

## An International Immersion into Co-Teaching: A Wake-Up Call for Teacher Candidates in General and Special Education

**Kevin Oh**

University of San Francisco

**Wendy Murawski**

California State University, Northridge

**Natalie Nussli**

University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Switzerland

This case study explored the short-term international co-teaching experience of pre-service general education teachers who were paired up with intern special education teachers (N = 8) to provide English language instruction to students in South Korea. Pre-, during-, and post-data were collected to investigate how the participants experienced their co-teaching. The narratives of two participants were chosen for phenomenological analysis, reflecting an overwhelmingly positive and a rather negative co-teaching experience. The key ingredients to a successful partnership were identified as open communication, the willingness to accept both positive and negative feedback, the willingness to learn from or get inspired by someone who may have less teaching experience, mutual respect and trust, compatibility of personal characteristics, and frequent check-ins. The potential threats to a positive relationship were identified as mismatched personalities, incompatible teaching goals, the lack of co-planning, conflicting approaches to lesson planning, unequal roles, infrequent check-ins, and lack of trust and respect. Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that immersing teacher candidates in co-teaching experiences resulted in positive perceptions of co-teaching and increased the participants' skills related to collaborative teaching for all but one candidate. The findings have led to recommendations for the successful set-up of co-teaching experiences.

*Keywords: co-teaching; co-planning; co-instructing; immersion programs; multicultural education; teaching abroad; international practicum; inclusive classrooms; special education*

The push towards inclusion, wherein students with special needs are taught in the same classroom as typical learners, has resulted in both national and international implications in the preparation of teachers.

In the United States, the federal government aligned the predominant special education law (known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, reauthorized in 2004)

with national guidelines as previously stated in the 2001 U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind Act (ed.gov, 2004). This alignment resulted in changes in national regulations concerning a variety of areas that directly impact the preparation of teachers, both special and general education, to include teacher qualifications, federal funding to schools, standardized testing and its impact on teacher retention and pay, and student placement in classes. The implications of these changes resulted in U.S. federal guidelines that more strongly reaffirmed a commitment to educate all students in their least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE is defined on the U.S. Department of Education's website as the fact that

“children with disabilities...are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Building the Legacy, n.d.).

This national policy has transferred over not just to students with identified disabilities, but the concept of least restrictive environment has resulted in the inclusion of students with all types of special needs including English language learners.

The prevailing philosophy of inclusion allows for many more students to integrate into general education and extracurricular activities, but has also proven challenging for teachers and administrators on several levels. One of the ways in which schools are addressing the

diversity of students in the typical classroom setting is through the use of co-teaching, whereby a general education teacher and a special service provider teach concurrently in the same classroom by co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing students together (Murawski, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of how one university has actively addressed this growing concern by preparing their future teachers to not only co-teach, but to do it immersed in a foreign country so as to experience for themselves what it is like to be from a different cultural and linguistic background.

Despite the fact that many school districts throughout the United States have established inclusive classrooms facilitated by teacher partnerships as one solution to the growing number of students with diverse needs in the general education environment, most districts do not provide sufficient professional development necessary for these partnerships to be successful (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). In addition, as teachers begin to share responsibility for all students in their school, increased and improved communication is critical for success (Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Hang & Rabren, 2008). Again, however, little professional development or training has been done in schools to ensure this occurs (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). The lack of sufficient teacher preparation and professional development opportunities are not solely focused on issues related to special education. Most universities recognize that cultivating culturally and linguistically responsive educators is an important area of focus for teacher trainers and those who work with high-need students. In direct correlation to the increased cultural diversity in schools, many

general education teachers are being placed in classrooms that have diverse learners with a wide range of instructional needs (Emmer, 2001; Tomlinson, 1997). Repeatedly, teachers report a lack of sufficient training and experiences in how to differentiate to meet these diverse instructional needs. In addition to the difficulties that general education teachers report, special education teachers are often overwhelmed as well by the many “hats” they are being asked to wear in schools. For example, they are asked to deliver instruction to students in large classes, small groups, and one on one; consult with other educators; keep up with paperwork and legal requirements; conduct on-going assessments; and monitor student data. More recently, both groups of teachers are expected to co-teach and share classroom spaces and roles (Murawski & Spencer, 2011). Co-teaching is a very specific service delivery option and has been defined as when “two or more educators co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess a group of students with diverse needs in the same general education classroom” (Murawski, 2003). For teachers to effectively address their various job requirements, including co-teaching, they need to be able to collaborate on a daily basis.

Teacher education programs are increasingly criticized for not preparing teacher groups to collaborate with each other in K-12 schools (Friend, Embury, & Clarke, 2014). In order for general and special education teachers to understand the benefits of collaboration and be able to subsequently work with diverse populations of students with academic, behavioral, cultural, and linguistic needs, they need to experience the advantages of working together while in teacher education programs (Kamens, 2007; Murawski, 2002).

