

# Key Question for Literacy Co-Teachers: What Possibilities Do We Have Together?

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Co-teaching offers great potential but rarely yields strong learning results. A series of reflective co-teaching guides are presented that support building relationships and intentional teaching practices to maximize literacy learning.

Co-teaching gives good opportunities to try out new ideas and teaching practices. You talk together along the road – discussing with each other about your own teaching continuously. You have a unique possibility to learn from each other and make each other even better teachers! You reflect together about individual students' development, about what methods work well and which, not so well said Norwegian Primary school co-teacher, Katrin (all names are pseudonyms)

Co-teaching is a practice that we are likely all familiar with—but do we really know about how it works for teaching literacy? it is easy to confuse familiarity with understanding, and there is actually much, as a field, that we do not yet fully understand about co-teaching. Therefore, in this article, we synthesize what has been established and what is not yet known. Then, we propose a model of change regarding how co-teaching can lead to greater student literacy learning. Next, we introduce our work, including in-depth interviews with co-teaching partners in literacy, and consider how their voices inform the model. Finally, we translate implications from research into practical steps that literacy co-teachers can take to avoid pitfalls, enhance professional learning, and improve student reading skills. Throughout this paper, multiple experienced co-teachers of literacy offer guidance in their own words.

Most central, we identify an active ingredient employed by highly effective co-teaching pairs—*shared reflection*. To promote this process, we created tools in the form of *partner reflection guides for literacy co-teaching*, designed for unique stages of the school year. These guides aim to prompt shared reflection on key

areas identified by co-teaching research. As encapsulated by the quote above, co-teaching provides an unparalleled opportunity for discussions that lead to professional learning and positive change. Therefore, our guides prompt teacher partners to repeatedly ponder: *What possibilities for literacy instruction do we have together that we do not have when we are solo?*

## But First, What Exactly Is Co-Teaching?

“Two heads are better than one, and we have to come up with different ideas to collaborate well,” said Marit.

Co-teaching is a broad term describing cooperation, planning, and teaching among two or more professionals (Krammer et al., 2018). Co-teaching most often refers to the collaboration between a classroom teacher and a special education (SPED) teacher (Friend, 2008). However, co-teaching arrangements also include pairing general educators with another professional, such as a speech-language pathologist or a reading specialist (Krammer et al., 2018), or a gifted education teacher (Mofield, 2020) or even pairing multi-grade-level teachers (Chandler-Olcott & Nieroda, 2016). In our work, we studied pairs of general education elementary teachers who co-taught literacy

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instruction for first and second grades. However, the guides in this article can be adapted for any partnership engaged in literacy instruction.

### **Why Co-Teaching Holds Promise to the Literacy Community**

“The best experience is to have a sparring partner ... not being alone with this serious responsibility: teaching children how to read and write,” said co-teacher, Theresa.

Co-teaching provides numerous potential benefits for students. For example, having an additional teacher reduces the student-to-teacher ratio, thus creating the opportunity for more teacher–student interactions and small group work (Cramer & Nevin, 2006)—critical for early literacy instruction. Co-teaching can also support differentiated instruction, especially for children experiencing reading challenges while allowing for students to remain in their classroom. When co-teaching pairs SPED and regular education teachers, both SPED students and typically-developing students can benefit (Hang & Rabren, 2009).

Beyond benefits to students, co-teaching also offers multiple opportunities for literacy teachers (Rytivaara et al., 2019). Co-teaching allows for peer modeling and peer collaboration, which have long been acknowledged as important for teachers’ professional development (Johnston & Tsai, 2018). Co-teaching provides a consistent fellow professional for reflection, problem solving, and the co-construction of knowledge about their students (Rytivaara et al., 2021). As a result, co-teachers report professional growth, professional satisfaction, and personal support from this arrangement (Walther-Thomas, 1997).

### **The Problem: Research Does not Clearly Connect Co-Teaching to Student Growth**

Despite the many potential benefits from co-teaching, unfortunately, the effects on students’ learning are often undocumented or underwhelming. This lack of efficacy has been repeatedly identified as an important gap by researchers in the field of education (e.g., Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001; Weiss & Brigham, 2000). Simply put

... we wondered why. Is the lack of impact between co-teaching and student learning because co-teaching is under-researched or because actual findings are weak? There is truth in both options.

The actual quantity of co-teaching research is not lacking; however, there are quality problems. Specifically, Weiss and Brigham’s review (2000)

identified key weaknesses in the co-teaching literature: (1) inconsistent definitions about co-teaching, (2) limited information about measures, (3) the practice of studying only successful co-teaching pairs, and (4) findings presented subjectively. For example, in a 2001 meta-analysis on co-teaching, Murawski and Swanson found that only six of 89 relevant articles met standards for inclusion.

Furthermore, even many high-quality studies do not link co-teaching to student learning. Rather, co-teaching research often focuses on surrounding questions, such as the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the process. To illustrate, Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, and McCulley

(2012) documented that, of 146 studies reviewed, only 17 considered student outcomes (and those findings were not strong). In total, the research base provides an incomplete investigation, so we cannot claim a robust connection between co-teaching and student growth.

