

Lived Experiences of Teachers in Implementing Evidence-Based Co-Teaching for Inclusive Classrooms: Basis for a Framework for Advancing Equity and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers lived experiences of implementing evidence-based co-teaching in inclusive classrooms and used their accounts to inform a framework for advancing equity and inclusion. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed at Carman Buckner Elementary School, Waukegan Community Unit School District 60, Illinois, United States. Ten general education, special education, and related inclusion-support teachers with direct co-teaching experience were purposively selected. Data from individual semi-structured interviews were examined using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological analysis, including significant-statement extraction, formulated meanings, thematic clustering, exhaustive description, and participant validation. The participants characterized effective co-teaching as an intentional professional partnership involving shared planning and

instructional responsibility, differentiated and evidence-based strategies, flexible deployment of co-teaching models, responsive assistance for students with diverse academic and linguistic needs, and ongoing reflection. They also described constraints involving inadequate common planning time, communication difficulties, ambiguous roles, uneven participation, and limited institutional support. Teachers perceived co-teaching as supporting learner participation, access, and belonging, although the study did not independently measure student outcomes. These findings informed the Evidence-Based Collaborative Inclusive Co-Teaching (ECIC) Framework, emphasizing organizational support, equal teacher partnership, responsive instruction, and continuous professional learning. The study contributes a contextualized, experience-based account of conditions needed to sustain collaborative and inclusive teaching.

Keywords: *co-teaching; descriptive phenomenology; inclusive education; teacher collaboration; equity in education; differentiated instruction*

INTRODUCTION

Equitable participation in schooling requires more than placing learners with disabilities and diverse learning needs in general education classrooms. It also requires teaching arrangements that coordinate expertise, adapt instruction, and provide meaningful support without separating learners from their peers. Evidence-based co-teaching, in which general and special education teachers share responsibility for planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection, has therefore become an important approach to inclusive schooling. Reviews and empirical studies identify opportunities for differentiated support and academic participation while also cautioning that implementation quality varies across settings (Vembye et al., 2024; Zamkowska et al., 2025; Woolfson, 2025).

The potential benefits of co-teaching do not follow automatically from assigning two teachers to a classroom. Collaborative instruction may be hindered when common planning time is absent, responsibilities are unequal, or one teacher is limited to a supporting role. Barron and Friend (2025) and Zamkowska et al. (2025)

emphasize the importance of structured collaboration, purposeful selection of co-teaching models, and continuing professional development. Other studies highlight concerns about teacher preparedness and the institutional arrangements that shape inclusive education (Hart, 2024; Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). These issues are particularly salient for teams accommodating students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and learners requiring individualized instructional adjustments.

Although research has investigated co-teaching models and student learning outcomes, the subjective meanings teachers attach to everyday co-teaching experiences remain important to understanding implementation. Educators continually negotiate responsibilities, respond to diverse needs, work through disagreements, and adjust teaching models according to available time and support. Qualitative studies of educator perceptions point to the significance of professional relationships, instructional confidence, and context for inclusion (Daly, 2024; Garner, 2025; Hemler, 2025). A descriptive phenomenological approach can examine these lived experiences rather than treating co-teaching solely as an intervention whose success is defined by numerical achievement indicators.

Accordingly, the present study investigated the nature of teachers' lived experiences in implementing evidence-based co-teaching in inclusive elementary classrooms; the meanings they derived from those experiences; the recurring patterns, challenges, and adaptive strategies they described; and their recommendations for strengthening equity and inclusion. Its practical objective was to develop a contextualized co-teaching framework grounded in the participating teachers' accounts. Although the dissertation situates its significance within inclusive education reform and Philippine policy concerns, the empirical setting for the interviews was a public elementary school in Illinois; therefore, transfer to Philippine contexts must be evaluated rather than assumed.

Literature Review

Co-Teaching and Shared Professional Responsibility

Co-teaching brings together complementary professional knowledge within a shared instructional space. Its models include team teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and one-teach-one-assist arrangements. These models provide different ways to distribute instructional tasks and respond to student needs, but their value depends on purposeful selection and collaboration rather than routine adherence to one format. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Vembye et al. (2024) examines collaborative models in relation to academic achievement, while Sharma (2025) discusses the instructional possibilities of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. Both strands of scholarship support attention to implementation practices rather than assuming uniform effectiveness.