Teacher training universities nationally and internationally must be tasked with creating opportunities for their students to have applicable experiences prior to going into the inclusive classroom as a credentialed teacher. Thus the obvious question for this project was the following: How can we design a teacher training program that will result in general and special educators willing and eager to collaborate with one another in the best interests of students with and without disabilities?

This study addressed the above question by looking at the two clear, overarching abilities needed by new teachers. The ability to recognize, identify, and appropriately address the different needs of various cultural groups is an important skill (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2007) in almost any class these days. In addition, the ability to collaborate with educational colleagues to meet the needs of students with and without disabilities, to include sharing the same classroom, is another skill that new teachers need to build (Murawski, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to build these skills with novice special and general education teachers by immersing them in a co-teaching experience in a foreign country, thereby allowing them to experience first-hand both co-teaching and the feeling of being a cultural and linguistic minority.

Teachers who are trained in a collaborative program are more likely to remain in the field beyond their first five years and more likely to successfully co-teach at their school site (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004). The collaboration that occurs between the special education teacher and the general education teacher can allow access to challenging, but appropriate, material for all

students in a diverse classroom. Given this knowledge, it was hypothesized that the prospective teachers who participated in this program would be more prepared, and therefore more willing, to work in inclusive classrooms and possibly even co-teach in the future.

### Methods

We used phenomenology as a type of qualitative research method, which is aimed at understanding participants' feelings, experiences, and beliefs about the theme in question in order to identify the essence of an experience, such as the participation in a particular program (Merriam, 2009). The conceptual approach that guided this research is reflective practice "as a means by which practitioners can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development" (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 2). All instruments used in the present study were designed to prompt insight into personal behavior by developing a conscious awareness of one's actions and effects with the objective of facilitating change (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

### Setting

This program was a collaborative project between a United States university on the west coast and a major university in South Korea. Both programs offer strong teacher preparation programs.

### Participants

#### Teachers from the United States.

The U.S. participants included four pre-service general education teachers (undergraduate students), four in-service special education teachers (graduate students) with at least one year of teaching

experience, two administrative staff, and one special education professor (lead author). Based on the participants' applications and a 30-minute interview process, two staff and faculty members from the U.S. selected eight students, all female, ranging from 20 to 29 years. It was ensured that each individual would be a good fit for the program by looking at his or her GPA (no failing classes) and prior experiences (working with children). Further criteria for selection included: classroom experience, interest, open-mindedness, and willingness to work and live in a foreign country. Participants met three times prior to leaving the U.S. for curriculum development, pre-planning activities, Korean language practice, use of multisensory education, and cultural training. Although some teaching materials were shared with the teachers prior to departure, the co-teachers themselves were in charge of the development of the curriculum. The only stipulation for their lesson planning was that they had to cover reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English each day.

None of the 10 teachers and staff from the U.S. had visited Korea prior to this immersion trip. The lead author was the only person who spoke Korean and had an understanding of Korean culture. All of the U.S. participants lived in student housing at the Korean university for two weeks. During the school week, Monday to Friday, they co-taught English language classes from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The researchers and student teachers did not know exactly how many students were going to be in each class nor their assigned levels until arrival in Korea. In the afternoons and on weekends, participants were exposed to traditional Korean culture via outings, meals, and social gatherings. Korean language practice was

encouraged, as were interaction and communication with local teachers, college students, professors, and other

professionals. Table 1 provides details about the U.S. participants' background.

Table 1. *Participants*

Teachers (SET-Special Education teacher; GET-General Education teacher)	Ethnicity	Age	Teaching experience	Types of teaching experience
Sally (SET Team 1)	White	27	1 year	Resource specialist in grades 9-10
Gwen (GET Team 1)	Asian	24	None	None
Sarah (SET Team 2)	White	23	1 year	History and English in grades 6-8
Gayle (GET Team 2)	Asian	25	None	None
Sandy (SET Team 3)	Asian	26	1 year	English in grades 11-12; resource specialist in grades 9-12
Gloria (GET Team 3)	White	21	None	None
Sabrina (SET Team 4)	White	29	1 year	Resource specialist in grades 1-5 and 9-12
Gina (GET Team 4)	White	20	None	None

**Korean students.** Participants from Korea included 30 students ranging from 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade with mostly low levels of English speaking and listening skills. These students were from diverse backgrounds, many of whom would not have otherwise been afforded the opportunity available to a majority of their peers due to socioeconomic status. Two administrative staff and a special education professor from the Korean university were liaisons and advertised, organized, and supported the English camp at many levels.

