

Innovative and Encouraging Research and Application of Co-teaching in Rural Settings: An Introduction to Volume 9, Issue 2 of *TPRE*

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Ninety-seven percent of the United States' land mass is considered rural and close to 20 percent of the country's population live in rural spaces (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). These areas face such challenges as higher poverty coupled with lower budgetary revenue, lower levels of educational attainment, and critical problems in staffing schools (Fishman, 2015; Grooms, 2016; Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). Although these issues are similar to urban areas, rural districts have considerable variability and specific needs that differ from their counterparts in urban settings (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). Unfortunately, rural schools are often treated by federal and state policy makers like urban schools, with a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the *problems* rather than from a strength- and challenges-based perspective (Fishman, 2015; Johnson & Howley, 2015).

One major challenge rural schools face is fewer resources, including adequate staffing. Rural education leaders are forced to consider creative and innovative ways to allocate and leverage the limited resources to meet teaching and student learning needs. The reorganization of staff with differentiated roles is one example of how leaders can leverage their resources for greater impact (Henry, 2019; Miles & Ferris, 2015). The articles in this issue demonstrate powerful instances of how co-teaching can and is being used to improve teaching and learning in rural schools.

The Origin and Adaptation of Co-Teaching

Teaching is a collaborative endeavor—not only between teachers and students but also between fellow educators. Collaboration within schools takes many forms and involves a variety of people. One such collaborative practice is co-teaching, which

involves the pairing of two or more teachers together in a single classroom to share the responsibilities for planning, instructing, and assessing students (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010; Murawski, 2003). In a co-teaching setting, both teachers are actively involved and engaged in all aspects of instruction.

In its origin, co-teaching was implemented with general and special education teachers paired together to create a more inclusive classroom (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991; Beninghof, 2011; Cook & Friend, 1995). Within the field of English as a Second language (ESL), co-teaching has also become a popular model for embedding ESL teachers in the general classroom (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010; Pappamihiel, 2012). Co-teaching allows for more individualized instruction in the general education setting, increases access to general education curriculum for students with special needs, and decreases the stigma for such students. Teachers benefit from the support and collaboration as they work together to meet the varied needs of their students, while the students benefit from the differentiated instruction and alternative assignments as well as greater teacher attention in the small-group instruction co-teaching makes possible.

Co-teaching has recently been used in teacher preparation and is considered more beneficial than traditional models of student teaching because it takes away the stark dichotomy between the beginning teacher candidate and the experienced classroom teacher (Carambo & Stickney, 2009). Research suggests teacher educators and teacher candidates believe collaborative learning has value, and the implementation of collaborative learning can have positive results (Ruys, Van Keer, &

Aelterman, 2010). Initial studies have also shown co-teaching to positively affect student growth in K-12 classrooms (Bacharach et al., 2010; Carambo & Stickney, 2009). Some benefits of the co-teaching model include increased collaboration skills, decreased student-to-teacher ratio, differentiated instruction for students, and improved classroom management. The aim is that co-teachers consistently perceive they are concurrently teaching, which gives student teachers a more engaged experience than is offered in traditional models.

Overview of the Issue

The articles selected for this issue of *Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)* explore the use of co-teaching in ways that speak to the reorganization of resources, specifically teachers and staff, to meet the learning needs of all students; the effects of co-teaching on student learning within rural settings; and the adaptation of co-teaching within teacher education to prepare more collaborative novice teachers. This special issue includes articles reporting on encouraging research being done in rural classrooms, a case study of a distance education program's creative use of co-teaching, as well as promising practices of co-teaching in teacher education.

The first article explores the use of co-teaching to disrupt the disengagement of students in rural schools, where teacher shortages and use of traditional teaching methods often contribute to a lack of student engagement. Wendy Whitehair Lochner, Wendy Murawski, and Jamie Daley (2019) used the Instructional Practices Inventory to measure cognitive engagement in nearly 900 observations within solo-taught and co-taught classrooms in grades 5-12 over the course of a year. Data demonstrated co-teaching has the capacity to not only provide better instruction but opportunities for students to participate at higher levels of cognitive engagement. Implications of their work include a responsibility of teacher preparation programs to embed co-teaching competencies within their coursework and school districts to provide professional development focused on co-teaching.