### **Co-Teaching as an Opportunity Space, but not a Change Agent**

“Use the two-teacher resource to vary the teaching: Divide into groups of different sizes, make different arrangements, be more interdisciplinary, have projects that extend over time in addition to the daily arrangements. Be more creative!” said co-teacher, Mette.

The research findings (or lack thereof) lead to an obvious question: *Why* does co-teaching not necessarily lead to student growth? We would argue that this lack of consistent effects is likely due to the *nature of the intervention*. Unlike many typical educational interventions, such as a new literacy program, co-teaching is an opportunity space. It is a structural, but not pedagogical, intervention. In other words, it can disrupt the status quo, but the

### **PAUSE AND PONDER**

- What are the most compelling opportunities that arise by having two teachers for literacy instruction?
- Why do you think research has not consistently found robust student learning outcomes from co-teaching?
- Under what conditions would co-teaching not result in new or more adapted literacy instructional practices?
- What does *shared responsibility* best look like between co-teachers of literacy?
- In what ways can *shared reflection* be more powerful than individual reflection?

teachers must serve as change agents to make pedagogical changes occur.

If we use an analogy to a jigsaw puzzle, before co-teaching, a teacher already has the components of literacy instruction established (perhaps vocabulary study, writer's workshop, guided reading, etc.) within a system. Adding a second teacher provides an opportunity to deconstruct and consider each piece anew (see Figure 1) and consider adding new pieces. Co-teachers may choose to experiment with approaches that are less feasible when working solo. For example, for students to practice and teachers to assess fluency, in a one-teacher classroom, a teacher may have students take turns reading to the whole group (round robin reading), which is an inefficient use of time. With two teachers, it becomes more feasible, during independent working time, to have both teachers circulating and having students whisper-read, one-at-a-time, to a teacher. Teachers can give in-the-moment feedback and take notes to share with their partner. In this way, oral

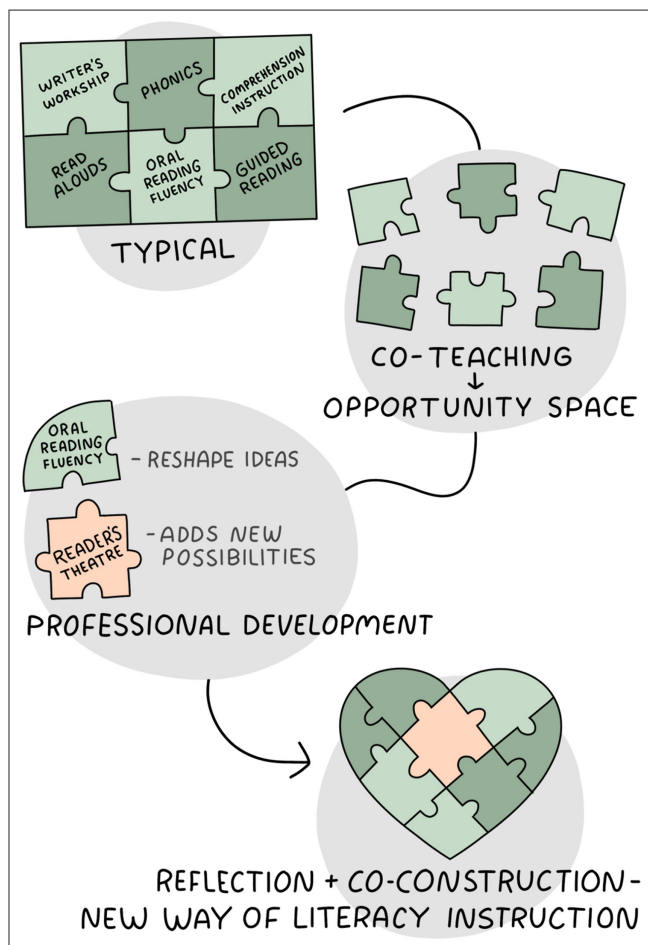
reading fluency continues to be a regular practice but is reshaped to be more effective.

We must acknowledge here that changing how we do our work takes an immense amount of effort. For example, researchers have estimated that at least 40% of our daily actions are habits, not intentional decisions (Neal et al., 2006). Habits are particularly vital for teachers when we recognize that elementary teachers manage about 1200–1500 decisions daily (Jackson, 1990)! Yet, reliance on habits also makes change difficult so an opportunity space is not always enough to spark change.