**Korean teaching assistants.** The Korean teaching assistants (TAs) were undergraduate students from the Korean university's special education program. They were able to translate what the U.S. teachers were saying in the classroom. After a few days, however, they were asked only to intervene if a student was completely

lost, so as not to limit the Korean students' experiences.

**Role of the researcher.** As a Korean-American, the first author was able to instruct the U.S. teachers about the cultural differences and specific mannerisms. For example, Korean students are more familiar with a lecture style format of teaching where students do not have opportunities to share their thoughts and have discussions. Therefore, the U.S. teachers were advised to create more interactive opportunities in classrooms, but be cognizant about the Korean students' lack of familiarity to these types of discussions in class.

#### Data Collection

For data triangulation, multiple qualitative instruments were used.

**Pre-trip.** Approximately one month before departure, participants were asked to complete the S.H.A.R.E (Sharing Hopes, Attitudes, Responsibilities, and Expectations) worksheet (Murawski, 2004) regarding their views, beliefs, and hopes about their upcoming co-teaching experiences. They also completed a pre-survey created by two of the authors (Appendix A). The questions from these two tools focused on teaching philosophy, style, and personal preferences in the classroom. In addition, they looked at teachers' demeanors in general and asked about their level of comfort being paired with someone who had very different ideals in the classroom setting. There were also short answer questions regarding hypothetical situations surrounding co-teaching and how each participant believed they would react. Using the information from the SHARE worksheet and the pre-survey, two staff and two special education professors paired the co-teachers.

**Daily reflective journals.** While in Korea, participants were required to keep three separate journals and record their thoughts at the end of each day documenting: (a) their co-teaching experiences, (b) their experience teaching English language learners, and (c) their cultural experiences. To prioritize authentic reflection rather than structured responses (Jiang & DeVillar, 2011), the journals had no specific guidelines or questions; rather, participants were asked to write at least one page daily documenting their reactions, struggles, and successes. The journals served a dual purpose of collecting data as well as providing a space to record personal achievements, difficulties, observations, and notes for honing their teaching craft. Half-way through the trip, each participant wrote a separate mid-reflection journal

entry documenting their experience overall and focusing on ideas for the following week and how the co-teaching partnership could be strengthened and improved upon.

**One-on-one interviews.** Half-way through the project, the lead author conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant in which they had the opportunity to talk about their accomplishments and difficulties within the classroom. The one-on-one format allowed the faculty member to gain more in depth understanding of each participant's experience and to provide a safe space for participants to discuss any personal concerns that they may not have felt comfortable sharing with their co-teacher.

**Post-trip interview.** A final interview was conducted with each co-teaching team after leaving the Korean university. The goal was to document the progress they had made with each other, to record their observations of student achievement, and to learn more about the dynamics between the co-teachers and the impact on their classroom experience.

#### **Follow-Up**

Two years later, the lead author contacted the participants by email to learn how the Korean co-teaching experience had shaped their teaching practices in the U.S. Only four teachers, however, replied to the follow-up request.

#### **Data Analysis**

During an initial reading of the participants' pre-survey answers, their daily journals, and the interview transcripts, we identified significant statements and clusters of meaning. We then wrote a textural description of how two participants experienced their teaching-abroad experience. Finally, we compared the themes across all eight participants to better understand the phenomenon, which

allowed us to distill the essence from their common experiences (Merriam, 2009). Overall, 36,872 words were analyzed (open-ended answers to pre-survey questions: 3,168 words; journals: 24,042 words; one-on-one interviews: 8,720 words; 2-year-follow-up: 942 words).

## Results

### Pre-Survey

The participants completed a 21-item survey about two months before the departure to Korea. All participants had heard about co-teaching before, but hardly any had received formal training on co-teaching. Half of the participants had been enrolled in a co-taught class, but their perceptions of the effectiveness of these classes differed markedly. Some appreciated that each professor presented a topic from their own perspective, thereby resulting not only in a more engaging class but also in more material being covered in a shorter amount of time, whereas some criticized that the instructors failed to collaborate on each aspect of instruction. In other words, they would have preferred to see more unity.

Overall, seven of eight participants reported having a positive or very positive attitude towards co-teaching, whereas one participant was neither positive nor negative. When asked about the anticipated advantages of co-taught classes for their future students in Korea, most mentioned more attention and individualized assistance because having two teachers in the room would allow different level groups to get the attention they need. They believed that the use of different teaching styles and techniques contributed to a better balance within the classroom because some techniques may work better with some students than others. In

addition, students might benefit from different content materials and from the balance of general educators' versus special educators' perspectives and knowledge. The lower teacher-student ratio was expected to add more flexibility in structuring activities. Another frequent argument in favor of co-teaching was that beginning teachers could be paired with more experienced teachers so that they could receive guidance and reflect on their teaching practices together. Miscommunication and disagreements between the co-teachers and an overall unpleasant work relationship, which might affect students' learning as well, were frequently mentioned as anticipated challenges.

