught classroom and still manage the rest of her job

responsibilities. According to Alex, her co-teacher was appreciative of the insight Alex

brought to the classroom about providing accommodations and supporting students with

disabilities. Meanwhile Alex appreciated how her general education teacher's subject

area knowledge helped enrich the class: "Does she know more than I do? Oh, heck yes,

much, much more" (May 4, 2022, p. 3). These statements provide evidence of co-

teachers realizing their partner was bringing unique skills into the classroom. Leveraging

each other's skills helped improve class instruction for the students and simplified each

co-teacher's workload because they could rely on their partner's talents.

      Despite the previously referenced high levels of shared worked in true

partnerships, a few special education participants in these classrooms still indicated that

general educators had more power in the relationship. For instance, Alex and Fiona

described how the general educators have a larger desire to take "the lead" (Fiona

Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 5) during instruction or "put their stamp" (Alex Interview,

May 4, 2022, p. 10) on planning. In each of these instances, the special educators

described themselves as more laid back and willing to give up control as long as their

input was valued. Meanwhile, Colin's statements demonstrated that while the co-taught

class was collaborative, he still perceived the classroom as the general educator's domain.

For instance, Colin said that some students were embarrassed to raise their hand and ask

the "main teacher" (referring to the general educator) a question (May 20, 2022, p. 8).

Additionally, Colin described his ability to gain leadership and control in the classroom

stemming from the general educator's trust. For instance, when discussing assessments

Colin said, "she trusts me to grade assessments" (May 20, 2022, p. 10). This implies that

power was something for the general educator to distribute as opposed to it being equally

possessed by both teachers at the outset.

Despite these few instances of a perceived power imbalance in true partnerships,

most statements demonstrated a perception that work was collective. Additionally, most

statements by participants in true partnerships provide evidence that special educators

view the collaborative experience as co-equal. Even though Colin had a few statements

suggesting power was Lisa's possession to distribute, there were more occasions where

he described his relationship as "yes, co-equal partners, yes" (May 20, 2022, p. 17) and

that "our collaboration is just one thing that goes extremely well between [my co-teacher

and myself]" (May 20, 2022, p. 13). Alex described how her current partnerships provide

more opportunities for collaboration and empower her: "I never feel like an assistant

anymore, which is great" (May 4, 2022, p. 17). Fiona described how collaboration was

enhanced and parity was achieved through:

> Knowing that we're here to just support the students as best as possible. We want
>
> them to succeed. And so having that as our overarching theme of how we go
>
> about our class and our relationship, that makes it a little more smooth. (May 30,
>
> 2022, p.12)

When relationships are truly collaborative, the classroom is a shared space and neither

co-teacher feels a lack of ownership. The teachers in these true partnerships described

shared work and power when planning, instructing, and assessing. Not surprisingly, all

the co-teachers in true partnerships felt comfortable in their co-taught classrooms and

desired to extend the relationship beyond the current school year.

Power Inequity in Developing Partnerships

When analyzing power perceptions in developing classrooms, the special

education teachers were more likely to describe separate rather than collective work and

refer to the general education teacher as having a greater degree of power in the

classroom (see Figure 1.5 on page 126). While Ian said that he believed the appropriate

power breakdown in a co-taught classroom was, "60/40 giving 60 percent [of power] to

the general ed teacher" (May 10, 2022, p. 3), no other participants in developing

partnerships articulated that they felt the general educator should have more power;

however, all the participants in developing partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian,

Julia, and Karl) discussed or intimated ways that power dynamic skewed towards the

general educators. For instance, Bonnie's (who also was involved in a true partnership)

pronoun usage when she described how co-teachers interacted provided evidence of a

power imbalance in her developing co-taught classroom. For instance, when discussing

planning time with her developing co-teacher Bonnie said, "she's very thorough outlining

the objective for the class and what needs to be done" (May 31, 2022, p. 8). This

statement described Bonnie's partner as making the important planning decisions, and it

suggests Bonnie is taking on the assisting or observing role. Meanwhile, in Bonnie's true

collaborative partnership, Bonnie described planning as:

> We sit down, we have like, we have, we have calendars, we try to provide the kids
>
> with calendars…some things work well, some things don't…it just depends on
>
> [and impacts] the pacing of our classes. (May 31, 2022, p. 7)

When discussing the true partnership, Bonnie's pronoun usage suggests that she and her co-teacher were working in tandem to plan the class and had collective ownership over what was working and what was not.

Similarly when discussing instruction in her developing partnership, Bonnie described her co-teacher as running the show by noting that during lecture, "she'll work her way through the notes…I'll just go around and I will make sure students understand what she is saying" (May 31, 2022, p. 6). This contrasted with Bonnie's description of instruction in her true partnership:

> We go back and forth... We'll do one teacher, one assist, but then we'll tag and switch. So like if she does the content, like the, the lesson, then... we'll switch so that I am leading the lab portion of the class. (May 31, 2022, p. 10)

These quotations suggest that Bonnie's perception of joint work was much different in her true and developing partnerships. In fact, Bonnie described work in her true partnership as collective 100 percent of the time by only using pronouns like "us" or "we" to describe co-teacher interactions; however, her statements about her developing partnership demonstrated collective action only 52 percent of the time. This provides evidence that Bonnie had a perception of shared ownership and collective work in the true partnership but only partially shared ownership in the developing classroom.

Bonnie's experience was not unique. There was a clear difference in the percentage of work described as joint versus siloed when comparing developing partnerships to true partnerships (see Figure 1.5 on page 126 to compare results). While co-teachers in true partnerships referred to joint work 85 percent of the time or more, no participants in developing partnerships described work as joint more than 52 percent of

the time. In fact, co-teachers in nine out of twelve developing partnerships described joint

or collaborative work less than 38 percent of the time. The amount of perceived joint

work varied based on the degree to which co-teachers shared leadership and

responsibility when planning, instructing, or assessing. For instance, Danielle described

some co-planning and co-instructing with one co-teacher (Hermine, the teacher with

whom Danielle planned via email) saying she could run "any part of the class I want to

run," (May 30, 2022, p. 9). Meanwhile, in her other three partnerships, Danielle described

herself as "very much the observer in the classroom" (May 30, 2022, p. 9). Danielle

described work as joint or collaborative 40 percent of the time in the stronger partnership

with Hermine but only 22 percent of the time in her other three partnerships.

In some developing partnerships, special education teachers described their power

and ownership as being in flux or varying based on the circumstance. For instance, when

Earl was intent on teaching a lesson, he told one of his co-teachers, "this is what we're

gonna do," (June 7, 2022 p. 9); however, when Earl described the class more generally he

said, "it's kinda like her class, you know, she's been doing it forever" (June 7, 2022, p.

11). Meanwhile, Julia referenced a changing power dynamic over time. For instance, in

the first year of the partnership (as previous noted), Julia's co-teacher did not introduce

Julia to the class making her presence sometimes confusing for students. In the second

year, Julia asserted a desire for more of a role working with the students in the class and

it began with ensuring she was introduced to the students: "If you want to give me one

minute, I can introduce myself to the students" (June 17, 2022, p. 20). As things

progressed in the second year of their partnership, Julia found more opportunities to work

with students (e.g., "[My co-teacher] will ask me if I would like to review

something…I'm already using time to review with the kids" (June 17, 2022, p. 16);

however, Julia still described most decisions as stemming from the general educator.

When Julia discussed her increased role during instruction, she still described the general

educator as the one who provided her with more opportunities to work with students:

"She would invite me to participate in the activity" (June 17, 2022, p. 6). Julia's word

usage implies that her co-teacher had more power in determining Julia's level of

involvement in the class.

Danielle, Earl, and Karl described themselves as having no sense of agency in six

of their developing partnerships (three for Danielle, one for Earl, two for Karl). In these

classes, special educators described themselves as assistants or observers. As the

participants shared, "I'm very much the observer in the classroom…so I'm more inclined

to help individual students when they have a need" (Danielle Interview, May 30, 2022, p.

9) or "she does her own thing…so I [am] kind of like, alright…whatever…I think it will

be different next year" (Earl Interview, June 7, 2022, p. 4). In the second statement, Earl

was referencing his desire to work with a different partner next year partially because of

his perceived lack of power in the co-taught classroom. In these classes, the participants

supported student learning but needed to determine their roles independently and without

co-teacher collaboration. Minimal collaboration and a perceived lack power to alter class

instruction seemed to contribute to Danielle, Earl, and Karl feeling their partnerships

were not growing and requesting new co-teaching partners in the subsequent school year.

External factors

While classroom processes and perceptions warranted separate discussions for

true and developing partnerships, such was not the case for external factors impacting co-

teacher collaboration. I am presenting collective results for all participants in this section

since I did not identify patterns unique to one group. For instance, each participant

commented on the importance of having a common planning time regardless of whether

they possessed shared planning with their co-teacher. Teachers who shared planning time

referred to it as a "true benefit" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 13) or helpful, while

those without it discussed the challenges of coordinating times to meet with their co-

teacher. As Danielle described and was previously referenced, "one teacher I strictly see

in the classroom [during lessons], one of them…we sometimes meet in the hallway to

talk" (May 30, 2022, pp. 10-11). Such meeting coordination challenges seemed to have

led to shorter or less effective meetings especially since eight of the nine participants

described a preference for face-to-face meetings (e.g., "I feel like our communication is

solid face-to-face." (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 11)). As noted earlier in the

findings, Danielle was the only teacher who expressed some comfort with email

planning, and she still only achieved limited success planning with only one of her

partners.