### How Co-Teaching can Lead to Student Growth

Be good at utilizing each other's expertise, strengths and interests. ... a good opportunity to try new programs and teaching methods. ... You have a unique opportunity to learn from each other and make each other even better teachers! Reflect on individual student's development together -which methods work well? said co-teacher, Trine

**Figure 1**  
**How Co-teaching can Reshape Literacy Instruction**

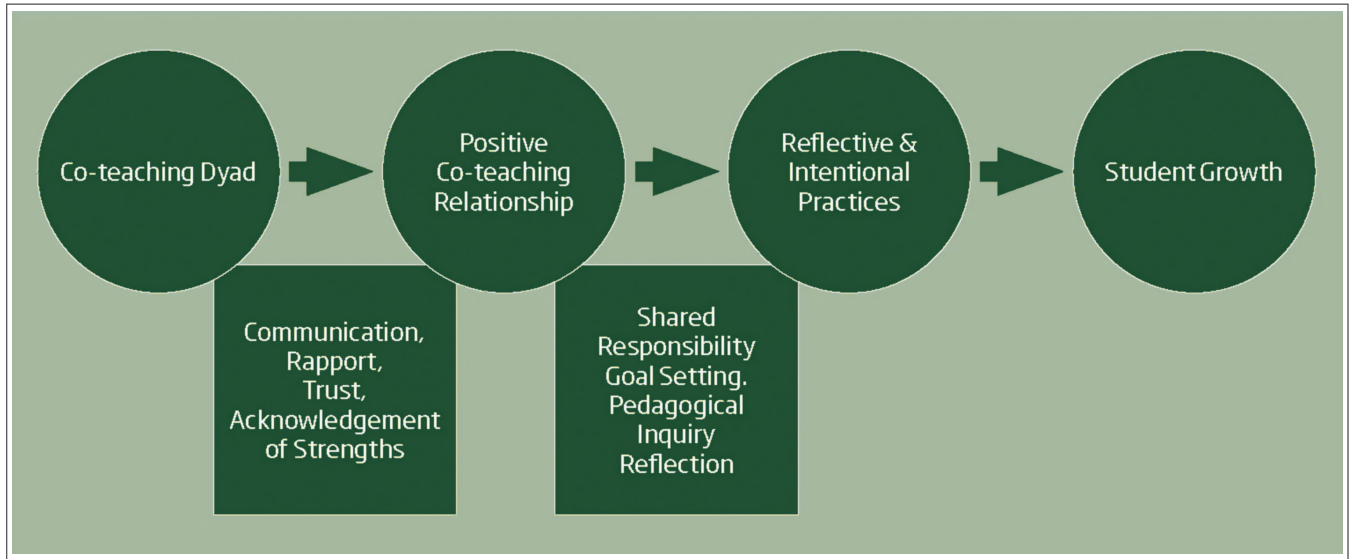


Rather than sharing discrete advice about co-teaching, we grounded these ideas in an overall model that reflects both the research and our own experiences (see Figure 2). We fully recognize that relationship building and communication are essential to creating an effective co-teaching partnership (e.g., Gerber & Popp, 1999). However, teachers working well together does not guarantee instructional change or student growth—the student growth derives from reflective and intentional instructional decision making.

As noted above, much research has focused on the first half of this process—building positive co-teaching relationships. Researchers have frequently examined what can go wrong at this stage when teachers' notions of territory, ownership, and autonomy can undermine collaboration (Alexander, 1997). In contrast, *parity* in planning, instruction, and roles is essential for successful co-teaching relationships (Pratt et al., 2017). Furthermore, conflicting belief systems can hinder the building of common processes (Brownell et al., 2006). For example, one co-teacher may be dedicated to integrating authentic literature throughout instruction, whereas her partner believes strongly on careful matching of students' reading levels and text difficulty. While both belief systems have value and research supporting them, they can create conflict when actually picking out which texts the students will read in the coming month—Should we prioritize children's literature or leveled readers?

Shifting to the second half of the model, the collaborative nature of the arrangement allows for peer modeling and mentoring so that teachers can learn from each

**Figure 2**  
**Proposed Model of Change from Co-teaching to Student Growth in Literacy**



other and support each other. Drawing from professional development research in general, we know it is difficult for professionals to change their practices at a meaningful level (Jacob & McGovern, 2015). Even when a TPD (teacher professional development) program succeeds in increasing teachers' knowledge, this does not necessarily lead to instructional changes or increased student learning (Kennedy, 2016). Kennedy named this phenomenon *the problem of enactment*, in which teachers can learn and espouse one idea yet continue enacting a different idea without even noticing the contradiction. As a result, through discussions, implicit assumptions must be challenged and existing practices questioned for TPD to lead to changes in practices (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Next, it is important to recognize that this model occurs within a school context, so looking beyond the processes between the two teachers, contextual factors, such as lack of common planning time and administrative support, present challenges to even the most compatible of teaching partners (Pratt, 2014). In one study (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016), two-thirds of co-teachers reported not even meeting on a regular basis which precludes rapport building or shared responsibility. Therefore, administrators have an active role in creating the conditions necessary for co-teachers' success and must be included early in the early planning.

In summary, for co-teaching to be wholly successful, teachers, on their own volition, must move beyond default practices to experiment with new approaches. For example, although having a second teacher would make small group instruction for comprehension more feasible,

if teachers were already comfortable with the instructional approach of the teacher modeling strategies via think-alouds to the whole-class, followed by independent reading, they could easily maintain that practice with the second teacher circulating. In that way, there would be no meaningful change to the status quo.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that most teachers have not been educated in collaborative models (Kampwirth, 1999) beyond being a preservice and mentor teacher (in which there was a clear hierarchy). As a result, co-teaching can be a situation of building the plane as it is being flown. Therefore, it is essential that neither co-teachers nor administrators simply assume that all will work out but invest in the time and structures (e.g., reflection guides!) to make it successful.