### Journals and Interviews

The following account examines two special education teachers' international co-teaching experience. First, we are drawing from Sandy's overwhelmingly positive co-teaching experience with Gloria. Second, we are drawing from Sabrina's rather challenging co-teaching experience with Gina. Both accounts were chosen because of the breadth and depth of their reflections. Although these narratives cannot speak for all participants, they are representative of the diversity of experiences and outcomes of this international experience across the eight participants. These co-teaching experiences serve as the primary focus of this article.

In Sandy's first journal entry, one of the key ingredients of a good co-teaching relationship becomes readily apparent. Getting along well right from the start plays an important role in her partnership with Gloria. Based on both partners' accounts, this partnership seems to be the most rewarding of the four partnerships throughout the two-week program.

While we haven't taught together yet, it's been fun getting to know Gloria and hearing all of her great ideas for our classroom and students. We seem to be on the same page on many things and we both encourage each other's ideas. For two teachers who didn't know each other before this trip, we're able to make pretty cohesive lessons and agree on many things.

Honest communication and very frequent check-ins (i.e., during each break) also emerge as key components. Both partners demonstrate the willingness and expectation to learn to become a better teacher and are open to positive and negative criticism.

During our break, we both checked in and asked each other if there was anything in our own styles that needed to be changed or if anything happened that offended or annoyed the other, etc. (...) We also said how happy we were with the whole experience of being paired up together, the students we got and how smoothly the first day was moving along. (...) our lesson flowed very well (in our opinion) and it seemed like we had been teaching together for quite some time!

The same feelings of mutual support and respect are evident after the second day of teaching. With both teachers in tune with each other, trust is developing more easily and faster than when expectations or personalities are less compatible.

Gloria and I are still on the same page. Today we did a bit of team teaching, then we did a couple of activities where one was the main teacher and the other supported. We were on the same page and in

sync throughout the day and we enjoyed it...EVEN when the morning started off on a chaotic note and we had no classroom! The communication is still very open and I'd like to believe the kids see us as a unit. (...) They (the kids) look to both of us equally for instruction and help.

The partners check in with each other constantly to make sure that they both agree that the lessons are running smoothly. They keep asking each other for constructive criticism and they even enjoy the planning aspect, which is in stark contrast with other partnerships in this program. Toward the end of the first week, planning each day is getting quicker because they have a good idea of each other's teaching styles and interests. Similar to other participants, Sandy mentions that co-planning had generated more ideas. At the beginning of the second week, the partners demonstrate that they can enrich each other's ideas and be a successful team even in tricky situations.

There was a bit of a hiccup in today's lessons since Gloria and I didn't plan enough activities to fill the day. The students finished everything we had planned earlier than expected and they also didn't seem to be very excited so Gloria and I had to put our heads together and quickly come up with fun, engaging, beneficial activities.

Mutual trust is evident when Sandy describes how they switch their TA for the second week and how they divide their tasks. She expresses full confidence in Gloria and does not seem to have any concerns about her partner providing inadequate instruction although Gloria is much less experienced in terms of teaching.



Today was also the first day with our new TAs and it feels good to be able to trust that the class is in good hands with Gloria teaching since I volunteered to prep the TAs when they came in this morning with our expectations of them for the week. I have complete faith in Gloria when she is on her own with the class which is a great feeling but I also know that when I come back, she's ready to work together again and it seems seamless to jump right back into the lesson.

On one occasion, the teachers switch their co-teaching partners for a day. Sandy is appreciative of this opportunity and feels that the match was almost perfect, although she is also aware that this is not necessarily true for everyone else. She summarizes her personal and teaching relationship with her teaching partner as follows:

What a bond Gloria and I made throughout these two weeks and more importantly, what an impact I feel we've made on the students we taught. I am so happy to have been paired up with Gloria and I'm so proud of her hard work and dedication to our students. (...) Throughout the two weeks, I've passed along little pieces of advice that suddenly come to mind and I hope she takes those with her and finds them useful. I also walk away having learned so much from Gloria. Her passion for teaching and her excitement to work with children revives my own passion for students. It's TOO easy to be jaded by the education system in America but being here with Gloria and working alongside her has changed my

perspective and reminded me just why I love teaching. I wish we could have spent a semester here together!