The partnership between co-teachers involves more than dividing classroom duties. Mutual respect, clearly negotiated roles, joint decisions, and communication before and after lessons allow general and special educators to contribute their expertise as instructional equals. Barron and Friend (2025) emphasize ongoing tensions between the potential of co-teaching and its inconsistent realization in schools. Zamkowska et al. (2025) similarly recommend structured planning routines, coaching, and variation in instructional models. Together, these studies indicate that collaboration must be embedded in organizational routines and supported as a professional practice.

Differentiated Instruction and Meaningful Inclusion

Co-teaching offers opportunities to respond to students with varied academic, language, behavioral, and disability-related needs through differentiated instruction, scaffolding, flexible grouping, formative assessment, and accommodations. Little (2024) examined teachers' experiences with differentiated instruction, and Byfield (2025) considered co-teaching in relation to the education of students with disabilities. Such literature helps explain why teacher collaboration becomes especially important when instructional adjustments must occur during a shared lesson. Responsiveness, however, requires appropriate learner information, teacher expertise, and time for planning and follow-up.

Inclusion also extends beyond physical access to a common classroom. It involves learners' active participation, peer acceptance, appropriate support, and opportunities to demonstrate understanding. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) discuss the opportunities and challenges of inclusive education, while Woolfson (2025) considers the wider difficulties of realizing inclusive schooling for learners with special educational needs and disabilities. Heinz et al. (2025) likewise foreground the broader conditions of equitable and inclusive learning environments. In the present study, these perspectives inform the distinction between formal placement and teachers' accounts of belonging, differentiated opportunity, and student-centered support.

Teacher Preparedness, Organizational Conditions, and Professional Growth

Teacher preparation and perceived competence affect whether co-teaching teams can implement instructional strategies with confidence. Hart (2024) and Jones (2025) describe concerns about the preparation of teachers working with students who require specialized supports, while Dzenga (2025) examines teachers' readiness to teach children with autism in general classrooms. Such studies highlight that co-teaching competence cannot be reduced to goodwill or a willingness to collaborate; it also involves practical knowledge of instructional modification, learner assessment, and collaborative pedagogy.

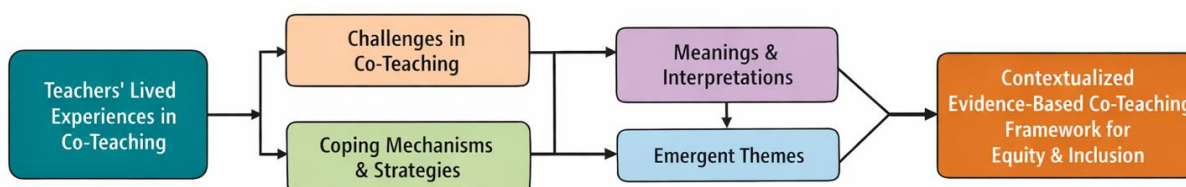
Organizational culture and leadership further affect the sustainability of co-teaching. Massouti et al. (2024) show the relevance of school leaders' perspectives on inclusion, and Grech (2025) addresses coaching approaches to improving co-teaching. Szumski et al. (2025) examine the relationship between collaboration, self-efficacy, perceived benefits, and practices within inclusive teaching teams. Taken together, these sources suggest that adequate planning time, protected access to resources, instructional coaching, and collegial reflection are conditions that can enable teachers to translate inclusive principles into daily practice.

Teachers' Experiences as a Basis for an Inclusive Framework

Research based on teacher perspectives helps reveal how practitioners interpret and adjust co-teaching arrangements in settings where prescribed models interact with classroom realities. Daly (2024) and Garner (2025) describe educators' experiences and perceptions of co-teaching and inclusion, while Hemler (2025) investigates factors educators associate with effective co-teaching. These contributions support qualitative investigation of the meanings attached to planning, shared instruction, learner support, and professional relationships rather than relying only on formal descriptions of instructional models.

A framework derived from lived experience can connect instructional decisions with the conditions that permit effective collaboration. Raeford (2025) examines teacher perceptions within a co-teaching initiative, and Schirmer (2025) addresses elementary teachers' perspectives on including students with special needs. When considered alongside evidence on teacher diversity and inclusive environments (Heinz et al., 2025), this literature indicates the need for a model that attends simultaneously to partnership, responsive pedagogy, learner belonging, and leadership support. The present study translated participants' accounts into the Evidence-Based Collaborative Inclusive Co-Teaching framework, without treating the resulting model as an already tested intervention.

Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of the study (original diagram from the dissertation).*



METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to examine how teachers experienced and made sense of evidence-based co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. The inquiry focused on firsthand accounts, significant experiences, challenges, coping responses, and conditions that facilitated or impeded collaborative teaching. It did not involve experimental manipulation, numerical measurement of students' achievement, or quantitative hypothesis testing.

Research Locale

The research was conducted at Carman Buckner Elementary School in Waukegan Community Unit School District 60, Illinois, United States. The setting provided inclusive elementary classrooms where general education, special education, bilingual, and intervention teachers collaborated in serving learners with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students requiring individualized academic assistance. The findings were situated within this school context.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Ten teachers (P1–P10) were selected purposively because they were actively involved in evidence-based co-teaching and had at least one year of relevant experience. The participants represented general education, special education, inclusion, bilingual, and intervention roles. Selection emphasized information-rich accounts rather than statistical representativeness, and the study reported participant confidentiality through coded identifiers.

Research Instrument

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit accounts of collaborative planning, instructional role-sharing, co-teaching models, differentiated strategies, learner participation, barriers, coping responses, and recommendations for improvement. The guide was reviewed by experts in relevant educational and qualitative research fields, refined following feedback, and pilot-tested with teachers who were not included among the study participants. A consistent core of interview questions was maintained, with probes used when clarification was needed.

Data Gathering Procedure

Following school permission and informed consent, the researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews in private or secure online settings. Interviews generally lasted 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy, and organized under anonymous participant codes. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and their ability to decline questions or withdraw.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological procedure guided the analysis: (1) repeated reading and familiarization with transcripts; (2) extraction of significant statements; (3) formulation of meanings; (4) clustering of related meanings into themes; (5) development of an exhaustive description; (6) articulation of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon; and (7) return of the findings to participants for validation. The researcher used manual coding, maintained records of analytic decisions, and applied member checking to support credibility. The study did not report inferential statistical analyses.

Ethical Considerations

The source described school authorization, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidential interview arrangements, use of participant codes, secure handling of recordings and transcripts, and opportunities for participants to validate interpretations. Its table of contents lists an ethical clearance certificate in an appendix, but the source text examined for this article did not provide an identifiable ethics approval code; none has been added here. Findings were presented without participant-identifying details.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nature and Essential Structure of the Co-Teaching Experience

Across the ten interviews, participants portrayed evidence-based co-teaching as a shared, adaptive professional practice rather than a fixed division of classroom tasks. They described collaborative planning, purposeful use of instructional models, differentiated and research-supported strategies, continual communication, and responses to learners' changing needs. The source's essential-structure statement emphasized that these practices were sustained through professional relationships even when time, scheduling, and communication difficulties constrained implementation. Table 1 consolidates the six themes reported for the nature of the experience, retaining the participant identifiers used in the dissertation.

Table 1. *Themes describing the nature of evidence-based co-teaching (source thematic matrix).*

Emergent theme	Supporting participants	Description
Collaborative Planning and Shared Professional Responsibility	P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10	Participants consistently described co-teaching as a collaborative process involving shared lesson planning, communication, joint decision-making, and collective instructional responsibility.
Implementation of Evidence-Based Instructional Practices	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P9, P10	Participants emphasized the use of differentiated instruction, scaffolding, formative assessment, accommodations, visual supports, explicit instruction, cooperative learning, and instructional modifications to meet diverse learner needs.
Instructional Flexibility Through Diverse Co-Teaching Models	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P10	Teachers utilized various co-teaching approaches—including team teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and One Teach–One Assist—depending on lesson objectives, learner characteristics, and classroom contexts.
Responsive Support for Diverse Learners in Inclusive Classrooms	P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10	Participants highlighted individualized support through bilingual instruction, small-group teaching, progress monitoring, accommodations, and instructional modifications that promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.
Reflective Collaboration and Continuous Professional Improvement	P1, P2, P6, P7, P10	Participants described continuous reflection, communication, and collaborative evaluation of instructional practices as essential mechanisms for improving co-teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes.
Organizational Challenges Affecting Co-Teaching Implementation	P4, P7	Participants acknowledged that limited planning time, communication constraints, and varying levels of co-teacher participation sometimes hinder the full implementation of evidence-based co-teaching practices.