     In addition to planning time, Danielle referenced the need for more open spaces

for instruction during her interview. She discussed how it was difficult to fulfill certain

IEP needs because she would have no place to work with small groups of students. The

need to "hunt down a classroom" (May 31, 2022, p. 17) for small-group testing or work

created unnecessary stress. Danielle noted that this stress of finding a room often falls on

special educators who are often tasked with implementing the accommodations. As

Danielle described, "it would be nice if I could take [the students] out, if I had someplace

to go…and I've had teachers turn me down" (May 31, 2022, p. 17). By teachers turning

her down, Danielle was referring to the unwillingness of some teachers to surrender their classroom for small-group testing during planning periods. Teachers' resistance to surrender their classrooms during planning made the logistical spacing issue Danielle referenced even more challenging.

Danielle and Fiona noted that there was inequity between general and special educators regarding access to online classroom materials. For instance, it was previously noted that Danielle did not have access to resources like the online textbook making it harder for her to plan instruction. Fiona referenced a separate digital inequity when describing KPS' online grading program:

> [The grading program] makes it appear as if it's "just the general-ed teacher's class…[that's] how things are seen; they're not always kind of equal by the students. Or by…the parents. It's a little frustrating…because the [general education] teacher's name is on the…communication…or they tend to just email him (May 30, 2022, p. 12).

Fiona comments focused on how the online grading program was her co-teaching class's main way of reaching out to students and their families. It allowed students and the families to review grades and email their teachers. By the grading program only publishing the general education teacher as the person responsible for grades, it elevated the general education teacher's classroom role in the eyes of the students and parents. As a result, this inequity often kept Fiona "out of the loop" (May 30, 2022, p. 12) regarding home-to-school email communication because parents contacted teachers through the grading program.

A positive external support noted by Alex, Colin, and Earl was participating in PLC meetings with their co-teachers: "The [PLC]. It's been tremendous" (Colin Interview, p. 5). All three participants said that PLC interactions enabled them to get a better understanding of their course and helped them become a better co-teacher. As Earl described, "[We] just used the PLC to plan out the week and stuff…[the PLC members] always try to find a common planning time" (June 7, 2022, p. 13). These meetings provided an additional point of interaction between co-teachers and introduced the special educator to a network of general educators teaching the same subject.

Professional development received mixed reviews from the participants. There were some true partnerships, like Bonnie's and Fiona's, in which the partners strategized which PD sessions would most benefit the co-teachers: "It's kinda cool that we pick different things, because then we'll come back and teach each other something that we learned" (Fiona Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 12); however, other participants said PD was "[not] helpful at all…they never give us time to implement it" (Alex Interview May 4, 2022, p. 19) and that it was "pushed to the backburner because of the pandemic" (Karl Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 18).

One takeaway from multiple participants was external factors make co-teaching easier or harder but the factors most determinant of co-teaching success take place within the classroom. As Ian put it when asked about the degree to which external factors impacted co-teaching, he responded, "I don't [think external factors influence co-teaching] because I believe most of the work is within the classroom" (May 10, 2022, p. 14). As such, improving external issues will support good co-teaching but it is no substitute for improving the collaborative relationship of co-teachers.

Interpretations

In this section, I use my professional experience, relevant literature, and my conceptual framework (see visual aid of framework on page 54) to interpret the findings. The interpretations section is divided by my three research questions and includes relevant subheadings. For my first research question about roles played by special educators in the co-taught classrooms, there are no subheadings. When interpreting findings for my second research question about factors influencing co-teacher collaboration, I divide my discussion into the following sub-topics: communication and values, confidence with the subject matter, flexibility and power dynamics, and external factors. When discussing my final research question about the association between collaboration and special educators' desires to extend or dissolve a co-teaching partnership, there are no subheadings. Below is a chart (see Figure 1.6 on page 138) summarizing my important findings and interpretations that I will expand upon in this section. The chart is divided by the three categories discussed in the findings: classroom processes, classroom perceptions, and external factors. I created two columns to highlight learnings cleaved from the findings to show aspects of co-teaching collaboration that strengthen or weaken perceptions of co-teacher classroom fit. As mentioned earlier, throughout my interpretation section, I will connect findings back to my conceptual framework and discuss how special educators' perceptions of strong or weak classroom fit connect to the desire for partnership extension or dissolution respectively.

Figure 1.6 – Interpretation of Results

Factors associated with classroom fit	Strong Fit	Weak Fit
Classroom Processes	Job interactions when planning, instructing, and/or assessing are collaborative and responsibility is shared; communication is frequent, purposeful, and two-way.	Job interactions when planning, instructing, and/or assessing are siloed and teachers make decisions independently rather than collaboratively; communication is missing, not frequent, or non-productive
Classroom Perceptions	Co-teachers demonstrate an alignment of pedagogical philosophies and worldview and/or personal traits; special educator language describes co-teachers as a united team with parity in decision-making; special educators communicate their co-teacher is amenable to their suggestions; special educator has confidence and experience with the general education subject matter	Co-teachers show a lack of alignment between pedagogical philosophies, and/or personalities and worldview; special educator language describes co-teachers as individuals rather than a team with general educator possessing more power in decision-making; special educators see their general education co-teacher as inflexible and unwilling to accept suggestions; special educator lacks experience and/or confidence with subject matter
External Factors	Co-teachers share scheduled planning periods; school division has a system for maintaining strong and committed co-teaching partnerships beyond the current school year; school division provides effective PD for co-teachers; administrative actions promotes parity between co-teachers	Co-teachers have no scheduled planning period; school division lacks a system for maintaining strong and committed partnerships beyond the current school year; school division fails to provide effective PD for co-teachers; administrative actions are not designed to promote co-teacher parity

RQ1: What Roles Do High School Special Education Teachers Report That They Currently Play in Planning, Instruction, and Assessment in Co-Taught Classrooms?

The role of special educators in co-taught classrooms ran the gamut from complete immersion in all classroom responsibilities to only assisting students who needed additional support during instruction. As the data reported in the finding section

shows, the role of the special educator varied greatly between participants who were in

true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) and those who were in developing

partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl). In my research, special

educators in true partnerships had a more extensive role in planning, instructing, and

assessing than those in developing partnerships; however, each partnership was unique

and there was not a formula that all true or developing partners followed when dividing

planning, instructing, and/or assessing responsibilities. Instead, my findings demonstrated

that classroom responsibilities were worked out organically and non-linearly by co-

teachers.

My findings align with the evolution of the co-teaching relationship as discussed

by Gately and Gately (2001). Gately and Gately said that co-teachers work on

interpersonal communication, physical arrangement, familiarity with the curriculum,

curricular goals and modifications, instructional planning, instructional presentation,

classroom management, and assessment over time and not linearly. Choices about when

and how to navigate this working relationship are determined by the co-teachers

themselves. The non-linear progression of co-teacher collaboration is also clear when

reviewing other research on co-teaching. Multiple studies suggest that co-teacher

collaboration varies due to a myriad of factors including past experience collaborating

(Arndt & Liles, 2010; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Thompson, 2012; Young 2011) and

knowledge of the subject matter (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Ashton, 2014; Compton et al.,

2015; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). Since the evolution of co-teacher

collaboration is not linear, it is logical that co-teacher roles vary from one classroom to

the next (even in classrooms with high levels of collaboration).

What was evident in my findings was that all participants in my study, regardless

of whether they were in a true or developing partnership, were constantly working to

carve out a role for themselves to support student learning. In true partnerships this effort

was part of the fabric of the class with both co-teachers working collectively to support

all students. As Fiona says, "we work hard to make sure that we address all of the

learning styles of students in the classroom" (May 30, 2022, p. 4). Meanwhile, in the

developing classrooms, co-teachers sometimes worked collectively to support student

learning (e.g., "we work together so well…I can create tasks and assignments that can

help the students understand the curriculum" (Danielle Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 14))

while other times co-teachers worked separately to fulfill their job responsibilities and

special educators had to identify opportunities, independently of their co-teacher, to

support student learning (e.g., "I'm more attuned to understand each individual student

and provide whatever support I can." (Karl Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 5); "I'll just go

around and I will make sure students are understanding what she is saying." (Bonnie

Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 6)).

In the true partnerships I studied, special educators had clear roles when planning,

instructing, and assessing; both co-teachers' opinions were respected, and work was

equitably divided. A good example of equitable work distribution referenced in my

findings was when Alex described a greater role for herself when grading and her co-

teachers had a larger role when planning: "You know how we divide it up? I can tell you

that the general education teacher tends to be the one that does most of the writing of

lessons…so then, I do more of the grading" (May 4, 2022, p. 10). In Alex's classroom,

both general and special education teachers had an equal voice in planning and assessment, but work was divided to maximize each co-teacher's time.

Co-equal roles for dividing tasks were not established to the same extent in developing classrooms, and co-teachers spent more of their time negotiating responsibilities. This negotiation was apparent in an example from the findings section when one of Danielle's co-teachers insisted on modifying an assignment for a student with disabilities even though Danielle was prepared to do it. In the example, Danielle said: "Well this kid needs to have the work reduced. Do you want me to do that?" and her co-teacher responded, "Oh no, no. I'll do it" (May 30, 2022, p. 8). Unfortunately, Danielle's co-teacher did not continue to fulfill this responsibility to the extent Danielle felt was necessary to support the student's accommodations. Danielle described how the co-teacher who previously agreed to modify the assignments changed his stance on work reduction and said, "they have to do all of it" (May 30, 2022, p. 8). In another example from the findings where roles were negotiated, Karl discussed how he did not practice co-assessment in his co-taught classes because both his co-teachers insisted on "do[ing] all the grading" (June 17, 2022, p. 10). In both of these examples involving developing partnerships, Danielle and Karl were prepared to take on more responsibility in the co-taught classroom; however, their respective general education co-teachers were not supportive of these overtures. In both cases, the participants communicated that the general educator made the unilateral decision to retain control of certain portions of the classroom.