In a post-interview, when asked why their co-teaching had worked so well, Sandy replied that they had gone in with positive attitudes and positive expectations. Right from the start, they agreed to maintain open communication with each other concerning teaching styles, lessons, and things that went well and things that did not go so well. They were very honest with each other from the beginning so they could build a good foundation. Another thing that worked well was that they became good friends and enjoyed each other's company to the extent that when they had to plan their lessons together, "it was more like we were hanging out rather than doing 'work.'" When asked about potential difficulties of co-teaching, Sandy spoke about her initial fears of not being the only teacher in the room, which turned out to be unfounded.

I thought it would be hard to hand over certain classroom duties but in reality, it wasn't. Class ran very smoothly between my co-teacher and myself and I wasn't as controlling as I had expected, which is a great thing. Now I know I can co-teach, so long as I build a good relationship with my co-teacher. It was definitely EASIER than I thought it would be!

In a brief follow up by email two years later, Sandy describes how the immersion experience in Korea impacted her current teaching practices. Interestingly, Sandy's follow-up report revolves mainly about cultural and teaching differences comparing U.S. and Korean students. Similar to the three colleagues who replied to the follow-

up request, Sandy did not mention how the co-teaching experience had impacted her growth as a teacher.

Teaching in Korea, although it was short-lived, was eye opening in terms of truly seeing our students as those who learn differently, whether that be because of a language barrier or because of ability. Most of my students are eligible for our services under SLD [Specific Learning Disability] but many of them are ALSO English Language Learners. They are coming to me with various abilities and differing levels of exposure to the English language and I constantly remind myself to take both of these factors into consideration when planning. In many ways, teaching English in Korea was much easier than teaching (in general) here in the U.S. only because my students in Korea did not have learning disabilities. (...) Since I didn't have any of the children who were truly new to the English language, I spent a lot of time observing their attitude towards school and their teachers. This impacts my daily teaching here in the U.S. because we just don't see that type of charisma and dedication for their learning (for most of our kids). Students here do not respect their teachers like those in Asian countries. Students here also take for granted the fact that they are given a free education. It's upsetting to me often times when I see the same students disrespecting their teachers or misusing their opportunities to learn.

Despite differences and conflicting experiences, four out of eight participants

specified that they would not have wanted to trade their co-teaching partner and seven mentioned that they were very grateful for everything they had learned during this experience. But not all participants were entirely satisfied with their co-teaching experience, as evidenced by Sabrina's (special educator, several years of teaching experience) narrative of her co-teaching experience with Gina (general educator, no teaching experience). The first conflict was readily apparent on the second day of teaching when Sabrina intervened. This intervention may not have been well received by Gina.

There were times when my partner was in charge of a certain part of the lesson and I found myself interjecting and adding information to help students understand what was being presented. I'm afraid she felt like I was stepping on her toes. After class, I acknowledged that I did this and apologized. She seemed to understand and even appreciated what I had added during the lesson. I think it was good that we talked about it afterwards and I hope this type of communication continues.

It was evident across all participant journals that the more experienced teachers tended to have conflicts with the supporting partner because roles were unequal. Some would have liked to relinquish more control to the supporting partner so they could truly have a partnership, and some would have liked to intervene more but had to hold themselves back to give their colleagues space to develop professionally. Sabrina's and Gina's challenges continue on the third day of teaching when Sabrina confronts the dilemma of having to share "her" classroom and needs to decide whether or not to support Gina's ideas.

Having to agree on the same agenda was problematic. To what extent Sabrina should insist on implementing her own ideas was a difficult balancing act.

I will continue to share my thoughts about the direction in which she takes the project; however, after having been a teacher for a number of years, I have grown accustomed to planning on my own. It is difficult to devote class time to something I do not wholly support. I want to be honest with her and yet I also want to be respectful of her ideas in order to ensure that we both contribute to the class curriculum.

Sabrina feels less frustrated on the following day because she and Gina were able to address a few issues that had not been going well.

I'm less frustrated than I was yesterday. A couple of things did not go well today; however, my partner was the first to acknowledge them and we both agreed to discontinue an activity that had become a running routine each day. I'm happy that she recognized it was unsuccessful and that she was flexible enough to agree to discontinue it even though she had planned to do it every day for the full two weeks.

Toward the end of the first week, although Sabrina feels more comfortable with the co-teaching, her inner struggles resurge. Her statement suggests that she would like to spend more time on planning lessons together and that she anticipates having to assert herself.

We have lots of ideas for next week and I hope we can devote some time to discussing them this weekend. I'm afraid some of my ideas, like pulling

out students for more direct invention, have not been well-received by my teaching partner; however, I don't want to let that dissuade me from pushing for them.

Sabrina's frustration with her partner is building up gradually. As opposed to Sandy and her partner, Sabrina and Gina do not seem to be in tune with each other, trust is not developing as easily, and their expectations or personalities seem to be less compatible. On day seven, the lack of joint planning causes a major conflict.