Collaboration and shared responsibility were experienced as the foundation of teaching partnerships. Teachers described co-planning, joint instructional decisions, and monitoring of student understanding, rather than relegating one colleague to an aide-like role. One participant emphasized that “Co-teaching is a partnership in which both educators share responsibility for student learning” (P4, dissertation interview matrix). Participants also reported using team, station, parallel, alternative, and One Teach–One Assist models according to curricular

goals and student needs. As discussed by Barron and Friend (2025) and Zamkowska et al. (2025), this flexibility depends on intentional planning and the opportunity to contribute as equal instructional partners.

Participants linked collaborative practice to differentiated instruction and more responsive support. Their accounts named scaffolding, visual supports, explicit instruction, formative assessment, instructional accommodations, bilingual supports, and small-group teaching. These strategies were described as ways of adjusting lesson access for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other students requiring individualized assistance. This interpretation is consistent with teacher-focused research on differentiated practice (Little, 2024; Hart, 2024), but the qualitative data reflect participants' reported experiences, not direct measurements of student achievement.

Meanings of Equity, Belonging, and Professional Growth

When asked what their experiences meant, teachers framed equity as giving students what they needed to participate and succeed, rather than giving every learner identical instructional experiences. The dissertation's meaning-cluster table identified seven related themes: shared responsibility; differentiated and individualized support; inclusive participation and belonging; student-centered and responsive teaching; professional growth and reflection; relationships and social-emotional inclusion; and institutional support. Table 2 summarizes these meaning clusters without converting them into numerical prevalence estimates.

Table 2. Meanings derived from teachers' co-teaching experiences.

Derived theme	Clustered meaning	Participants
1. Collaboration and Shared Responsibility	Co-teaching was understood as a partnership involving teamwork, mutual trust, shared planning, role distribution, and joint responsibility for student learning.	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10
2. Equity Through Differentiated and Individualized Support	Equity was understood as providing appropriate, targeted, and individualized support based on students' diverse learning needs rather than treating all learners identically.	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10
3. Inclusive Participation and Student Belonging	Inclusion was understood as meaningful participation, acceptance, engagement, respect, and a sense of belonging rather than mere placement in the general education classroom.	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8
4. Student-Centered and Responsive Teaching	Co-teaching strengthened flexibility, responsiveness, instructional adaptation, and attention to students' individual needs and backgrounds.	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10
5. Professional Growth and Reflective Practice	Experiences with co-teaching contributed to changes in teaching philosophy, professional growth, reflection, and improved instructional practice.	P2, P3, P8, P10
6. Relationship, Connection, and Social-Emotional Inclusion	Meaningful relationships, understanding students' backgrounds, peer acceptance, empathy, communication, and belonging were viewed as important dimensions of inclusion.	P7, P8, P9
7. Institutional Support and Capacity Building	Training, practical guidance, collaborative planning, and school-level support were recognized as necessary conditions for effective evidence-based co-teaching.	P3, P10

These accounts distinguished mere inclusion by placement from meaningful participation and relationships. Participants described teacher responsiveness, culturally and linguistically appropriate support, classroom acceptance, and empathy as essential dimensions of equity. One participant stated, "Co-teaching strengthened the belief that all students can succeed when appropriate support is provided" (P1, dissertation interview matrix). In this account, equity was experienced through instructional opportunity and responsive

assistance. Discussions of inclusive educational practice by Jardinez and Natividad (2024), Woolfson (2025), and Heinz et al. (2025) provide a relevant conceptual context for these interpretations.

The participants also attributed professional significance to their co-teaching experiences. Reflective conversations and exposure to their colleagues' expertise were described as contributing to instructional confidence and changes in teaching philosophy. As another participant expressed, "Co-teaching improved my overall teaching practice and reinforced my commitment to inclusive education" (P2, dissertation interview matrix). Their reported professional learning aligns with research on teacher collaboration and self-efficacy (Szumski et al., 2025) and demonstrates why attention to professional growth is important when interpreting inclusive teaching practices.

Implementation Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, and Organizational Support

The study identified recurring obstacles of limited common planning time, competing schedules, insufficient communication, unclear role expectations, unequal participation, and inconsistent administrative or professional-development support. Some participants relied heavily on a one-teach–one-assist arrangement when circumstances prevented more coordinated models. The problem was not the model itself but its use as a substitute for genuine shared responsibility. Teachers addressed constraints through flexibility, brief discussions, peer consultation, adjustment of tasks, and ongoing reflection, but their accounts also indicated that individual initiative could not fully compensate for organizational shortages.