The establishment of processes for interacting and equitable work distribution is something that Gately and Gately (2001) used to distinguish between beginning,

compromising, and collaborating co-teachers. True partnerships (what Gately and Gately would call collaborating co-teachers) still need to make daily decisions about planning, instructing, and assessing, but the process is smooth because collaborative roles are viewed as equitable and established through past interactions (e.g., Alex's division of labor with her co-teachers). Developing partnerships (which Gately and Gately would categorize as either beginning or compromising) face more challenges because, in addition to making decisions about planning, instructing, and assessing, the co-teachers are still discovering how best to communicate and divide classroom responsibilities (e.g., Danielle and her co-teacher's discussion about student work reduction). If the process for dividing up classroom roles does not involve a "give and take" and "open and interactive [co-teacher] communication" (Gately & Gately, 2001, p. 42) with both sides prepared to give up some control (Gately & Gately, 2001), it can lead to one or both co-teachers feeling disconnected from classroom decisions and dissatisfied with the partnership (Gately & Gately, 2001; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Such was the case for Danielle and Karl who did not perceive a sense of fit in their classroom and looked to dissolve their co-teaching relationship at the conclusion of the school year (e.g., "I actually requested to be assigned with different teachers next year." (Karl Interview, June 17, 2022, p. 12)).

RQ2: What Factors Do Teachers Report Impact Collaboration Between Special Education Teachers and Their General Education Co-teachers?

Collaboration occurs when teachers are joined in shared decision-making to reach a common goal (Friend & Cook, 1990). My research shows that multiple classroom factors impact collaboration including co-teacher communication and shared values, special educators' confidence in the subject matter, and special educators' perceptions of

flexibility and power dynamics. In addition to these classroom factors, the participants referenced multiple external factors that may also influence the collaborative relationship between co-teachers.

Communication and Pedagogical Values. One commonality amongst partnerships with stronger communication was that the co-teachers sought each other out for planning sessions. In the true partnerships, three out of four co-teachers (Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) shared a classroom for planning which facilitated efforts to meet regularly to discuss class responsibilities. The fourth participant in two true partnerships, Alex, discussed how she and her co-teachers went to great lengths to meet regularly: "Planning [time was] during lunch times, before school, after school, on the weekends, at night" (May 4, 2022 p. 19). Similar to Alex's experience, and unlike true co-teachers who shared a room for planning, teachers in developing partnerships (Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and Karl) often expressed having more difficulty finding meeting times. Danielle described this challenge in the findings: "It's meeting in the classroom…sometimes we meet in the hallways" (May 30, 2022, pp. 10-11). However, also like Alex, co-teachers in developing partnerships with more successful in-person communication (Bonnie and Earl) made efforts to meet at lunch or to coordinate times before, during, or after class: "She will come downstairs and we will meet during my class or we will talk over lunch" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 8). While most teachers in my research did indicate communication was stronger in-person, Danielle, as noted in the findings, said that email communication was used effectively for her partnership with Hermine and was necessary due to a lack of scheduled planning time during the school day.

The challenge of co-teachers identifying adequate meeting time was not unique to KPS, and research shows that most co-teachers do not have coordinated meeting times blocked off in their school schedules (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Moin et al., 2009; Ruben et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2019); however, if clear and adequate co-planning times are not established by co-teachers, research also shows that special educators are likely to feel more unprepared and to develop the perception that they are an outsider in their own classroom (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019). Thus, removing co-teacher communication barriers should improve special educators' knowledge of class plans which would likely contribute to an increased connection to their co-teacher(s) and stronger perception of classroom fit (Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

When considering opportunities to facilitate co-teacher communication, three participants (Alex, Colin, and Earl) referenced the benefits of participating in a PLC with their co-teacher in the findings section. One identified benefit of the PLC meetings was that they established predetermined and additional times for teachers to meet and discuss plans. For instance, Earl said that he and his co-teachers planned during class, advisory period, or lunch, but the only predetermined and scheduled time was their weekly PLC meetings. Additionally, the PLC meetings allowed the special educators to work with the larger general education subject team. As Earl describes,

> [T]he [PLC] always try to find a common planning time. So I'll be probably be involved in that with the rest of the other [general education teachers]. They all meet together as a department and I'll probably be…jumping into those meetings and planning times. (June 7, 2022, p. 13)

These connections allowed the special educator to ask subject-specific questions of more

colleagues. The PLC also provided an opportunity for special educators to develop a

collaborative relationship with additional teachers within department they co-teach,

which can contribute to special educators having more and stronger professional

connections amongst school staff and an increased sense of fit within the school

(Pogodzinski et al., 2013). While not specifically classified as co-teacher meetings, PLC

meetings also provided opportunities for an enhanced dialogue between co-teachers about

their shared classroom (and did so in all of my research examples but one, which was

experienced by Earl and referenced in my findings section). In the words of Colin, "the

[PLC], it's been tremendous" (May 20, 2022, p. 5). These meetings seemed to benefit all

participants but especially those lacking shared spaces and other times to meet.

Another factor influencing communication and regularly referenced by true

collaborative partners was the sharing of the pedagogical value that both co-teachers were

responsible for all students in the classroom. For instance, Fiona described that the

partners "worked hard to address all the learning styles in the classroom" (May 30, 2022,

p. 4). This joint understanding made communication more seamless because both

teachers were approaching their co-teaching arrangement with a similar mindset.

Scruggs, et al. (2007) found that compatibility was essential for co-teachers, and Jones, et

al. (2013) argued that a shared concept of teaching influenced perceptions of

compatibility and perception of fit.

In my research, participants tied this shared view of responsibility for all students

to mutually agreed upon procedures that provide opportunities for all students to succeed.

In Fiona's classroom, where there was a perception of shared responsibility, the co-

teachers agreed that the best policy was to have flexible deadlines or "submission

process[es]" (May 30, 2022, p. 7) to support students with special needs. Additionally,

Bonnie and Colin expressed that the partners modified instruction regularly based on

student understanding: "before [the students] move on to the second part of the unit, [we]

mak[e] sure that they understand the first part" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 10).

This understanding between co-teachers was less apparent in the developing partnerships

highlighted in this study.

In developing partnerships, debates about appropriate accommodations often led

to communication breakdowns between co-teachers and complicated their collaborative

relationship. A good example of this issue was Karl's previously described challenge,

when he needed to convince his co-teacher (the one with more experienced opposed to

his novice partner) that students in an advanced class still needed accommodations. Karl

described his partner as "less flexible when it came to students that had any differences"

(June 17, 2022, p. 14). As discussed in the findings, Karl was regularly displeased that his

co-teacher expected all students to work independently and did not provide the students

with adequate teacher support. In another example, Julia spent multiple meetings

debating with her co-teacher about the legally required extra time for students with

disabilities to submit an assignment. Julia expressed her feelings when she said, "By law,

if everybody gets it, that [does] not distinguish these Special Education needs, that they

needed to have more" (June 17, 2022, p. 8). In the end, Julia's co-teacher refused to

follow Julia's advice, which Julia would argue was against the student's IEP

requirements.

In both examples, disparate opinions regarding appropriate supports for students with disabilities led to unresolved tension between co-teachers. In both circumstances a middle ground was not established. Instead, the resolution was a unilateral decision made by the general educator about how to provide accommodations to students with disabilities in the co-taught class. Once the general educator took a position on accommodations, Julia and Karl both communicated how they worked independently from their co-teachers (as opposed to collaboratively) to provide students with the support they felt was required and necessary. For instance, a common occurrence in Julia's class was her co-teacher not wanting to inform students about missing work because she did not want to reopen and grade late work. Julia disagreed because of late work accommodations in the students' IEPs and felt that the students needed to complete late work to practice essential class skills. As Julia recounted:

> I will track with these kids. And a couple times my co-teacher will come to me and say, "[Julia], would you please not tell them they have missing assignments," after she closed the assignment"…and I said, "well the purpose for the assignments is for them to practice"…So a few times, she would not accept the late assignments and I said I would accept them. (June 17, 2022, pp. 8-9)

In this circumstance, Julia and her co-teacher disagreed about both accommodations and late work leading to Julia making independent decisions about accepting late assignments. Meanwhile, Karl communicated (and it was previously noted) that his experienced co-teacher felt their advanced students did not need as many accommodations as the IEPs specified and, as a result, "modifications were a bit challenging in that class for [Karl] to implement" (June 17, 2022, p. 5). As a result, Karl

ended up working independently from his co-teacher in the classroom with these students

to provide as much support as he could. In both circumstances, the disconnect between

co-teachers about how to support students with disabilities made communication more

challenging and complicated efforts to forge a strong collaborative connection.

As discussed in my Conceptual Framework, true co-teaching requires joint

decision-making when planning, instructing, and assessing (Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

These examples highlight differences between developing co-teachers regarding the

delivery of accommodations. These differences can lead to challenges collaborating when

planning and instructing (Karl's circumstance) and assessing (Julia's situation). If these

challenges become so serious that a collaborative partnership stops growing, it can

manifest in co-teachers becoming frustrated (Gately & Gately, 2001) and failing to forge

connection which may contribute to a perceived a lack of fit in the classroom

(Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

Confidence in the subject matter. While the other collaborative factors require

the involvement of both co-teachers, perceived confidence in the subject matter is

dependent solely on the special educator. When analyzing data in this study, a clear

distinction emerged in the collaborative experiences of special educators who were

confident with the subject matter and those who lacked such confidence. This distinction

was best described by Danielle when discussing a previous co-teaching experience:

> [A] number of years ago I was co-teaching in an algebra class. Algebra is not my
>
> thing, folks. And I was very upfront about that. And I wasn't helping this teacher
>
> teach. I was taking notes and trying out problems and the administrator came in
>
> and they said, and they were like, "Well, why weren't you teaching?" And I was

like, "Because I don't know the information. I'm learning it just like the students

are." And I was told that, "well you're the co-teacher. It's your job." I wanted to

say, "well you're not co-teaching in a Russian class and being expected to teach

Russian." That's what being in algebra class was for me…it was all Greek. (May

31, 2022, p. 20)

In this quote Danielle was describing frustration with what she saw as unreasonable

expectations. Danielle was making the case that placing a special education teacher in a

classroom does not mean they are automatically equipped to practice true collaboration;

an understanding of the subject matter is an important factor which can enable or hinder

special educators' ability to serve as a co-equal collaborating partner (Gately & Gately,

2001).