I'm a bit frustrated because we did not get done as much planning as we had talked about. (...) Also, she did some planning on her own and then expected it to take the place of some material I had been working on (...) Overall, it was not a big deal, but it was a breakdown in our lines of communication (...) I'm going to push for more planning ahead tomorrow.

Although Sabrina does not seem to have enough check-ins with her partner, the next extract shows that there are occasions on which they communicate. It is unclear, however, how open their way of communicating with each other is.

I was nervous to speak with her today about wanting to continue to pull out our two lowest skilled students; however, I felt it was my professional responsibility to do so. I explained to her how the pull-out session went and why I think it is important that one of us continues to work with these students. She seemed to understand (...)

While Sabrina and Gina are jointly working on their lesson planning, Sabrina seems to be struggling to find the right tone in addressing her concerns and to assert

herself. Although her partner seems compliant, Sabrina is unsure how honest her partner's reaction is.

I was proud of myself for expressing my concerns in what I think was a calm, respectful way right off the bat without skirting the issue and avoiding what could have become a confrontation. She understood my hesitation and said she agreed with me. Sometimes I feel that she agrees with me simply as a way to avoid further conversation on the topic.

At the end of the two weeks, Sabrina realizes that she has missed the chance to build up a better relationship with Gina, which prevented her from learning how to co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess effectively.

I'm feeling more and more frustrated that I don't feel great about what we accomplished as co-teachers. In reflecting on the experience, I feel that it devolved into two teachers breaking up sections of the day and taking responsibility for individual lessons or activities. We always consulted each other before we made decisions and that was essential; however, I wish we had worked harder to simultaneously co-deliver instruction. I also think that my partner often worked in extremes, either wholeheartedly agreeing with all of my suggestions or staying resolute on certain things despite the fact that I had expressed reservations. (...) I'm not feeling good about that because I missed the chance to have thoughtful, reflective conversations with my co-teacher about the decisions we made for our class.

Sabrina's regret about failing to push open communication manifests itself in the next extract. She comes to the conclusion that co-teaching and the "associated communication must be structured to allow for time, space, and language so that both parties feel that they can express themselves with ease."

I think there was a more divided, functional dynamic to our co-teaching relationship than I would have liked. I don't think it started off this way, but rather gradually built up. I failed to bring it to my partner's attention because I kept hoping things would get better. This was a mistake. I wish I had expressed my feelings to my partner, if only to get these thoughts off my chest. I'm not sure she has any clue that I feel this way or whether she feels similarly. I would love to have a debriefing session with her, but every time I've tried to initiate this type of conversation my partner says that she thinks everything was great.

Sabrina also highlights that the amount of time spent on lesson planning has been much longer than usually when she teaches alone. The two partners seem to have different priorities that they want to focus on in creating the curriculum, which makes coordination tricky. When asked how things might be different if she and her partner were to co-teach for a year, Sabrina has a more positive outlook, although she emphasizes the need for structured planning time.

I would imagine that things would only get better the longer you co-taught because I think even with Gina and I the better we got to know each other, the more we kind of worked on our personal relationship,

the more comfortable we've gotten with each other, the better our communication, and I imagine that would only be heightened after a year. Now that said, I think it would only work if the school provided structured time to do the planning.

As opposed to Sandy and Gloria who perceived their co-teaching as equally successful and satisfying, Sabrina's partner, Gina, perceived the experience quite differently than Sabrina herself. She found that they actually complemented each other because "they preferred to do opposite things. I prefer the more creative endeavors and she is definitely more into the structured, formal instruction." The mid-interviews also revealed different perceptions of each other. Whereas one partner thought that she and her co-teacher were always on the same page, the other partner stated the opposite. While one partner believed that both teachers were relaxed in terms of planning, the other partner would have preferred more meticulous lesson plans. Whereas one co-teacher wanted to have fun in the classroom, her partner considered the classroom a more serious place. Three participants mentioned that their goals or teaching approaches differed from their partners'. Four participants had concerns about the extra effort and time involved in joint lesson planning, not least because co-teachers have to agree on each other's ideas, whereas only three participants specifically pointed out that lesson planning was a very smooth and efficient process. Despite all discrepancies, all teachers, but one, tended to express mutual appreciation, even when one teacher was more experienced than the other. Appendix B displays a number of recommendations for

the successful set-up of co-teaching experiences.