## Our Own Work and What We Learned About Co-Teaching

*The Two Teachers Project* responds to a critical gap in co-teaching research by connecting student growth in literacy with co-teaching and TPD in literacy instruction (see Solheim et al., 2017). Specifically, in a large-scale, randomized control trial in southern Norway, we followed 148 literacy classrooms, with and without second teachers, and classrooms, with and without TPD, from school entry through Grade 2 (6 conditions in total). This design allowed us to investigate the individual and combined effects of a second teacher and TPD. Regarding demographics, the teachers in this study identified as 97% female and age-wise, there was a large range, but over

half of the teachers (57%) were between 30 and 49 years old. Approximately 96% held a degree in teaching or education. Regarding specific content, 63% studied general teacher education, 31% studied preschool/early childhood education, and 6% in a related educational field.

Literacy classes were co-taught for at least 360 minutes weekly (8 sessions of 45 minutes). The TPD was site based and utilized an online program “Language Tracks” (see [sprakloyper.no](http://sprakloyper.no)). This program covers a range of topics in literacy instruction including letter learning, assessment of reading skills and scaffolding of students’ writing. The grade-level teams were not assigned a topic but selected one they deemed to be most useful. To allow for greater autonomy, Language Tracks provided the directions and materials to enact site-based TPD without an external facilitator but rather as professional learning communities (Haaland et al., 2022).

To more fully understand co-teaching processes, we also conducted in-depth interviews with three pairs of teachers who were particularly effective (based on student growth scores) and three who were not. For selection, we first calculated student growth scores and determined which classes had highly effective teaching partners (top 20th percentile) and which classrooms had less effective partnerships (lowest 20th percentile). Based on availability and interest, we then selected three pairs from both groups and individually interviewed all 12 teachers about literacy instruction and co-teaching (see Gourvennec, 2021; Gourvennec et al., 2022).

### **Co-Teaching Layered with Professional Development.**

In the following sections, we summarize key results from a series of studies. Our main results revealed that there were only limited effects on students’ reading development or motivation from simply adding an extra teacher during literacy classes or only participating in TPD (Haaland et al., 2022b). However, *adding TPD in literacy instruction to the co-teaching arrangement* proved effective (Haaland et al. 2002a). Students in two-teacher classrooms in TPD schools scored higher on literacy measures, reader self-concept and perseverance. The effects were particularly large for boys and for students who entered first grade with low emergent literacy skills.

But why? Our mechanism investigation further suggested that effects in the combined condition were due to these teachers employing more adapted instruction. Only teachers in the combined condition reported more *pedagogical adaption*, specifically using texts and tasks adapted to the students’ reading level (Haaland et al., 2022). Teachers in the combined condition also reported higher self-efficacy about adapting literacy instruction to students’ needs. In

other words, professional development appeared to facilitate teachers to fill the opportunity space with new, more adaptive and effective practices that made students more focused on their learning tasks and more likely to persevere when facing challenge.

### **It’s not “Who Does What,” It’s “How We Share Responsibility”**

“It has been a desire to have equal responsibility for teaching. Then it requires very close cooperation, to be able to exchange information and adapt programs and teaching continuously” said co-teacher Andreas.

Next, we considered variation within all 148 co-taught classes because we aimed to find active ingredients that were present in more successful teaching partnerships and less prevalent among lower performing teaching partnerships (Gourvennec et al., 2022). For this goal, we collected data on co-teaching practices, focusing on both how teachers organized their co-teaching approaches (e.g., one person teaches while one tutors, parallel teaching) as well as their level of shared responsibility for planning, enacting, and evaluating instruction. In line with the results comparing one and two teacher classrooms, we found how teachers organized the students (e.g., dividing the group in two and teaching one group each, or pull-out lessons) was *not* related to student growth (Larsen, 2021).

However, the amount of *shared responsibility* reported by teachers was positively associated with student growth. In other words, the classrooms where the co-teachers genuinely shared instructional decision making were more successful, regardless of how they organized their time and space. For example, co-teachers authentically sharing responsibility may review student reading assessment results together and co-create an instructional plan of how to respond to students’ needs. This co-constructed plan may involve new structures such as small group tutoring, parallel teaching or other organizational arrangements. The importance of shared responsibility is aligned with Solis et al. (2012), in which they observed that when homeroom teachers provided the majority of instruction and co-teachers provided only support, there was little change.

### **How Teachers Related Their Successes and Challenges in Co-Teaching**

In this section, we focus on our results from the *interviews* with 12 co-teachers from particularly high- or low-performing classrooms (see Gourvennec et al., 2022).