In the example provided above, Danielle struggled to take on the co-equal

collaborative role during instruction that her administrator expected because she was not

comfortable with the subject matter. Earlier in the interview, Danielle expressed that it

was an unreasonable expectation for special educators to become co-equal partners in

subjects where they have a little to no understanding of the curriculum. Danielle

described how she attempted to overcome her lack of subject area knowledge in the

algebra class scenario by searching for support from the literature on how best to

collaborate when she was not confident in the subject matter, but she struggled to find

helpful guidance: "I was looking at co-teaching research…and it was [difficult] to find

something more high school appropriate and not elementary appropriate" (May 30, 2022,

p. 18). Danielle went on to say that it was more likely for a secondary special educator

rather than a primary school educator to run into challenges understanding the curriculum

because "it's so content specific" (May 30, 2022, p. 18). Danielle argued that primary

school special educators would often be "moderately successful" (May 30, 2022, p. 18)

because of less specific content. Danielle said this challenge was not emphasized enough

at her high school or in the literature when co-teachers were moved into an unfamiliar

subject.

The literature reinforces Danielle's argument that acquiring subject matter

expertise is more challenging at the secondary level (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch,

2013; Keefe & Moore, 2004) and that better subject area knowledge facilitates efforts to

co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore,

2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). Gately and Gately (2001) discuss how special educators do

not need to a have an equal command of the subject matter as their general education co-

teachers, but special educators need enough of an understanding of the subject matter to

make informed collaborative contributions. Gately and Gately also argue that knowledge

of the subject matter impacts how co-teachers collaborate.

When considering the time commitment involved in obtaining a strong command

of the subject matter, Julia expressed how command over an academic discipline was

something developed over years as opposed to in a matter of weeks or months. Julia was

in the second year of a co-teaching partnership in a subject of which she had no prior

knowledge. When considering its impact on co-teaching collaboration, Julia suggested

that she may be ready to start taking on a more co-equal role in year three or four of the

partnership. As Julia described: "So no, we are not practicing really that co-teaching.

After another year or two, I would know more" (June 17, 2022, p.16). Julia was making

the case that as she becomes more comfortable with the subject matter, she will become

prepared to take on greater responsibilities when planning, instructing, and assessing. Gately and Gately (2001) argue that special education teachers are prepared to take on a greater role in the classroom as their subject area confidence increases. In other words, as special educators grow their subject area knowledge, they can collaborate more fully with their co-teachers. This idea is important when considering partnership retention because, as shown through my conceptual framework, when collaboration and shared decision-making increases, it creates a stronger professional connection between co-teachers that likely contributes to an increased perception of fit (Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

When analyzing my data from the perspective of subject area confidence, I discovered that participants with a greater degree of confidence in the subject matter (i.e., all special educators in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) and Karl and Danielle in developing partnerships) desired more classroom responsibilities. (The lone exception to this finding was Ian who appeared comfortable with the distribution of duties in his co-taught classrooms). Meanwhile, participants with less subject matter confidence (e.g., Bonnie in her developing partnership and Julia) were more likely to defer to their general education colleagues about planning, instructing, and assessing. In other words, special education co-teachers with less subject matter knowledge showed a willingness to take on a less prominent role in the classroom because they do not have the same degree of confidence when planning, instructing, and assessing new units as their colleagues with more experience with the subject matter. This distinction was clear in the case of Bonnie. As previously discussed, she had a wealth of knowledge in one class (over 15 years of experience) and only two years of experience in the other. In the class where she had more confidence, Bonnie was involved in a true collaborative partnership;

however, in the other she deferred almost entirely to her co-teacher. Bonnie situation

suggests, and Gately and Gately's (2001) research supports, that, to become a true

collaborative partner, special educators need to develop a degree of subject matter

knowledge and the confidence to deliver that knowledge to students. Unfortunately,

research shows that special educators are frequently shifted between co-teaching

assignments, complicating their abilities to acquire subject areas expertise (Keefe &

Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019).

My research also suggests that if special educators are allowed the time to

develop an understanding of their co-taught subject, they will gain more confidence in

their abilities, as demonstrated by Julia. As noted in the findings, Julia did not express

confidence or opportunities to meaningfully contribute to collaboration in the first year of

her partnership but felt more opportunities in the second year. Julia's improved

perception of subject area confidence enabled her to feel more empowered to make

collaborative contributions: "I feel better [in my second year of teaching the course]…I

[am] able to learn and retain what I have learned this year and then contribute to the kids"

(June 17, 2022, p. 20). This aligns with the ideas of Ebmeier (2003) who argued that

success in an endeavor will lead to teachers' having a stronger voice and confidence.

Ebmeier argues that this improved perceptions of one's abilities can improve job

satisfaction and commitment, which my framework shows contribute to an improved

sense of classroom fit (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al.,

2013).

Perceptions of Flexibility and Power. When considering the role of flexibility

and power in the collaborative process, it is important to consider Gately and Gately's

(2001) discussion of how collaborative teaching is an evolving process. There are

multiple examples in the literature of co-teachers not entering the classroom as perfect

collaborative partners but finding collaborative interactions improving over time (Ashton,

2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004;

Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pellegrino et al., 2015; Ricci et al., 2019; Swanson & Bianchini,

2015); however, there are also examples in the literature of co-teaching partnerships not

evolving and general educators refusing to give special educators a role in class decision-

making (Ashton, 2014, Bennett & Fisch, 2014, Compton et al., 2015; Hamilton-Jones &

Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Swanson & Bianchini, 2015).

Cook and Friend (1995) argue that for co-teaching partnerships to grow both teachers

need to demonstrate flexibility and an openness to feedback.

  Commonalities in all true partnerships in my study (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and

Fiona) were high levels of flexibility and the realization that both co-teachers were

bringing unique skills into the classroom. To demonstrate this respect for unique skills,

Colin described how his partner would ask him, "What do you think about this?" (May

20, 2022, p. 18) and he then provided feedback like, "we have this student…I don't think

that's very good for that particular student" (May 20, 2022, p. 18). Fiona recalled her co-

teacher referring to her "as the expert in terms of…what students need" (May 30, 2022, p.

5). In my study, participants communicated that when co-teachers listened to one another

and were responsive to feedback, they honored each other's unique skills. Little (1990)

described this honoring of each other's skills as something that is essential for joint

collaborative work. Additionally, the participants in true partnerships discussed that by

honoring each other's skills, the students benefit, which is an understanding supported by

research (King-Sears et al., 2014; King-Sears et al., 2020; Ruben et al., 2016).

The four participants in true partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona)

highlighted flexibility in examples where student learning was assessed and then

classroom plans were altered in response to the assessment data. An example of changed

plans from Alex's class involved her assessing student progress during lessons and then

she asked, "Are we losing them [meaning the students]? Are they understanding?" (May

4, 2022, p. 11). Based on Alex's assessment and subsequent consultation with her co-

teachers, Alex said, "we'll change it up a little bit with the next group" (May 4, 2022, p.

11). In another example, Alex described how assessment and feedback was a two-way

street and a regular reply to feedback by her and her co-teachers was, "you think this is a

better way? Let's try it" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). Discussions like the examples highlighted

in Alex's classroom demonstrate flexibility and the willingness of co-teachers to accept

feedback and subsequently alter plans and instruction for the betterment of student

learning.

In addition to flexibility, co-teachers in true partnerships also discussed co-teacher

parity when planning, instructing, and assessing. In each classroom, teachers were not

equally responsible for each aspect of work, but the co-teachers equitably divided tasks to

ensure the best product reached the students. During the interview with Alex, she

reflected on what advice was most essential for new co-teachers to consider and she said,

"How is [work] going to be split? How is it gonna be equitable?" (May 4, 2022, p. 11)

and that co-teachers need to consider, "What do you feel comfortable with?...Where are

your strengths?" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). Even when work was divided by true partners,

participants made it clear that all work products were jointly owned, and responsibilities

were shared by co-teachers. This understanding was evident when analyzing the language

used by participants in true partnerships who expressed collective ownership of their co-

taught work product in at least 84 percent of their statements (See Figure 1.5 on page

126). Shared accountability for student outcomes and work products are important

components of co-teachers becoming co-equal partners (Friend & Cook, 1990). To

provide a couple classroom examples of this perception of unified ownership and

responsibility, Fiona described reviewing student accommodations at the beginning of the

year: "We take a look at the IEP; we look at the goals; we also look at the

accommodations" (May 30, 2022, p. 5). When discussing instructing, Fiona described

how, "We greet them…either me or my co-teacher will give the instruction…we'll start

the transition into the lesson…we'll take turns on who's gonna lead the transition" (May

30, 2022, p. 6). In each statement, Fiona described the co-teachers working as a collective

unit. Gately and Gately (2001) discuss how time and experience collaborating with

another teacher facilitates efforts to develop more effective ways to listen, work together,

and problem solve (Gately & Gately, 2001). The authors go on to describe how this

experience working together and exhibiting flexibility makes it more routine to plan and

instruct together. The partner cohesion described by Fiona shows a degree of power-

sharing that co-teachers should strive to achieve (Cook & Friend, 1990; Murawski &

Lochner, 2011). When power imbalances are removed, teachers have an easier time

collaborating.