### Discussion

The overarching experience of these student teachers working collaboratively as co-teachers in a foreign country provided myriad potential issues, observations, and recommendations. Because both the general educator and the special educator were obtaining their teaching credentials and were equals in power, they theoretically had parity in the experience and should not have had some of the barriers associated with co-teaching during student teaching that master teachers and apprentice teachers may experience (Friend et al., 2014). However, this experience more closely exemplifies what co-teachers in the field may experience. Thus, teacher educators are wise to learn from these findings as they too create opportunities for student teachers to learn about, and even experience, co-teaching for themselves. In fact, the major findings here mirror those found in the research on co-teaching in K-12 classrooms for years (Murawski & Swanson, 2001): communication, time for planning, use of different instructional approaches, and compatibility remain key to successful co-teaching experiences.

Effective communication between co-teachers requires an open mind and the ability to accept constructive criticism. Frequent check-ins, for example during breaks, were suggested as a valuable tool to achieve these goals as long as both co-teachers are open, respectful, and specific about their criticism. For those teachers who have no previous co-teaching experience, it is essential to learn to accept that the classroom is a shared classroom rather than their own. Co-teachers need to consider whether an activity or a plan will

work for both, which, in turn, requires the ability to communicate one's teaching plans well and to provide a clear pedagogical rationale for each specific activity. Sabrina and Gina experienced difficulty with truly co-planning, whereas Sandy and Gloria were able to quickly share ideas and get on the same page. Planning was perceived as getting easier with increased familiarity of the co-teachers, which suggests that co-teaching experiences should ideally extend over longer periods of time. A long-term collaboration would also allow continuous refining of strategies, which is essential to improving the quality of the collaboration. This validates the frequently repeated message of Murawski and Dieker (2013) that "If you have good co-teachers, leave them alone!" Their message to administrators is that good co-teaching teams need to stay together over time, not be broken up to create new teams. Communication takes time.

Another implication from this study is that schools and teacher preparation programs should provide structured time for planning so that co-teachers do not have to negotiate times for co-planning themselves (Hang & Rabren, 2008). All of the participants in the study mentioned the need for time to plan with their partner. Without such time, they mirrored what is identified in the literature over and over again as resorting to One Teach-One Support or simply turn-taking (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). A few of the student co-teachers noticed that incorporating daily routine activities further reduced their planning time, another recommendation supported in the literature (Murawski & Dieker, 2013; Sileo, 2011). Teacher educators and school administrators need to provide time for co-planning but also teach skills for teachers to know how to use

their co-planning time more efficiently (see Murawski & Dieker, 2013).

The literature is replete with examples of how co-teachers can assume different roles in the shared classroom. Cook and Friend (1995) first identified five co-teaching instruction approaches: One teach-One support, Team teaching, Station teaching, Alternative teaching, and Parallel teaching. Relying on one or two approaches defeats the purpose of co-teaching and results in a missed opportunity to engage all students, not to mention differentiate as needed. Co-teachers should be encouraged to try out several co-teaching strategies, not only to identify the one that works most effectively for both of them, but also to provide students with some variety in instructional practices and thereby increase interest and participation.

Observation of the teachers in this study, in conjunction with both formal and informal conversations and surveys, suggested that the success of the partnerships depended mostly on the compatibility of the two individuals. Preparation and personality were two frequently emerging issues. In terms of preparation, some students had early preparation or more experience teaching, whereas some had no experience. On the one hand, the less experienced partner could learn from the other and the more experienced partner could benefit from listening to new ideas from the other. On the other hand, this imbalance sometimes led to one person dominating the teaching. Parity and control are mentioned frequently in the research literature as potential barriers to co-teaching success (e.g., Friend et al., 2014; Murawski & Swanson, 2001) and this study maintains that finding. In terms of personality, some students were naturally more extroverted or animated in

personality, and some were more introverted. These differences were beneficial because the teachers could sometimes balance each other and learn from each other about different styles. At the same time, they were challenging because they sometimes resulted in resentment in the partnership and also involved some difficulty in planning together. Open communication, regardless of personality or preparation, was found to be key to a successful partnership. Teachers who talked openly together, co-planned, and allowed each other to try different things were most successful. Those teachers allowing for trial and error in their strategies seemed to be more productive and rewarded than those who were stuck on specific strategies and were disappointed when something failed to work. Through trial and error strategies, the teachers could figure out what worked best for students and aligned best with their own teaching styles.

#### **Limitations**

The way the co-teachers were paired up is a possible limitation to the study. Despite the fact that the SHARE worksheet, a survey, and other data were used, these were “arranged marriages” (Murawski, 2010) and teachers did not self-select as is typically recommended (Cook & Friend, 1995). The participants’ answers to the pre-survey were expected to give the researchers a clear picture of how to match them up most effectively. However, there is currently no method that will guarantee a perfect match between co-teachers. Another limitation is that these participants worked with students of varying English speaking ability. Sandy, for example, whose journal we used as the basis of our narrative, taught students from an English school, which may have been one of the

reasons for her exemplary partnership with Gloria. This is compared to Sabrina and Gina’s experience with students from a Korean school and lower levels of English ability. A major limitation is the short duration of the co-teaching experience. A longer experience would have allowed the participants to refine their strategies further and to get to know each other better, thereby increasing the chances of establishing mutual trust. However, the parallel between these findings and those of longer research studies suggest that barriers, issues, and successes may be experienced early in a co-teaching relationship and therefore are ones to be addressed as quickly as possible. Finally, the two-year follow up survey should have included more specific prompts about co-teaching in order to generate more focused and useful information in this particular area.

