

When mentoring meets co-teaching: A case study of interprofessional collaboration in a Czech primary school

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Rationale

As inclusive education continues to expand, co-teaching is becoming an increasingly prominent strategy for supporting diverse learners in mainstream classrooms (e.g. Friend, 2008). In the Czech Republic, however, co-teaching remains in its early stages and often takes fragmented, temporary forms shaped by short-term funding and individual school initiatives. Teachers are rarely systematically trained to collaborate, and novice educators are frequently left to “sink or swim” when entering the profession (cf. Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In this context, co-teaching holds particular promise as a form of real-time, situated support for novice teachers—not only through direct guidance, but also through observation and gradual participation in teaching (Roth & Tobin, 2002).

Theoretical framework

The study draws on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), particularly the concept of learning as a social and situated process. It also engages with literature on co-teaching as interprofessional collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2010; Nevin et al., 2009) and on mentoring in practice-based settings (Bacharach et al., 2010).

Research design

This qualitative case study explores a co-teaching partnership between a primary class teacher and a novice special educator who co-teach twice a week in a second-grade classroom at the time of the study. Data were collected through joint and individual semi-structured interviews, supported by visual mapping tools to capture the distribution of roles. A follow-up interview with the school principal added an institutional perspective. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns in collaboration, role division, and learning.

Results

The preliminary findings show that the teachers’ beliefs about co-teaching, along with external decisions (e.g., from the principal), shaped how they practically set up their collaboration. Although the relationship formally began as an interprofessional collaboration, it gradually evolved into a mentoring dynamic. The experienced teacher maintained primary responsibility for decision-making and took on a guiding role; the novice educator learned primarily through observation, inquiry, and gradual involvement in planning. While the roles remained asymmetrical, both teachers presented themselves as a unified team to students, offering both academic support and emotional safety. A key insight was that many of their decisions were intuitive and not explicitly discussed. The interview process itself functioned as a form of reflective intervention, prompting both teachers to articulate assumptions and reassess their cooperation. As a result, they approached the school leader to ask for more structured collaboration time and proposed expanding their co-teaching beyond the current twice-weekly sessions. The principal, however, perceived himself as supportive and communicative, while the teachers felt under informed and overlooked—highlighting a misalignment between leadership intentions and teacher experience.

Conclusion

Even asymmetrical co-teaching relationships can offer powerful opportunities for novice teacher learning—provided that trust, safety, and time are present. This case illustrates how co-teaching, when combined with mentoring, can support not only student learning but also professional growth (Roth & Lee, 2007). However, to reach its full potential, co-teaching requires intentional structures for reflection and sustained leadership support that includes active dialogue with teaching teams (Day, 1999).