The challenge-related findings clarify the interaction between teacher relationships and institutional conditions. Clear leadership expectations, agreed roles, schedules for joint planning, coaching, and instructional resources were described as necessary for sustained collaborative practice. This concern is comparable to research on teacher preparedness, leadership, and co-teaching improvement (Jones, 2025; Massouti et al., 2024; Grech, 2025; Schirmer, 2025). The analysis nevertheless remains context-specific; interviews at a single school cannot establish the effectiveness of an institutional policy or the causal effects of co-teaching on learner outcomes.

Teachers' Recommendations and the Proposed ECIC Framework

Participants recommended dedicated co-planning periods, clearer shared expectations, accessible resources, continuing professional development, and school-level systems for collaborative review. Their suggestions also stressed evidence-based instruction, equal teacher participation, and a culture of inclusive support. Table 3 reproduces the dissertation's five recommendation themes in concise journal form. They provide the practical basis for the proposed Evidence-Based Collaborative Inclusive Co-Teaching (ECIC) Framework.

Table 3. *Emergent themes in participants' recommendations.*

Recommendation theme	Description from thematic synthesis
1. Strengthening Structural Support and Professional Capacity	Participants emphasized that co-teaching requires protected planning time, adequate resources, professional development, and administrative support to ensure teachers are equipped to meet diverse learner needs.
2. Establishing Collaborative Planning and Shared Responsibility	Participants consistently recommended creating systems that allow teachers to plan together, clarify roles, share instructional responsibilities, and function as equal partners in supporting students.
3. Developing Inclusive Policies and Leadership Support	Participants highlighted the importance of school policies related to scheduling, staffing, role definitions, accountability, and leadership involvement to sustain effective co-teaching practices.
4. Promoting Continuous Professional Learning and Evidence-Based Practice	Participants recommended continuous training focused on co-teaching models, differentiation, classroom management, assessment, culturally responsive practices, and inclusive education strategies.
5. Building a Culture of Equity, Communication, and Student-Centered Support	Participants emphasized that successful co-teaching requires a school culture grounded in communication, mutual respect, flexibility, and commitment to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students.

The ECIC Framework was developed as an experience-based organizational and instructional guide, not as an intervention already implemented and experimentally validated by the study. Its six connected areas, described in the dissertation, are supportive leadership and organizational systems; collaborative professional partnership; evidence-based instructional decision-making; an inclusive learning environment; continuous reflection and professional capacity building; and intended improvements in equity, inclusion, teacher effectiveness, and student learning. The final area represents the framework's anticipated direction rather than measured improvements in the present research.

The framework thus proposes a sequence of complementary commitments: school leaders allocate time and resources; co-teachers clarify roles and co-plan; teams select flexible models and responsive instructional supports; learners are provided opportunities for participation and belonging; and educators engage in ongoing reflection and refinement. This practical synthesis is consistent with recommendations for structured routines, coaching, and professional learning in the co-teaching literature (Raeford, 2025; Zamkowska et al., 2025; Grech, 2025). Future implementation and evaluation are needed to determine whether adoption of the framework produces the intended outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that teachers experienced evidence-based co-teaching as a collaborative, adaptive, and meaningfully inclusive professional practice. Its essential features were shared planning and responsibility, differentiated and flexible instructional approaches, attention to diverse learners, reflective professional relationships, and a commitment to participation and belonging. At the same time, teachers encountered constraints involving limited planning time, communication difficulties, unclear roles, and uneven support. The central conclusion is that sustained co-teaching depends on both the commitments of instructional partners and institutional structures that make collaboration feasible. From these accounts, the study developed the ECIC Framework as a context-grounded guide for advancing equity and inclusion. Its practical value lies in organizing the conditions teachers identified; its impact on student outcomes and its transferability to other schools remain questions for future evaluation.

Recommendation

School leaders should allocate protected joint-planning time for co-teaching partners, establish clear expectations for shared instructional roles, and ensure access to resources and instructional coaching. General and special education teachers should use regular co-planning and reflective review to select co-teaching models deliberately, coordinate accommodations and differentiation, and monitor learner participation. Professional-development providers should offer sustained, practice-focused preparation in flexible co-teaching models, formative assessment, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, and collaborative problem-solving. School and district policymakers may pilot the ECIC Framework within inclusive education improvement plans while documenting fidelity, feasibility, teacher experience, and learner outcomes. Future studies should examine different schools and stakeholder groups and evaluate the framework using longitudinal, mixed-methods, or implementation-focused designs before making broader effectiveness claims.

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