**Shared reflection leading to decision making.** Regarding shared responsibility, an important theme across all pairs

was that the homeroom teacher was typically responsible for the whole group, whereas the co-teacher had responsibility for struggling readers. However, there were also clear differences. In the higher performing classrooms, the two teachers reported sharing the *higher level decision making* within planning. They reported discussing student progress and decision making “all the time.” This *shared reflection* was a particular hallmark of how they described their work processes and the formation of a seamless partnership. Their reflections considered a wide range of topics including organization, teaching plans, student skills, and students’ social and emotional development. For example, if organizing student book clubs, co-teachers each provide unique knowledge regarding students’ reading levels, topics of interest and which students they work well with. As one co-teacher described: “It is important to have frequent (and short) meeting points to coordinate further plans, as well as evaluate and reflect on what has been done. ... Students must get the impression that it is two teachers, not a head teacher and an assistant, who decide in the classroom.”

**Differences as strengths.** Another key theme was how the two groups of teachers viewed differences in their backgrounds and skills. For the low-performing teacher dyads, differences (e.g., age, experience) were often viewed as a challenge and could result in a strict hierarchy with one teacher mentoring but without knowledge flowing in the opposite direction. In contrast, the high-performing teacher dyads tended to view *differences as a source of strength*. They reported much open dialogue about disparate preferences and potential disagreements. For example, in a highly successful pair, Tania saw great value in collaborating with Sara because Sara had much knowledge about early literacy instruction whereas Tania was new to first grade. Tania regularly checked with Sara about developmentally appropriate practices. Beyond age level, teachers may differ in their content area preparation and passions. For example, one co-teacher could take a lead on planning and leading the writing curriculum, whereas the second could lead the reading. However, through co-planning the two curriculums (reading and writing) could operate in synchrony. Additionally, one teacher may bring in an entirely new practice. For example, if one teacher has a background in drama, they may introduce the practice of Reader’s Theater to the class (see [Figure 1](#)). Helene summarizes this view point: “Share the tasks according to interest and what you feel you are strong at. Share your thoughts and ideas about students who are struggling in different ways, and consider, are we seeing the same thing?”

It is important to note that while having differences in background, successful pairs shared agreement, at a

fundamental level, about how children learned and what children needed. Therefore, we infer that each co-teacher should spend time making their own epistemological beliefs explicit to their partner as well as understand their partner’s points of view. As Ingrid recommends, “Discuss students, development and the pathway forward. Be a professional and pedagogical support for each other.”

## Guides for Shared Reflection and Intentional Practices

### *Why Co-Teaching Reflection Guides?*

We advocate that the co-teaching process, both the building of relationships and the professional development for literacy, should not be left to chance. We developed this set of reflection guides to facilitate discussions around critical aspects of literacy practices. Rather than relying on individual reflection, reflective discussions can help engage teachers at a deeper level—learning from and with each other. These guides are also designed to shift the conversations beyond practical planning (e.g., Did you laminate the word cards?) to higher level thinking that considers possibilities and critiques new ideas. Returning to our model, these guides are to support the *processes* that drive the outcomes.

### *How Do These Guides Support Teachers Throughout a School Year?*

The focus of reflection shifts throughout the year. In the beginning, it is essential that *time* is invested for partners to build rapport, trust and communication plans, share their fundamental belief systems, and consider the possibilities that this arrangement brings (Hang & Rabren, 2009). Next, in order for dyads to grow professionally, it is essential that they try out new strategies with conversations focusing on the *opportunities* made possible. Then, of course, change must always be accompanied by some form of assessment and a *focus on results*, so dyads have a sense of how their changes are helping meet their goals.

### *Guide for Setting up Co-Teaching (Administrators and Literacy Co-Teachers)*

Our first guide covers the big picture and organizational considerations that must be considered before the school year. This discussion would ideally occur in a meeting with both co-teachers and a school administrator. These questions are based on reports from co-teachers documenting the externalities that made co-teaching difficult or supported (see Pratt et al., 2017). To connect with our model of change

**Figure 3**  
**Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers**

Reflection Guides for Co-teachers

## Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

**Participants:** Co-Teachers & School Administrator

**Timing:** Prior to the start of the school year. 30 - 60 minutes

1. What types of administrative support would be most critical for making the co-teaching a success?
2. Are there any school policies (formal or informal) regarding the distribution of responsibility between the homeroom teacher and co-teacher? (e.g., roles and responsibilities, communication with parents)
3. Can we plan to be two teachers every time as scheduled? What steps has the administration taken so that the co-teacher will not be pulled to cover for other classrooms? What is the school procedure for last-minute coverage changes? What is the procedure when one of us is absent?
4. Where will our workspaces be located? If they are not in proximity to each other, can they be adjusted?
5. If we are splitting the class and each instructing groups of students (e.g., dividing the class in two, implementing small group instruction, individual tutoring), is there another room/space that we could use during our co-teaching time?
6. When and where can we ensure a common planning time on a weekly basis of at least 30-60 minutes?
7. How can we create a brief check in time on a daily basis, ideally, immediately after our co-teaching period? (e.g., the two teachers walk from the class together)
8. How can the co-teacher have full access to student data (e.g., student assessment records) across all platforms as well as other technological resources (e.g., online learning platform, digital gradebooks)?
9. Are there any other issues that are specific to our school and our co-teaching relationship?

Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/Long Term Planning

Monthly Reflections

Check-ins Weekly & Daily

(see Figure 3), these practical conversations are essential to create the structures (i.e., shared physical space and time) for relationship building and reflection.

### **Guide for Building Rapport and Relationship in the Literacy Classroom**

“Find out what you are good at; what you are passionate about within reading and writing. Distribute the work according to the adult’s interests and imagination,” said co-teacher, Astrid.

This guide is designed to prompt co-teachers to first individually reflect on their own belief systems and strengths and then to share and build upon those insights with their co-teacher. To connect it to our model, this guide supports the stage of building trust, rapport, and acknowledging strengths in each other. Successful teaching partners *view differences* as sources of shared strength rather than obstacles.

The assumption is that even if two teachers are long-time co-workers, these are not the type of conversations that would naturally arise. Instead, this guide creates a situation to discuss one’s core professional values and epistemological beliefs about literacy. The specific questions are adapted from co-teaching research (Pratt, 2014) and training materials for co-teaching (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Additionally, to create a forward focus, questions were also adapted by the SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) framework, which applies positive psychology to strategic planning (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019).

We recommend that teachers take approximately 15–30 minutes to reflect individually and jot down their responses. Then, co-teachers can share their answers and consider the joint questions together. Because of the personal nature of this conversation, rather than practical, we would recommend creating a low-stress environment, such as blocking out 45–60 minutes before classes starts and sitting down over coffee or lunch (Figure 4).

### **Guide for Goal Setting, Establishing Roles, and Long-Term Planning**

“It is crucial for the work that the collaboration time is “scheduled,” for fixed days and hours in the week. More than 1 hour a week is needed for collaboration time. It is also especially important to set aside ample time for long-term planning at the beginning of the school year and each term.” said co-teacher, Anita

This guide shifts the focus from underlying beliefs to what these beliefs look like in practice. Referring to our model, this guide leads to questions of shared responsibility, pedagogical intent, and goal setting.

Mirroring the process of the high-performing dyads, it is important that the conversations allow both teachers to be involved in the *higher-order decisions*, such as in what areas to focus effort, rather than appointing one person to make all decisions. These questions prompt co-teachers to establish long-term curricular goals, co-teaching goals, and consider organization practices for how to start the school year. They also guide teachers to consider how they would use students’ literacy assessments for decision making. These questions were also adapted from training materials for co-teachers by Villa et al. (2013) and the SOAR model of strategic planning (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019). For recording goal setting, we would recommend that teachers use a chart to note longer term goals for each literacy domain (Figure 5).

### **Guide for Monthly Check-Ins**

Each month, we recommend having a planned reflection for at least 30 minutes to consider progress. This guide (see Figure 6) is intentionally divided into two key areas of focus: (1) the co-teaching process and (2) student growth. This guide supports the continued use of shared responsibility both in the co-teaching process (e.g., How are we growing as co-teachers?) as well as reflecting on the teaching process (e.g., What students are we most concerned with? What are the ideas to address their needs?)

### **Guides for Weekly and Daily Check-Ins**

“Good relationship [are needed] between two who will work so closely. Exchange experiences and plans daily” said co-teacher, Elin.

We would recommend that weekly reflection should occur at a designated time and place and receive a dedicated 10–15 minutes. To accommodate the reality of school, daily check-ins will likely be less formal (see Figure 7), and teachers may need to be creative about how this can occur. For example, these may need to be squeezed into transition times such as on the way to a teacher’s lunch break. We recommend printing out copies of the guides and posting them in a visible location. The questions are adapted from work with professional coaching (Peterson, 2011) and designed to help teachers draw attention to their daily and weekly decisions, the outcome of those decisions, and the resulting insight that can inform future instructional practices. They also continually lead the reflections toward the goal of shared responsibility (e.g., How can we help each other this week?)



**Figure 4**  
**Building Rapport and Relationship Guide for Co-teachers**

Reflection Guides for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

**Participants:** Co-Teachers

**Timing:** Prior to the start of the school year. 60-90 minutes

*Individual reflection (15-30 minutes)*

1. What are my proudest professional achievements in the last year?
2. What are three strengths that I'm bringing to this collaboration?
3. What are three things that my colleague should know about me (and may not already)?
4. What typically characterizes situations when I am at my best in the classroom?
5. What do I care most deeply about in my teaching? What gives me the most energy to do my job well?
6. What is one area that I would like to improve in my teaching? What are my goals for the year?
7. What would I like to learn from my co-teacher?
8. What are the three most important things that teachers provide for children at this age/developmental level?
9. From my experience and professional training, what do I consider to be the most effective approaches/techniques for teaching literacy at this grade level? (e.g., explicit phonics, instruction with levelled texts, independent reading, read alouds, think alouds, writer's workshop, handwriting instruction, word sorting, guided reading, computer-based activities ...)
10. What are my expectations for this collaboration (planning, instruction, organization, professional development...)?
11. (Homeroom Teacher) How would I like to invite the co-teacher to engage professionally? And how am I likely to react if s/he expresses a feeling of not being invited?
12. (Co-Teacher) How will I, as the co-teacher, respond to the homeroom teacher's invitation to engage? And how am I likely to react if I do not feel invited?