The second article in this issue is a quantitative research study investigating the use of co-teaching between English as a second language (ESL) and general classroom teachers in a secondary school in rural western United States. With over 44% of America's English learners (ELs) living in rural communities, it is essential that rural schools work within their limited human and financial resources to meet the challenges of educating EL students in an equitable manner. Heather Williams and Robert Ditch (2019) report on teacher-student interactions in 20 co-taught classrooms focusing on the quantity and type of exchanges between the teachers and ELs or non-ELs. The authors address issues of equity in access, participation, and learning for EL students and suggest that co-teaching holds promise in promoting learning for English learners.

The issue next addresses promising practices in teacher education where co-teaching is being implemented to improve learning and growth in teacher candidates. The third article in this issue is a case study demonstrating a thought-provoking application of co-teaching in a telepresence-facilitated field placement for a place-bound pre-service teacher without access to a local K-12 setting. Eileen Wertzberger (2019) examines the centrality of co-teaching and co-reflective practices in leveraging the telepresence technology to make the teacher candidate an integral part of a rural third-grade classroom. Data revealed the importance of the co-teaching relationship, the participants' creativity in developing co-instructional strategies that worked for them and the students, and the co-construction of space as they navigated the virtual and physical classroom. Wertzberger offers an in-depth look at possibilities in rural field experiences through technology and co-teaching.

Next, the authors of the fourth article explore the use of co-teaching in higher education to disrupt the academic silos in which teacher educators generally work. Allen Guidry and Christy Howard (2019) offer a reflection on their collaborative experience of co-teaching a secondary social studies methods course and a content area literacy course. Modeling the collaborative practices that they require of their students in their rural field experiences, the authors scaffold teacher candidates' development of collaborative practices and ability to identify and

integrate literacy strategies into their content area. Through careful reflection on their experiences co-teaching over the course of a semester, Guidry and Howard provide a precise blueprint for teacher educators interested in co-teaching.

In the fifth article, Tammy Barron, Holly Pinter, and Kim Winter (2019) share how co-teaching between general education, special education, and pre-service teachers is utilized in one rural middle school to foster student learning, enhance classroom community, and support pre-service teacher development. The significance of having structures and leadership within the school that support the implementation of inclusion through co-teaching is demonstrated, as is the importance of providing opportunities to co-plan. The complex shift from traditional models of student teaching to co-teaching is made visible and lessons around relationship building and prioritization of co-planning are discussed.

As all authors in this issue suggest, co-planning is a crucial element for successful co-teaching; however, little information on *how* to effectively co-plan exists. The final article by Maureen Grady, Charity Cayton, Ronald Preston, and Rose Sinicrope (2019), introduces six strategies to facilitate co-planning grounded in the research base for co-teaching. The multifaceted task of planning for instruction is especially difficult for pre-service and novice teachers. The authors demonstrate how the co-planning strategies allow the novice to take advantage of the expert teacher's knowledge of students, curriculum, and possible lesson misconceptions and pitfalls. The roles of mentor and novice are clearly explained for each strategy and drawbacks or concerns are shared, thus allowing the reader to easily implement co-planning. While the authors emphasize how these strategies are particularly helpful for pre-service teachers in co-teaching placements, they recognize the value of co-planning in other settings.

Final Thoughts

The evolution of co-teaching has seen the power of this teaching practice to first improve access and learning for students with special needs, then to impact the level of support and opportunities provided to EL students, and now to transform

teacher preparation. The articles in this issue explore how co-teaching is being used in a variety of rural settings to address the challenges rural educators face, improve student learning, and revamp how pre-service teachers are being prepared. They all speak to the significance of collaboration and strong relationships necessary for effective co-teaching. We likewise find these characteristics an important facet of rural education, where teachers from rural communities are place-conscious, or better understand the context of the community in which their school is situated (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). The relationships they cultivate with their students and knowledge of the community positions them to provide culturally responsive instruction and academic support. Co-teaching offers a tool to rural educators for fostering relationships and building collaborative skills to better serve their students.

I invite you to travel into the rural schools and classrooms; listen to the experiences of students, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators; and consider the possibilities for co-teaching in rural settings.

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