The importance of parity in a co-teaching relationship was expressed by Alex who

at one point compared her current experience to a past partnership by saying, "I never

feel like the assistant anymore, which is great" (May 4, 2022, p. 17). There are multiple

examples in the literature of unequal co-teaching power resulting in special educators

being viewed as an assistant by their general education co-teacher and the students

(Ashton, 2014, Bennett & Fisch, 2014, Bottge et al., 2018; Compton et al., 2015;

Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; King-Sears et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2019; Swanson &

Bianchini, 2015). Alex made it clear throughout the interview that an empowered special

educator was someone viewed as more than an assistant. Alex described how she can

truly collaborate and have a voice in decision-making that was equal to that of her

general education co-teachers. For Alex, this co-equal status improved her satisfaction

with the class and led to a strong sense of classroom fit: "I'm always like, no keep me

with [my current co-teachers]" (May 4, 2022, p. 15).

Bonnie also expressed co-equal status in her true partnership, which contributed

to her sense of fit:: "We're proud…I've been through quite a few co-teacher[s]…I can't

even know how many I've been through…so it's nice to…teach with a teacher who I

genuinely consider a friend" (May 31, 2022, p.12). While friendship is not required for

co-teachers to feel a sense of fit, I took Bonnie's word choice to show her feeling of

comfort and ease within the classroom. Other special educators in true partnerships used

other words to describe their partnerships, but all described a level of comfort and fit

within the classroom not experienced in less developed partnerships. Feeling happy,

friendly, and relaxed in a working environment are all characteristics that help

professionals feel a sense of fit and remain at their job placement (Jones & Youngs,

2012).

This flexibility and power-sharing was less apparent in developing partnerships and made collaboration more strained. Julia described how at the outset of her relationship with her novice co-teacher, Julia's partner made most of the class decisions. Despite Julia having more years of experience working with students, Julia felt like she needed to prove her worth to gain her co-teacher's respect and the opportunity to influence class decisions. Julia described actions she took to earn her co-teacher's respect: "I even went to training with her which is really beyond my level…she really appreciated that I [was] there" (June 17, 2022, p. 21). Additionally, Julia discussed other efforts she made which included seeking out her co-teacher at lunch time and participating whenever possible during classroom instruction. After two years, Julia said the relationship was still developing but her co-teacher was now providing her with more opportunities to participate during instruction.

As previously noted, Ian and Karl also worked with novice co-teachers; however, unlike Julia, Ian and Karl possessed greater confidence in the subject matter in the co-taught classroom than Julia. Both Ian and Karl discussed how they perceived their novice general education co-teachers as possessing more power in the classroom despite the special educators' greater levels of experience. This power imbalance led to both Ian and Karl's general education partners directing planning, instructing, and assessment in the co-taught classes and having the ability to accept or ignore special educator suggestions. Such a situation made it difficult to have true collaboration and joint work because only one partner was the true decision-maker. As Ian said:

> [I]t's hard because you also know as a co-teacher ultimately…the
>
> general education teacher has more slack than I do, which I'm giving them. So if

they do go a lot longer in a lecture and they're not giving enough time [for

practice], there's only so much I can do because I've allowed them to have more

power in that regard. So that's something where I can give recommendations, but I

can't just force someone stop teaching right now. (May 10, 2022, p. 10)

In each circumstance, when a power imbalance was described by participants, the general

educator had more power. In the same way that an equitable relationship supports

collaboration, an unequitable one is detrimental to it. Special educators are less likely to

provide feedback and work together if they feel their suggestions are unheeded or if their

ideas can simply be ignored (Bottge et al., 2018; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Swanson

& Bianchini, 2015). In the case of Karl, he described the lack of parity contributing to a

desire to dissolve co-teaching partnerships. Karl said a typical response to his feedback

was "this is how I do it, this is how I have been doing it, and I don't need any help or

recommendations" (June 17, 2022, p. 13). When interactions like this occur frequently,

there is a collaboration breakdown, or as Gately and Gately (2001) describe collaborative

growth gets "stuck" (p. 42). A collaboration breakdown or getting stuck was

demonstrated in the experiences of Danielle, Earl, and Karl. This collaborative

breakdown can lead to a situation where co-teachers share a classroom but fail to

collaborate in their work. When collaboration ceases in a co-taught classroom it may

negatively impact a teacher's sense of belonging and lead to a lower sense of

commitment and classroom fit (Friend & Cook, 1990; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Jones et

al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). In the cases of Danielle, Earl, and Karl, all three

participants indicated a lack of fit because they requested new teaching partnerships in

the subsequent school year.

External factors. The only external factor influencing co-teacher collaboration and referenced by all participants was planning time. The desire of co-teachers for improved opportunities to meet and plan is referenced frequently in the literature (Ashton, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Moin et al., 2009; Ruben et al., 2016; Sinclair et al., 2019). In my research, each participant discussed how having time and space to work with their co-teacher facilitated all aspects of collaboration; however, most teachers did not indicate that a lack of planning time was to blame for collaborative problems. Instead, most teachers discussed how internal factors weighed more heavily than external factors. For instance, while shared planning periods facilitated collaboration, co-teachers desiring a more collaborative relationship sought one another out to meet during the school day or after school hours: "Our planning [was] during lunch times, before school, after school, on the weekends, at night" (Alex Interview, May 4, 2022, p. 19). When I asked Ian about the role of external factors on co-teacher collaboration, he expressed that, "most of the work is within the classroom" (May 10, 2022, p. 13). In Ian's opinion, external factors can support or hinder co-teaching, but it was incumbent upon the co-teachers themselves to develop a stronger collaborative relationship.

In my research, a less talked about external factor was the number of co-teachers assigned to a special education teacher. The reason this factor may have not received the same level of discussion as planning time was that Danielle was the only participant working with more than two different co-teachers. As previously noted, Danielle discussed how working with four teachers made it difficult for her to collaborate effectively. Danielle's challenges were exemplified by discussing the varied and hurried formats she met with her co-teachers including her "strictly see[ing two] in the

classroom" (May 30, 2022, p. 10) and the other two co-teachers she "sometimes meets in the hallway" (May 30, 2022, p. 11). Additionally, Danielle said to manage communication with four different teachers she often discussed things over email. Sinclair, et al. (2019) found that challenges such as Danielle's are common among special educators and complicate efforts to create strong collaborative relationships.

Of the six participants working with two co-teaching partners (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, Earl, Ian, and Karl), none indicated that splitting time between partners made collaboration more challenging; however, Bonnie, Colin, and Earl all had a stronger collaborative relationship with one teacher than the other. In each circumstance, multiple factors contributed to one relationship being stronger than the other, but it should be noted that the stronger relationship always had more planning time built into the schedule with Bonnie and Colin sharing a room with their stronger partner for part of the day and Earl teaching more co-taught sections with the stronger partner.

None of the participants took a strong position on the topic of professional development (PD) helping or hindering co-teaching and collaboration; however, two teachers in true partnerships (Bonnie and Fiona) discussed how training sessions served as an opportunity for improved communication and learning for the co-teachers. For instance, Fiona and Bonnie commented that co-teachers would go to separate professional development sessions and teach each other what they learned. As noted earlier, Fiona said, "It's kinda cool that [my co-teacher and I] pick different things because then we'll come back and teach each other something we learned" (May 30, 2022, p. 11). This sharing of ideas led to professional development becoming an area that enhanced communication between co-teachers and provided more opportunities for

collaboration. Unfortunately, Fiona and Bonnie's experiences with PD were in the

minority. Alex, Karl, and Danielle were the other participants who discussed school

sponsored PD and they described it as unhelpful or a waste of time.

RQ3: Is There an Association Between the Level of Collaboration Between High

School Special Education Teachers and Their General Education Co-teachers and

the Special Education Teachers' Desire to Extend a Co-teaching Partnership?

The short answer to this research question is yes. As previously described, each

true co-teaching partnership (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) in my study demonstrated

high levels of collaboration, and the participants indicated that they desired to extend

their partnerships into the subsequent school year. Each of the four participants in true

partnerships described regularly collaborating and sharing responsibility for planning,

instructing, and assessing, which are key characteristics of collaborative co-teaching

partnerships (Friend & Cook, 1990; Gately & Gately, 2001; Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

All participants in true partnerships referenced the collaborative work environment they

shared with their partner as a major factor influencing their desire to extend the

partnership. As Jones and Youngs (2012) described, feeling happy and relaxed in your

work environment is essential for perceiving a sense of fit.

When considering developing co-teaching pairs, five participants (Bonnie,

Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia) expressed a desire to extend at least one co-teaching

relationships into the subsequent school year, and three participants (Danielle, Earl, and

Karl) preferred having at least one partnership dissolve after the current school year. Two

factors that appeared to largely influence decisions about partnership retention for special

educators in developing partnerships were confidence with the subject matter and the

perceived level of collaborative growth experienced during the school year.

It is important to look at confidence in the subject matter and collaborative growth

collectively. In general, participants in developing partnerships with more subject matter

confidence wanted more responsibility and power in the classroom than they currently

possessed. For instance, Danielle, Ian, and Karl all described occasions where they knew

a great deal about their subject matter and could have taken on more responsibility in the

classroom. Of these three, Ian was the only one expressing a preference for a secondary

role in planning because of his lack of interest in planning: "an advantage of being a co-

teacher is very little planning for myself" (May 10, 2022, p. 6).

