

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is a collaborative instructional model in which two or more educators—often a general education teacher and a special education teacher—share responsibility for planning, delivering, and assessing instruction within an inclusive classroom. This model is particularly beneficial in special education settings, including Queensland special schools, where diverse student needs demand tailored instruction, collaborative problem-solving, and multiple pathways for success.

Foundations: Theoretical and Research Base

Villa & Thousand (1995, 2016)

Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand are seminal voices in inclusive education and co-teaching. Their work emphasizes:

- **Collaboration as a cornerstone** of inclusive practice
- **Shared ownership** of all students, including those with disability
- **Multiple co-teaching models** tailored to context and learners
- **Differentiated instruction** within a unified curriculum

Villa and Thousand (2016) advocate for a *paradigm shift* where all educators are collectively responsible for student learning, breaking down silos between general and special education. Their framework includes strategies for co-planning, flexible grouping, and reflective practice.

Other Supporting Literature

- **Friend, Reising, & Cook (1993)**: Identified six co-teaching models (e.g., team teaching, parallel teaching, station teaching) and highlighted the need for shared planning and parity.
- **Murawski & Swanson (2001)**: Found that co-teaching, when implemented with fidelity, positively affects academic outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly in literacy and mathematics.
- **Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie (2007)**: Conducted a meta-analysis showing improved engagement, behaviour and academic progress in inclusive settings with co-teaching.

Key Co-Teaching Models

Co-teaching is not one-size-fits-all. The six classic models are:

1. **One Teach, One Support**: One teacher leads, the other circulates to assist.
2. **Station Teaching**: Students rotate through teacher-led and independent stations.
3. **Parallel Teaching**: The class is split, with both teachers delivering the same lesson simultaneously.
4. **Alternative Teaching**: One teacher instructs a large group while the other focuses on a smaller group for targeted intervention.
5. **Team Teaching**: Both teachers deliver instruction together as equal partners.
6. **One Teach, One Observe**: One teaches while the other collects observational data (used for diagnosis or behaviour monitoring).

In a Queensland special school, the best model may vary based on:

- Student cognitive and communication levels
- Staffing availability (e.g., teacher + speech pathologist + teacher aide)
- Learning goals (ACARA or GIL-aligned)

Co-Teaching in the Queensland Special School Context

Context

Queensland special schools cater to students with significant intellectual disabilities and complex needs. Many operate within the Australian Curriculum (Version 9), adapted through Individual Curriculum Plans (ICPs), and the **General Capabilities in Learning (GIL)** framework.

In this setting, co-teaching may involve:

- Special education teachers partnering with **allied health staff** (e.g., occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists)
- Teachers and **teacher aides** working in tandem to deliver learning in community or functional contexts
- Collaboration between **classroom and specialist teachers** (e.g., music, HPE, or literacy coaches)

Examples of Effective Co-Teaching in Special Schools

1. **Team Teaching – Language and Literacy**
In a class of Prep–Year 2 students working below Foundation level, a special education teacher and a speech-language pathologist co-deliver shared reading sessions. The speech pathologist targets receptive and expressive language goals, while the teacher aligns content to the English achievement standards. Students benefit from increased engagement, targeted modelling, and multimodal communication strategies (AAC, visuals).
2. **Alternative Teaching – Numeracy in the Community**
During a community-based outing to a supermarket, one teacher leads a group comparing prices and identifying food labels, while the other works with a small group on counting and coin recognition using assistive visuals. This model allows for targeted instruction aligned with Mathematics and Personal and Social Capability outcomes.
3. **Station Teaching – Science & HASS Integration**
In a middle school setting, students rotate between sensory science experiments, cause-effect technology activities, and exploration of community helpers. Each station is supported by one of the co-teachers and a teacher aide. The approach ensures hands-on, differentiated access to the curriculum.

Benefits of Co-Teaching in Special Schools

Benefit	Impact
Improved student-teacher ratio	Increases individual attention and instructional intensity
Differentiation and scaffolding	Enables curriculum access at individual levels (AC v9 and GIL)
Inclusive practices	Supports social interaction and modelling across peer groups
Shared expertise	Combines skills (e.g., behaviour management, communication, curriculum)
Professional learning	Promotes reflection, skill-sharing, and evidence-based planning

Success Factors for Co-Teaching

To be effective, co-teaching must be:

- **Voluntary and trust-based**
- Backed by **administrative support** (time for planning, shared responsibility)
- Embedded in **school-wide inclusive culture**
- **Student-focused**, with co-teaching aimed at increasing meaningful participation and outcomes

Conclusion

Co-teaching, as advocated by Villa and Thousand and supported by a strong evidence base, is a powerful strategy for improving learning outcomes in Queensland special schools. When co-teachers work collaboratively to adapt the curriculum, align with GIL and ACARA v9, and draw on their complementary strengths, students with disability receive more equitable, effective, and engaging educational experiences.

Co-Teaching Models