*Partner Reflection (45 - 60 minutes)*

13. Where do our strengths overlap?
14. Where do our strengths diverge?
15. How do we leverage our strengths to help students achieve?
16. What could be a potential source of conflict between us?
17. When conflicts arise, how should we address concerns with each other?
18. How can we reframe differences to be seen as opportunities?
19. How does this co-teaching opportunity help us to best meet the individual needs of this year's students?
20. How does this opportunity help us to better engage and motivate students in literacy?
21. What are possible new instructional strategies or classroom organizational processes that we can use, now that we are two?
22. What do we care deeply about in our shared classroom?
23. What new skills do we need to move forward as effective co-teachers of literacy?

Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/Long Term Planning

Monthly Reflections

Check-ins Weekly & Daily

**Figure 5**  
**Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/Long-Term Planning Guide for Co-teachers**

Reflection Guides for Co-teachers

### Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/ Long Term Planning

**Participants:** Co-Teachers

**Timing:** Prior to the start of the school year.  
45 - 60 minutes

*Goal Setting*

1. What is our most compelling aspiration?
2. Considering our strengths, opportunities and aspirations: What meaningful measures would indicate that we are on track to achieving our goals?
3. Where do we want to be at the end of this year in the following domains: a) our co-teaching relationship, b) classroom management, c) students' decoding and spelling skills, d) students' comprehension skills, e) students' writing skills, f) students' oral language skills and g) our ability to adapt to the needs of diverse learners?
4. If these are our end points for the year, where do we want to be in December?
5. What strategies do we have for reaching our goals?
6. How does being two teachers help us to reach these goals? What strengths, personal and combined, can we use to achieve these goals?
7. In the process of reaching these goals, who else needs to be included? (e.g., Administration, School Psychologist, Speech Language Pathologist, Special Educators, Teacher Assistants, Grade Level Team Members, Other Professional Staff, Parent Organizations)

*Roles & Responsibilities*

8. How will we share the teaching responsibilities? Will we rotate or maintain the same roles?
9. What instructional models will we use in a typical day/week?
10. How much time will we need for co-planning on a monthly, weekly and daily basis?
11. How will we take notes/keep records to facilitate our planning?
12. Who will complete the paperwork and attend meetings for students enrolled in special-education?
13. How can we hold each other accountable for using this co-teaching opportunity well?

*Classroom Management & Communication*

14. How will we introduce our roles to the students so that they both see us as equal teachers? How will we refer to each other in front of the students?
15. If we could have only three class rules, what would those be?
16. How will we be consistent on management issues? Who will decide on the disciplinary-procedures?
17. How will we arrange the classroom space?
18. How will we explain our co-teaching arrangement to parents?
19. What types and frequency of communication do we each aim to have with parents?

*Assessment of Progress*

20. How often will we formally assess students' progress? Which assessments will we rely on?
21. How often will we informally assess students' progress? How will we organize and manage that information?
22. How do we know that we are making a difference?
23. How will we celebrate our wins in the classroom and as co-teachers?

Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/ Long Term Planning

Monthly Reflections

Check-ins Weekly & Daily

**Figure 6**  
**Monthly Reflection Guide for Co-teachers**

Reflection Guides for Co-teachers

## Monthly Reflections

**Participants:** Co-Teachers

**Timing:** At the end of the month. 30 - 60 minutes

*Co-Teaching Focused*

1. How is our co-teaching working?
2. What was a highlight of our co-teaching during the last month? Why?
3. How are we growing as co-teachers? What do we need to keep learning?
4. To what extent did we meet our co-teaching goal for the past month?
5. Should we keep this goal or create a new goal for the coming month?
6. How are we doing in reference to our long-term goals? Where are we right now?
7. Can we improve our communication in any way?

*Student Focused*

8. To what extent did we meet our instructional goals for the past month?
9. Should we keep this/these goal(s) or create a new instructional goal(s) for the coming month?
10. How are we progressing with our long-term goals in each area?
11. How do our current assessments inform upcoming instructional decisions?
12. What is working best for helping our struggling readers, in general, progress?
13. What students are we currently most concerned with? What are ideas to address their needs?
14. What is working best for challenging our high-achieving readers?
15. What is working best to motivate/engage different groups of students (e.g., language minority students, reluctant readers)?
16. What are our most challenging management issues? What could we do to address these issues?
17. At this time, do we need any additional parent/family communication?

Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/Long Term Planning

**Monthly Reflections**

Check-ins Weekly & Daily

**Figure 7**  
**Weekly and Daily Check-In Guides for Co-teachers**

Reflection Guides for Co-teachers

## Check-ins Weekly & Daily

**Participants:** Co-Teachers

**Timing:** At regular intervals

*Weekly (10-15 minutes)*

1. Overall, what worked well this week with our literacy instruction?
2. What is one new thing in our literacy instruction we tried this week? How did it work?
3. Based on these observations (questions 1 & 2), what should we maintain in our practice?
4. What area is a current area of challenge in our literacy instruction?
5. What should we try out next week to address that challenge?
6. How can we use our individual or combined strengths to approach this issue?
7. What was most useful about co-teaching this week? Why?
8. What was most challenging about co-teaching this week? Why?
9. How can we help each other?
10. What progress did we make on our monthly goals?