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences gained by pre- and in-service teachers during an immersion teaching opportunity. Teacher education programs will benefit from learning about the impact that this type of international collaboration may have for future teachers in America. Beyond mere theory and basic instruction, a true understanding of students and what their cultural frames of reference are can offer insights to pre-service teachers. Experiential learning was provided through the immersion in a foreign country and through co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing (Murawski, 2003) with another teacher. By combining instruction in another country with co-teaching experiences, these pre-service and intern teachers were able to provide one another support, use one another as

sounding boards, and learn from one another. These experiences are likely to lead to a more positive outlook on collaboration and co-teaching.

While many aspects of collaboration are yet to be fully researched and implemented in today's schools, teacher training and professional development remain areas that lack support for teachers to work collaboratively. Studies have shown that students learn well from teaching dyads and that observation of co-teaching gives pre-service teachers more confidence to work collaboratively once they enter the field (Lyons & Stang, 2008). Arndt and Liles (2010) found that a majority of pre-service teachers in their study were open to the idea of collaboration between general education and special education with some reservation, yet as teachers spend more time in the classroom their openness to this tactic reduced. District and school administrators can provide training and an ideological platform for successful collaboration through the use of increased professional development, while universities can partner with schools to provide co-teaching opportunities in student teaching (Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2010) or apprentice teaching experiences (Friend et al., 2014).

These types of collaborative experiences have started, but they need to be adapted and refined to address findings such as those in this research. Teacher training at the university level has begun to increasingly include classes on collaboration and co-teaching, such as the Accelerated Collaborative Teacher preparation program in southern California (Burstein et al., 2009), the co-teaching model espoused by St.

Cloud University in Minnesota (Bacharach et al., 2010), and the curriculum redesign for collaboration by Cleveland State University (Banks, Jackson, & Harper, 2014). Teachers who are given explicit training and fieldwork practice in co-teaching are more likely to be willing to co-teach as well as be successful in their actual experiences. Explicit instruction and practice in different types of co-teaching can give teachers the techniques needed to integrate special educators into the general education classrooms where their students are expected to learn. Preparing teachers for co-teaching should not only include observation of seasoned teaching dyads, but fieldwork practicum as well (Arndt & Liles, 2010; Friend et al., 2014) so that pre-service teachers have a chance to experience co-planning, co-instruction, and co-assessing themselves. Schools, at both the K-12 and higher education levels, must have firm criteria to judge the effectiveness of these programs and the quality of teachers (Salend, Gordon, & Lopez-Vona, 2002). Pre-service and in-service teachers, both in general and special education, should be encouraged to practice the theories and ideas given in training programs and professional development, to provide personal feedback and reflection on their experiences, and to analyze various types of data that reflect the success rate of the techniques used. Only as we continue to collect and analyze data at different levels of experience with co-teaching will we be able to truly implement with fidelity and reliability successful collaborative teaching models that work with all students and all teachers. This study helps provide additional data as we pursue that goal.

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## Appendix I

**S.H.A.R.E.****S**haring **H**opes, **A**ttitudes, **R**esponsibilities, and **E**xpectations

**Directions:** Take a few minutes to individually complete this worksheet. Be honest in your responses. After completing it individually, share the responses with your co-teaching partner by taking turns reading the responses. Do not use this time to comment on your partner's responses – merely read. After reading through the responses, take a moment or two to jot down any thoughts you have regarding what your partner has said. Then, come back together and begin to share reactions to the responses. Your goal is to either (a) Agree, (b) Compromise, or (c) Agree to Disagree.

1. Right now, the main **hope** I have regarding this co-teaching situation is:

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2. My **attitude**/philosophy regarding teaching students with disabilities in a general education classroom is:

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3. I would like to have the following **responsibilities** in a co-taught classroom:

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4. I would like my co-teacher to have the following **responsibilities**:

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I have the following **expectations** in a classroom:

(a) regarding discipline -

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(b) regarding classwork -

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(c) regarding materials -

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(d) regarding homework -

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(e) regarding planning -

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(f) regarding modifications for individual students -

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(g) regarding grading -

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(h) regarding noise level -

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(i) regarding cooperative learning -

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(j) regarding giving/receiving feedback -

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(k) other important expectations I have-

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