Danielle and Karl both possessed a great deal of subject area experience to the

point where they were considering obtaining licensure endorsements. Combined, they

worked with six different co-teachers; however, both participants reported that they were

not consulted or had their opinions largely ignored in five out of six classes. As

previously noted, out of the six partnerships experienced by Karl and Danielle, only

Danielle expressed a desire to extend one relationship beyond the current school year. In

that relationship, Danielle perceived that her expertise was valued and that she could plan

and teach lessons within the classroom. As Danielle described, "[I can] really be part of

the education of the students" (May 30, 2022, p. 14). While Danielle was not teaching the

same number of lessons as her partner, she had seen growth in shared responsibility and

decision-making which seemed to contribute to her desire to extend the partnership. In

the other partnerships, both Karl and Danielle expressed dissatisfaction with having their

knowledge underutilized. As Danielle described, "I'm very much the observer" (May 30,

2022, p. 9) in the other three classrooms. Meanwhile Karl discussed how his partners were not open to "the suggestions I would make" or "the experience that I had from years teaching at the school and familiarity with the program" (June 17, 2022, p. 13). In five of the six partnerships described above, Karl and Danielle perceived little to no growth in their ability to work more collaboratively with their co-teacher and felt their expertise was underutilized.

      Meanwhile, Bonnie (in her developing partnership), Earl, and Julia all previously communicated perceptions of less subject matter confidence because they were still learning the subject matter. For instance, Bonnie described how in the subject she was "relatively new…I can answer student questions…but I'm learning as I go" (May 31, 2022, p. 6). This lack of confidence (that was previously noted in the findings) meant the participants were comfortable taking on a less prominent role when planning, instructing, and assessing. As a result, they did not expect to have the same level of decision-making as their co-teachers and focused more on providing appropriate accommodations for students rather than working on the intricacies of planning, instructing, or assessing: "I tend to be more of the supportive role in that class" (Bonnie Interview, May 31, 2022, p. 6); however, it was clear that even with lower leadership expectations, the participants felt that growth was necessary for the continuation of the partnership.

      The need for on-going growth was apparent in one relationship experienced by Earl who found one co-teacher relationship regressing during the school year, meaning his input was less valued than when previously working with the same co-teacher. As a result, Earl desired a dissolution of this relationship at the conclusion of the school year. When Earl discussed his rationale, collaborative growth seemed central to his thought

process: "next year, I think it will be a little more back and forth" (June 7, 2022, p. 7).

This decision seemed to be linked more to the lack of collaborative growth than to

concerns about subject area confidence since Earl said he was still learning the content.

Meanwhile, Julia also struggled with the content in her co-taught class but was learning

it. Also noted previously, Julia communicated that she was in the second year of her co-

teaching partnership, and, despite collaborative struggles along the way, she wanted to

continue working with the same partner in the subsequent school year. Julia explained

this decision by discussing how the relationship was growing:

> Because I think two years working together is still really very young. Our
>
> relationship is still young… But like I said, you know, we get to know each
>
> other more now. And I know her teaching style, and she's accepting my feedback
>
> more. So I feel I'm more respected and I'm being more helpful to all the students.
>
> (June 17, 2022, p. 18)

When making the decision to continue the co-teaching relationships, the continued

growth and progress of collaboration or lack thereof seemed to factor heavily into Julia

and Earl's decisions. In both examples, the teachers connected their thoughts on

collaborative growth with their desire to continue their co-teaching partnership.

When looking at participants in developing co-teaching relationships, there was a

clear division between the special educators' perception of subject matter confidence and

expectations of how much shared responsibility and decision-making should exist in the

co-taught classroom. Teachers with more subject knowledge (e.g., Danielle and Karl)

desired more responsibility than teachers with less confidence (e.g., Bonnie and Julia)

who were more comfortable deferring certain decisions to their general education co-

teacher.

Gately and Gately (2001) discuss this phenomenon by arguing that co-teachers

need to make collaborative progress to feel committed to the partnership. Without

sufficient growth, co-teachers may feel less connected to one another and look to dissolve

the partnership. My research extends this understanding by connecting the sufficient level

of perceived collaborative growth by co-teachers to subject matter expertise. To expand

on this idea by reiterating an example from my findings, as previously mentioned,

Danielle was confident in her subject level expertise and was considering obtaining a

licensure endorsement for the course she was co-teaching. Danielle said "I'm very

familiar with the curriculum, I've taken all the courses on it. I just don't have the

endorsement to teach it by myself (May 30, 2022, p. 9) Danielle felt there was sufficient

collaborative growth with Hermine (her strongest co-teaching partner) to warrant

continuation of their partnership because she was able to take an active role in co-

planning (i.e. "I can create tasks and assignments that will help the students understand

the curriculum" (May 30, 2022, p. 14)) and co-instructing (i.e. "we're working together,

we both present. I can take over the class in a heartbeat…I can interrupt her, she can

interrupt me…you know finish the same thought" (May 30, 2022, p. 12)). Danielle did

not perceive sufficient growth with her other three co-teachers and did not look to extend

those partnerships. In the other three partnerships, Danielle communicated that she was

primarily an "observer" (May 30, 2022, p. 9) in the classroom. While she did not

elaborate on her reasons for not wanting to extend the other partnerships, I took note

when conducting the interview that Danielle seemed energized by having more control in

the class with Hermine. In the other classes Danielle noted that whenever she wanted to speak it was an anecdote or an "extra part…not part of the whole system" (May 30, 2022, p. 14). It was clear from the comment that Danielle was not satisfied with her instructional role in the other co-taught classes (other than Hermine's) because she felt she had more to offer students than just random pieces of information "tacked on to" (May 30, 2022, p. 14) her general educator's instructional presentation. On the contrary, with Hermine, Danielle felt the collaborative relationship was growing and afforded her the ability to use both her subject knowledge and special educator skills to support the "whole system" (Danielle Interview, May 30, 2022, p. 14) of instruction in the co-taught classroom.

When comparing Julia's experience to Danielle's experience, Julia had less of an expectation for sharing control when planning, instructing, and assessing than Danielle because Julia was still learning the subject matter. As Julia described, "when she's teaching, I'm also the student learning" (June 17, 2022, p. 15). Julia communicated a desire for collaborative growth but did not see growth as leading instruction, but rather, Julia wanted more opportunities to work with individual students. Julia described that her lack of subject area knowledge limited the role she could play in the classroom: "I help more with discipline instead of instruction. So I'm doing as much as I can. I understand why [my co-teacher] has not let go yet for me to teach" (June 17, 2022, p. 16). Julia said she was encouraged by learning more of the curriculum every year and felt that in the next school year (if the team remained together), she would expect a larger role in instructing: "hopefully, down the road I will have the chance to really teach the kids" (June 17, 2022, p. 16). This quote shows that as Julia's comfort with the subject matter

increased, she would expect a larger role when instructing the students. The examples of

Danielle and Julia highlight a pattern that occurred in all partnerships except one (Ian was

the exception) whereby special educators in this study who had more subject area

knowledge expected collaborative growth to include more special educator leadership

opportunities when planning, instructing, and assessing in the co-taught class than special

educators with less subject matter expertise. In other words, special educators' perception

of sufficient collaborative growth in their co-teaching partnerships seemed to be related

to the special educator's confidence in the subject matter being taught. The connection

between collaborative growth and co-teacher job satisfaction was highlighted by Gately

and Gately (2001), but special educators possessing varying perceptions of sufficient

collaborative growth based on subject matter knowledge appears to be unique to my

research. The importance of sufficient collaborative growth is integrated into my

Conceptual Framework which highlights that growth in a co-taught classroom is

evidenced by increasing levels of shared decision-making between co-teachers when

planning, instructing, and assessing (Friend & Cook, 1990; Gately & Gately, 2001;

Murawski, & Lochner, 2011). When special educators perceive that sufficient

collaborative growth is occurring in a co-taught classroom, it leads to stronger

connections between colleagues, increased job satisfaction and perceptions of fit (Jones

& Youngs, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski et al., 2013).

Another aspect of understanding collaborative growth in a co-taught classroom is

the realization that it does not occur uniformly. Participating special educators in true

partnerships (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona) reported having a co-equal role in

planning, instructing, and assessing and all wanted to extend their co-teaching

partnerships beyond the current school year. Meanwhile, each participant in a developing

partnership interested in extending the relationship beyond the current school year

(Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, and Julia) expressed collaborative growth in at least one

pillar of the co-taught classroom referenced by Murawski and Lochner (2011): planning,

instructing, and/or assessing. The most common area of growth reported by developing

partnerships was increased special educator responsibility and decision-making during

instruction. All special educators in developing partnerships who desired to continue their

co-teaching relationship beyond the current school year reported increased opportunities

to introduce new content or work independently with small groups of students (i.e.

Bonnie, Danielle, Earl, Ian, and Julia). In the six developing partnerships slated for

dissolution, participants reported little to no role in planning, instructing, or assessing (i.e.

Earl, Karl, and Danielle).

Interestingly, when I began exploring how planning, instructing, and assessing

factored into extension or dissolution of co-teaching teams, I assumed one area would be

perceived as more important for special educators. Instead, I discovered participants

weighed the importance of planning, instructing, and assessing differently. For instance,

four participants said they felt planning was the most important part of the collaborative

relationship (Colin, Julia, Earl, Karl), two participants said instructing (Ian and Danielle),

two participants said assessing (Fiona and Alex), and one participant said it was a

combination of planning and instructing (Bonnie). There was also no pattern for teachers

in true versus developing partnerships elevating the importance of different aspects of co-

teaching. I did find that participants tended to express a desire for more growth in the

areas they found most important. For instance, Ian did not like planning and considered

instructing as the most important component of co-teaching to increase his collaborative

role: "I don't have to do as much preparation, which is good for me. So the main thing

is…instruction time" (May 10, 2022, p. 14). Ian felt special educators should always have

a time to lead instruction during a class period but expressed that a larger role in planning

would have decreased his satisfaction with his co-teaching placement. Meanwhile, Alex

felt her most important role was assessing student work and determining their progress.