*Daily Check in (2-4 minutes)*

1. What did we notice in literacy instruction today?
2. What worked well?
3. What should we reteach?
4. Who has reached the goals today?
5. Who is struggling?
6. What is one thing we could do differently tomorrow?
7. Let's revisit our plans, what requires an adjustment? Who will make that change?
8. Do we need to prepare materials for tomorrow? If yes, who will do that?

Administrative and Organizational Guide for Co-teachers

Building Rapport and Relationship

Goal Setting/Establishing Roles/Long Term Planning

Monthly Reflections

Check-ins Weekly & Daily

## How to Make Shared Reflection Work Within the Real Constraints of Schools

We want to emphasize that the practice of regular shared reflection is a (free!) practice that any dyad of co-teachers can adopt and only requires time. However, we also recognize that time is a major constraint for true teacher collaboration. For example, a recent national survey from the American Teaching Panel indicates that only 10% of US teachers strongly agreed that they had sufficient time to collaborate with other teachers (Johnston & Tsai, 2018). Therefore, committing to enact these guides requires an atypical time obligation that administrators must work to facilitate, both initially and then at regular intervals throughout the year. Although this may seem excessive to administrators, we would counter that the capital investment of a second teacher is substantial, and the additional time dedicated for planning and reflection (to maximize the potential of a second teacher) is minimal in comparison. So, in short, it is unwise to scrimp on co-planning time!

Additionally, co-planning ultimately creates efficiency. For example: Rytivaara et al. (2019) found that co-teachers who invested time in aligning their ideas about co-teaching allowed them to plan more efficiently throughout the year. Therefore, this pre-work of relationship building can save teaching partners time throughout the year.

Furthermore, we recognize that teachers are very busy professionals, and it will be easy for reflection time to be eclipsed by other needs (e.g., emailing parents, completing forms, scheduling meetings); as such, this time must also be protected for shared reflection. We would recommend some form of accountability to prevent slippage from the plan, such as that monthly goals could be shared with another school professional. Administrators, therefore, are a critical link to facilitate time for reflection, provide input and recommendations, and allow co-teachers to reach their potential (Solis et al., 2012).

## Conclusion

Co-teaching offers a unique opportunity for effective, differentiated, and innovative literacy instruction, as well as an opportunity for two educational professionals to significantly grow in their skill set while supporting each other. As described by Hilde, “It is instructive to have someone to plan the teaching with and share the knowledge and experiences we have. We have tried to utilize each other’s qualities and share what we

make.” Additionally, above and beyond the curriculum, these partnerships can help build a positive classroom environment and attend to the diverse needs of many students. As Eva recommends, “Have academic conversations about individual students. It felt completely unique and very safe that we were two people who both knew the students so well.” However, we recognize that for teachers to seize this opportunity space in the busy (and often chaotic) worlds of elementary schools, we need to proactively create and protect a time to slow down and reflect on the process. We believe that shared reflection and intentional decision making are the active ingredients for co-teaching to significantly improve students’ learning. In order for this to happen, our series of reflection guides can work to support teachers in their daily, weekly, and monthly routines, as well as throughout the school year cycle. Returning to our initial question, we aim to continually prompt consideration of: *What possibilities for literacy instruction do we have together that we do not have when we are solo?*

## TAKE ACTION FOR CO-TEACHERS

1. Before the school year, set up a meeting between administrator(s) and co-teachers, and share in advance the *Administrative and Organizational Questionnaire for Co-teachers*. In this meeting, discuss issues including scheduling and shared work spaces within the school.
2. Take 15–30 minutes to complete the individual reflection on the *Building Rapport and Relationships Questionnaire*.
3. Find a common time (maybe a lunch or coffee?) to complete the shared reflection of the *Building Rapport and Relationships Questionnaire*.
4. With your co-teacher, determine best times for daily, weekly, and monthly check-ins and conversations and post these on a shared calendar.
5. Print out additional questionnaires in advance for the year and put them in a shared space for easy access.
6. Create a shared file for recording weekly and monthly goals and reflections.
7. Share with parents about your co-teaching plan, your individual and shared roles and responsibilities, and how to best communicate.
8. Enjoy your time co-teaching, continually work to improve, and celebrate your successes!

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Funding Source

The project is funded by The Research Council of Norway, Research Programme “LÆREEFFEKT,” Grant number: 256197.

## Acknowledgments

We thank Professor Åse Kari Hansen, previous director of the Norwegian National Centre for Reading Education and Research at UiS who supported this ambitious project from the beginning and, current director, Professor Kjersti Lundetræ, who has continued with this large-scale work. We also thank graphic designer, Tim Olsen Levang, for his creative contributions to the figures in this article.

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