As Alex said, "I'm assessing all the time" (May 4, 2022, p. 11). Without the ability to

grade and observe, she felt planning and instruction were ineffective. These examples

provide evidence that there is no singular area of collaboration to target or formula for

helping co-teachers progress into true partnerships. As Gately and Gately (2001)

discussed, co-teaching teams develop over time and not uniformly. The authors stress

there is an expectation of collaborative growth, but growth will look different for each

team. If a team is working together to improve their shared decision-making when

planning, instructing, and assessing (Gately & Gately, 2001; Murawski & Lochner,

2011), then teachers will feel an increased commitment to the classroom (Ebmeier, 2003)

and an improved sense of classroom fit (Jones & Youngs, 2012).

      The importance of collaboration on the desire to extend co-teaching partnerships

is relevant to KPS because it finds most teams dissolving from one year to the next.

While team dissolution is sometimes related to external factors like scheduling

challenges, my research demonstrates that all participants desiring cessation of their

current co-teaching team expressed issues with collaboration as the primary reason for

ending the partnership. As a result, in my next and final chapter, I make

recommendations to the school division to reduce the likelihood of teams dissolving due

to problems with collaboration.

Chapter 5: Translation to Practice

When addressing the problem of practice that the majority of co-teaching teams dissolve from one year to the next, there are certain factors outside of administrative control; however, there are still active steps that a school division can take to help promote co-teacher success and continuity. Participants recommended a series of school actions to improve collaboration for secondary co-teaching teams. In addition to direct recommendations, indirect statements made by participants or reported experiences also informed suggested actions to improve collaboration.

Recommendation #1: Identify Willing Partners

One way to help facilitate the creation of strong teams is ensuring general educators want to co-teach. Research shows that compatibility problems between co-teachers can make it difficult for a collaborative relationship to develop (e.g., Solis et., al., 2012; Stefanidis et al., 2018) and that not every teacher is comfortable co-teaching (Coook & Friend, 1995). Multiple participants described current or past experiences working with general educators who had been forced to co-teach. For instance, Alex described how some of her past general education partners viewed having a co-teacher as a nuisance: "[W]hy are you in my class? Why suddenly do I need another teacher in here?" (May 4, 2022, p. 13). Alex went on to describe that some general educators "want their own class, doing their own thing with nobody telling them what to do or questioning them" (May 4, 2022, p. 13). Multiple participants expressed how challenging it was to work with colleagues who felt the special educator's presence in the classroom was a nuisance. Karl who also recalled past co-teaching experiences where he felt like an unwanted partner suggested that administration "make [co-teaching] an option for general

education teachers…Is this something you would like to do?...Get volunteers to take the

co-taught classes" (June 17, 2022, p. 16). Thus, prior to assigning co-taught classes to

general educators, it is important to poll general educators regarding their desire to co-

teach. This hopefully will help reduce initial compatibility issues and set more co-

teaching teams up for success.

Recommendation #2: Promote Co-Teacher Communication

One of the most important aspects of co-teaching is collaboration (Cook &

Friend, 1995; Friend, 2000; Friend & Cook, 1990). It is important to take early steps to

promote a dialogue between co-teachers and help them realize the importance of

collaboration (Cook & Friend, 1995). Multiple participants described ways that new co-

teachers should frame early conversations to build this dialogue. For instance, Alex said,

> I think the most important thing is to get to know each other, you know? Um, see
>
> what your philosophies are, see if they're in sync, and if they're not, how are we
>
> going to work together if we have two totally different philosophies, how are you
>
> going to work that out? Who's gonna do what, is the... One teacher gonna do most
>
> of the planning and the other teacher's going to do most of the grading? (May 4,
>
> 2022, p. 20)

 Similarly Karl said, "I feel like understanding what one another's strengths are. What are

you good at? What am I good at? And identifying how that would work together" (June

17, 2022, p. 15). If schools promote these conversations between co-teachers at the outset

of their partnership, with a questionnaire or task list, it could help novice partners develop

norms and promote a strong initial dialogue.

In addition to early conversations setting new co-teachers up for success, Bonnie, Colin, and Fiona all discussed how sharing a classroom and off periods enabled them to meet regularly with their co-teacher and discuss planning, instructing, and assessing needs. For instance, Fiona described her co-teacher proximity as, "we're together all day. Um... all day, literally" (May 30, 2022, p. 5). Additionally, Alex, Colin, and Earl all discussed how participating in PLC meetings with their co-teacher helped them have a better understanding of the class direction, upcoming lessons, and how to maximize their skillset to support student learning. In Colin's words, "the [PLC], it's been tremendous" (May 20, 2022, p. 5). By supporting these opportunities for co-teachers to meet frequently, it facilitates collaboration by removing obstacles. In five of the six partnerships referenced in this section, clear times set aside for planning and dialogue between co-teachers contributed to stronger communication and helped promote a sense of classroom fit. The one exception was Earl's unsuccessful partnership. For Earl, his co-teacher had classroom values and expectations that did not align with Earl or her own department ("she kind of does her own thing" (June 7, 2022, p. 4)). This lack of alignment led to Earl feeling less connected to her and having a lower sense of fit. In this circumstance, the proximity of having a shared classroom may not have been able to bridge this communication gap.

Recommendation #3: Set Expectations for Levels of Shared Work

Murawski and Lochner (2011) discuss that collaborating when co-teaching involves working together when planning, instructing, and assessing. Gately and Gately (2001) said that every co-teaching team is not equally ready to collaborate in each of these classroom components on the same timeline. As a result, it is important to help

teachers determine their readiness levels for collaborating when planning, instructing, and

assessing; however, if the goal is for co-teaching teams to eventually become co-equal

partners with shared decision-making (Friend and Cook, 1990), each team member needs

to contribute in some way to planning, instructing, or assessing. It is important for school

leadership to communicate this expectation. Alex described how at her school this

expectation was only recently communicated and the impact it made on collaboration:

> [The kids] saw us as an assistant…they really didn't understand our role in the
>
> classroom…I didn't even know…I had always just assumed it was co-teaching
>
> (p.8)…then [a new principal] came along and said, "that pen should be easily
>
> passing back and forth between the Gen Ed. and the SPED teacher"…and that's
>
> when it really changed. (May 4, 2022, p. 4)

As previously noted, participants like Alex and Karl suggested that new co-teachers take

time at the beginning of their relationship to discuss work distribution and pedagogical

philosophies. To help support this work, co-teachers should have a required meeting at

the beginning of the year to discuss how they are going to work together when planning,

instructing, and assessing and set goals and expectations for their partnership. This work

will help them start developing a working relationship with shared expectations. As time

progresses, the co-teachers will learn about each other's strengths and alter goals

accordingly. However, an initial expectations meeting will support the building of their

professional relationship and contribute to the formulation of shared classroom values

which is an important component of perceiving a sense of professional fit (Youngs et al.,

2015).

Recommendation #4: Create Differentiated Growth Benchmarks

Building off the previous recommendation, co-teaching teams should have an expectation of growing collectively and collaboratively over the school year to avoid getting "stuck" (Gately and Gately, 2001, p.42) and devolving into an unsatisfactory working relationship; however, leadership needs to understand that a one-size fit all growth approach will not work for teams. As Gately and Gately discuss, teams progress at different speeds and in a non-uniform manner. Additionally, the special educator's level of subject matter confidence should contribute to how leadership differentiates co-teacher growth expectations.

Leadership should create co-teacher team evaluations opposed to just individual teacher evaluations. In these evaluations, co-teachers should have yearly benchmarks that are differentiated by each teacher's subject matter confidence. For instance, as previously mentioned, Danielle was considering a licensure endorsement in her co-taught subject. Danielle can handle much greater responsibilities when planning, instructing, and assessing than Julia who described learning the content as her general education partner taught it. As a result, Danielle and her co-teacher should have the expectation that they progress towards co-equal partners more quickly than Julia who needs more time to learn the subject matter. Additionally, Earl seemed to have knowledge of the subject matter but did not take on as many instructional presentation abilities. In this circumstance, a differentiated approach could provide Earl with a more rigorous instructional goal than Julia to support his growth. Making these evaluations team-based, will help communicate

the importance of co-teachers working together and ensure that teams set reasonable

expectations based on both co-teachers' subject matter confidence.

Recommendation #5: Provide Continuity in Special Educators' Subject Matter

Participants in true and developing partnerships discussed that multiple years

teaching the same courses enable them to build subject matter confidence. Gately and

Gately (2001) discuss how developing a comfort with the subject matter is something

essential for co-teaching. The authors discuss how a certain degree of subject matter

confidence by the special educator allows the partners to move beyond the compromising

stage of their model and into the collaborating stage.

Eight of my nine participants (Alex, Bonnie, Colin, Danielle, Earl, Ian, Julia, and

Karl) spent portions of their interview discussing challenges stemming from not having

subject matter confidence or the benefits of being knowledgeable about their content. As

previously noted, Alex and Danielle both relayed past experiences where they felt

unprepared to truly collaborate when co-teaching because they did not know the subject

matter. Also referenced earlier, Bonnie and Julia discussed how they were learning

information for their current preparations by studying the night before or by listening to

the presentation of new material by their general education co-teacher. Ian, Earl, and

Colin all discussed how it was a relief to get placement in a preparation for which they

had a degree of comfort. As Ian said when speaking to his administrator, "I made it very

clear I'm very strong [in a certain subject]" (May 10, 2022, p. 2). Earl also expressed his

comfort in one of his preparations by saying it is "like right up my alley" (June 7, 2022,

p. 3). An easy way for stakeholders to improve collaboration and special educator

perception of fit is by prioritizing efforts to assign special educators to preparations

where they have a degree of subject matter confidence.

Recommendation #6: Create Continuity in Co-Teaching Partnerships

Literature shows that a source of co-teacher stress is the randomness of yearly co-

teaching pairings (Ashton, 2014; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2019). While

multiple participants expressed confidence that they would retain their current partners in

subsequent years, much of that confidence stemmed from administrators liking the

pairing opposed to a systematic method for retaining strong partnerships. For instance,

Fiona said there was a system at her school for indicating subject preferences for the

subsequent school year, but she felt her co-teaching partnership remained largely because

"administration liked the way we worked together, so they kind of made sure that we're

together" (May 30, 2022, p. 11). Implementing a systematic method for determining

which co-teachers want to remain together and then ensuring those preferences are

factored into scheduling for the next year would help ensure co-teacher continuity.

Stability of co-teacher teams is important because research shows that co-teachers'

collaborative relationship grows over time (Ashton, 2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2013;

Faraclas, 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2015) and on-going connections with colleagues can

increase co-teachers' perception of fit (Youngs et al., 2015) which can support KPS'

efforts to retain staff (Ingersoll & Collins, 2017).

Recommendation #7: Evaluate Systems and Messaging to Promote Equity

Another suggestion influenced by this study is to improve equity in co-teaching

systems and messaging. As previously noted, Danielle expressed issues with access to

online curricular materials, and Fiona discussed that she was not listed as a teacher on the

grading programs viewed by parents. Both differences between special and general

education teachers create inequities and gives more power to the general educator. While

Danielle's suggestion may simply require changing access codes, Fiona's suggestion is

indicative of something that could be a larger issue. Research shows that general

educators tend to have more decision-making power in the co-taught classroom (Ashton,

2014; Bennett & Fisch, 2014; Compton et al., 2015; Faraclas, 2018). If KPS has systems

in place that elevate the position of the general educator at the expense of the special

educator, it is perpetuating this inequity and making the job of special educator more

difficult. KPS should evaluate its technology and messaging to ensure that it promotes

parity.

Recommendation #8: Institute Meaningful PD

Literature shows that a lack of strong professional development for co-teachers

extends beyond KPS (Ashton, 2014; Moin et al., 2009; Sinclar et al., 2019) but teachers

want guidance (Sinclair et al., 2019). Research provides evidenced that focused, directed

support can improve collaboration between co-teachers (Faraclas, 2018; Pellegrino et al.,

2015). As discussed earlier, Fiona and Bonnie were two participants who found ways to

strategize with their co-teachers to get the most out of professional development. Both

participants discussed how the co-teachers would look at information sessions offered by

the school, attend separate sessions, and then teach each other their new learnings. This

strategy is something that KPS should encourage all co-teaching teams to implement as a

way of gaining more knowledge from school division trainings.

In addition to the experiences of Fiona and Bonnie, Smith et al.'s (2020) study

demonstrated that just participating in team teaching enabled participants to improve both

their instructional and content knowledge. By locating PD geared towards co-teachers

and focused on authentic practice (like in Smith et al.'s study) it could help co-teachers

strengthen their practice.

Conclusion

Through this research, patterns emerged showing that true collaborative co-teaching teams desired to remain together because they perceived a sense of classroom fit. A perception of classroom fit for true partnerships was tied directly to high levels of co-teacher collaboration evidenced by the partners sharing responsibility for the classroom and engaging in co-equal decision making when planning, instructing, and assessing. Special educators in developing co-teaching teams desired to extend their partnership if they perceived a sufficient level of collaborative growth with co-teacher over the course of the school year. For developing partners, sufficient collaborative growth was case specific and varied based on the special educator's perceived confidence in the subject matters.

While this research helps us better understand the experiences of special educators within one school division, future research should expand on patterns identified. More research into how co-teachers' subject area confidence at the secondary level influences collaboration is important. Additionally, research of co-teachers at the secondary level needs greater direction. Most research discusses secondary co-teachers as a singular entity. Instead, research should realize the experiences of secondary co-teachers varies greatly based on their experience levels and should not approach them as a singular block of teachers.

For my research, the main data source was special education teacher interviews. If KPS would like to explore patterns identified in my research in more detail, it is recommended that the school division increase the number of co-teacher interviews and

expand participants to include general education co-teaching partners. In addition, KPS could conduct systematic observations of co-teacher work when planning, instructing, and assessing to better understand how co-teachers interact. Also, adding quantitative data by surveying of co-teachers about collaboration would serve as another tool for identifying co-teaching patterns that may exist within the school division.

Despite the narrow scope of this project, it provides insight into all my research questions and research supported suggestions for how KPS could address its problem of practice. In my research, special educators were shown to take on varying levels of responsibility within co-taught classrooms. Multiple factors influence collaboration and levels of shared responsibility including special educators' subject area confidence, alignment of co-teacher values, and general educator flexibility. If KPS adheres to my suggestions, the school division can improve co-teacher collaboration and special education co-teachers' perceptions of classroom fit. This will lead to more special educators wanting to extend their co-teaching partnerships beyond the current school year which will improve co-teacher continuity within KPS. Thus, KPS should focus on improving collaboration between co-teachers by reducing classroom factors that are associated with the dissolution of co-teaching teams. Efforts to promote co-teacher continuity will improve the quality of collaboration between co-teachers, support KPS' strategic plan, and benefit student learning.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Hello _____,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Virginia working on my capstone research project on co-teaching, and I am hoping to interview you as part of my research. I work at Alpha High School in Key Public Schools as a social studies teacher, and I am interested in learning more about collaboration in co-taught classrooms in KPS. My research has been approved by the University of Virginia (UVA IRB-SBS #5079) as well as KPS. If you would like to confirm my identity, feel free to send an email to my KPS email.

If you are interested in being interviewed or would like more information about my research, please reply to this email and let me know. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Mandel

Appendix B: General Consent Letter

Informed Consent Agreement

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this research is to explore co-teaching collaboration within Key Public Schools to determine the role that collaboration can play in strengthening co-teacher relationships and classroom commitment.

What you will do in the study: You will participate in an interview on co-teaching collaboration. Prior to interviewing, you will sign a consent form. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. During the interview, you may skip any question that makes you uncomfortable or stop the interview at any time.

Time required: The interview will require approximately one hour of your time.

Risks: There is little risk for you in this study. You are a special education teacher, and the study looks to explore co-teaching collaboration and your agency in that relationship. The main risks are your co-teaching partner discovering that you are reporting negatively on your relationship or your employer discovering that you are expressing negative attitudes towards your school or school division.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us better understand co-teacher collaboration and support consistent co-teacher partnerships within KPS. Since research shows students perceive better instruction when co-teachers collaborate and teachers report a better working environment, this data has the potential to improve the classroom and work environment for students and teachers including yourself.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your name and other information that could be used to identify you will not be linked to the data. Data and materials collected from interviews will be kept offline. Audio recordings from interviews will be deleted after interview transcription. Once your interview is transcribed, your identity is removed from the transcript and your interview transcript is assigned an identification number. From this point, your identity is kept separate from interview data. In the final report, data will be reported in aggregate or individual data will have details changed to strengthen confidentiality protections. Data will be stored for a year after the active phase is completed (anticipated August 2022). After a year, the data will be deleted (anticipated August 2023).

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study, data collected from you will be destroyed and not used in the final report.

How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study, tell the researcher to stop the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you withdraw from the study, your data will be destroyed.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Using data beyond this study: The researcher may utilize data for related studies on co-teacher collaboration. If the data is not used for another related study, the data you provide in this study will be retained in a secure manner for one year after the active phase of research is complete (anticipated August 2023) and then be destroyed.

Agreement:
I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Print Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. **Tell me about your teaching background and teaching philosophy.**
Probes: Tell me about your teaching philosophy as it applies to co-teaching. How does your philosophy compare or contrast with your co-teacher? How would you describe your familiarity with the curriculum?

2. **Describe to me a day in the life of co-teaching. What would I see and hear? How do you spend your time together?**
3. **Describe your planning process within the co-taught classroom.**
Probes: How are instructional goals and modifications factored into planning? How would you describe your communication between you and your co-teacher?

4. **Describe your instructional practice within the co-taught classroom.**
Probes: How would you compare your approach to instructional presentation and classroom management with that of your co-teacher? Tell me about co-teaching methods in your classroom: One-teach, one assist; Team teaching; station teaching; one-teach, one observe. Describe your assessment practices with your co-teacher.

5. **Tell me about the sharing of leadership in co-teaching—sharing planning, instructing, and assessing responsibilities.**
6. **Describe a co-teaching experience that you have had this quarter that went well. In what ways did it go well?**
7. **Describe a challenging co-teaching experience that you have had this quarter.**
8. **What is one goal that you have for co-teaching as you continue to co-teach next quarter?**
9. **Would you want to continue working with your co-teacher next school year? Why or why not?**
Probes: To what degree do any of the following factor into your decision: your relationship when planning, instructing, assessing? Are you and your co-teacher equal partners? Why or why not?

10. **Do any external factors (ex: planning time, professional development) impact you and your co-teachers' collaborative relationship? If so, what?**
11. **What advice would you provide to a co-teaching pair beginning their experience?**
12. **What advice would you provide to KPS leadership regarding co-teaching relationships and student performance in co-taught classrooms?**