

## CO-TEACHING WITHIN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY IN KORCA COUNTRY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

Co-teaching is a practice that helps inclusive processes in regular classrooms. It is a practice that asks teachers to master professional competencies to work in a team. About these competencies, we consider the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that the teachers must have to guarantee the standards of quality in education. This study, albeit in a small sample, seeks to bring attention to regular classes, in the Albanian context, where the curricular teacher and the support teacher teach. In Albania, the support teacher has been introduced as a professional figure in regular schools since 2013, when the concept of inclusive schools was gaining ground more and more. Today, we need to understand how the two teachers, the curricular and the support teacher, interact with each other within the same class. In our study, we collected interviews from curricular teachers and support teachers to understand if and how co-teaching takes place in their classrooms. Additionally, we collected data via the Co-Teaching Rating Scale (Gately & Gately, 2001). Likewise, we observed, with the teachers' permission, the carrying out of the lesson in some classes where both teachers were present to see if co-teaching applied or not. From the data analysis, it appears that most teachers experience difficulties not only in seeing if co-teaching was applied but, also in understanding the practices that help this process.

**Keywords:** co-teaching, support teachers, curricular teachers, inclusive education

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### 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is the keyword today if we are talking about education, learning, and school. Today, in Albania we can say that, for more than ten years, the philosophy of inclusion has been perceived not only in the legislative framework but also, up to a certain point, in the practices of professionals working in educational institutions. However, much has been done and much more still needs to be done about inclusive education in Albania. In this regard, we can mention the nationwide work, directed by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, which started in 2019 and concluded in 2023, for the unification of university curricula of study programs training teachers for middle and high school. In this process, one of the results achieved is the mandatory inclusion of the training course on inclusive education in all study programs that train teachers. With this in mind, we asked ourselves what kind of training skills are transmitted to new teachers in the field of inclusive education, both in terms of knowledge and practical skills but also in terms of attitudes and values. This process indeed aligns with the recommendations of the Council of the European Union (2018) as well as that of the Incheon Declaration on Framework Action in Education 2030, (2018) which underlines the need to implement and promote teacher training to ensure inclusive education. We can also mention the Inclusive Teacher Profile (PIT) designed and defined as a result of the research of the Teacher Education for Inclusion project (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012), where the skills of the inclusive teacher are defined. The Inclusive Teacher Profile is presented as a guide for designing and

implementing Initial Teacher Education programs for all teachers, supplying indications both in terms of relevant content, planning methods, and specifying desired learning outcomes for ITE. The core values and areas of competence of the PIT are: Valuing Learner Diversity, Supporting All Learners, Working with Others, and Personal and Professional Development. Concerning the teacher's professional skills in working with others, including parents, families, and other education professionals, in terms of collaboration and teamwork, perhaps we need to evaluate how well teachers have these skills. Among the crucial skills that are proposed to be developed by teachers, we also find co-teaching and working in flexible teaching teams; collaboratively problem solving with other professionals; drawing on a range of verbal and non-verbal communication skills to help work co-operatively with other professionals, etc. (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012) As Scruggs and Mastropieri (2017) also define co-teaching is not an intervention, rather, it is a model of service delivery, or a framework for providing specialized services to students with disabilities, in a general educational context. It is what the two teachers do and how they do it that can make co-teaching effective for students with disabilities. Putting the focus on co-teaching, this study tries to investigate how the two teachers, the support one and the curricular one, present themselves in the classroom, and how the teaching practice is carried out by both teachers, in the same class environment at the same time of intervention. This study can help to understand another factor, the collaboration between the two teachers, as a key to developing inclusive practices within the classroom. On the other hand, the results of this research can be used as points of reference to further investigate the subject of professional preparation of the two teachers, the curricular one and the support one, shifting the focus to university training programs and specific training courses for inclusive education.

## **2. Co-teaching as a teaching method in inclusive classes**

Co-teaching has been defined by Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997), as the collaboration between the curriculum teacher and the special education teacher, both of whom are fully responsible for the teaching processes for all pupils in the classroom. It seems that it is essential to promote inclusive practices, within the classroom where we find pupils with disabilities and the support teacher, knowing how to coordinate not only teaching practices but also tools, spaces, and actions. The support teacher coordinates with the curriculum teacher to share the same space, and the same tools present in the classroom and to ensure that the Individual Educational Plan integrates and is in line with the curriculum and with the pedagogical actions that they will initiate during the class time. Several factors influence co-teaching, considering the teachers themselves, their training, meaning the skills to teach in classes where there are pupils with special educational needs. We know that teachers themselves can be a barrier factor, with their negative attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Pivik et al., 2002; Darrow, 2009; Çuko et al., 2012). On the other hand, a shared and coherent vision among all the actors taking part in inclusive practices is based on a profound understanding of the values on which the philosophy of inclusive education is based. Another factor is the time available to teachers to start a joint work where collaboration is the keyword. The lack of understanding and support from school administrators and school leaders as also mentioned by Friend (2008) and Murawski (2010) can lead to the failure of co-teaching practices. Even the communication and the relationship set up between the two teachers can become a barrier in that process that Murawski (Murawski, 2008) metaphorically calls "professional marriage" or "co-teaching dance" (Murawski & Dieker, 2013). In a study conducted by Kohler-Evans (2006), teachers ranked some factors influencing the effectiveness of co-teaching according to their importance, placing planning time first and working relationships second. Other studies have highlighted the importance of co-teaching as a practice to be acquired during the training process of new teachers. Rao, (2009) proposes that teachers must be prepared to immerse themselves in four forms of collaboration: collaboration - consultation where teachers must know how to ask for support and help from special education teachers to generate solution ideas for tricky situations that arise. Furthermore, another form of collaboration

is based on the peer support system where two curriculum teachers work together to generate innovative ideas for solving the situation. The third form that Rao proposes is when the curriculum teacher is supported in his work by a team where the teacher specializing in special education also participates. The latest model of collaboration is that of co-teaching when a curriculum teacher and a special education teacher work together to support the struggling student through the integration of teaching methods and techniques. Referring to Rao's study, but also to other studies (Cook & Friend, 1995; Scruggs et al., 2007; Correa, 2019), it seems that co-teaching is an indispensable practice to ensure the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular classes. On the other hand, teachers must have the knowledge and skills to apply co-teaching in the classroom context, as a process that includes three components, co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. While McHatton and Daniel (2008), suggest that the implementation of co-teaching to pre-service teachers helps in a paradigm shift and changes the way courses are delivered with collaborative teaching across disciplines. On the other hand, teachers must have the knowledge and skills to apply co-teaching in the classroom context, as a process that includes three components, co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. The researchers suggest that the implementation of co-teaching to pre-service teachers helps in a paradigm shift and changes the way courses are delivered with collaborative teaching across disciplines. Disparities in roles, less positive attitudes towards inclusion by secondary school teachers, the challenges associated with co-teaching, and the need for co-teaching as a teaching method in inclusive classrooms push towards the need to provide training for pre-service teachers, both curricular and support teachers, with co-teaching practices. Referring to the arrival point of Albanian education about the training of teachers towards inclusive education, but as has also been noted by other researchers ((Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Nevin et al., 2009), there is no university teacher training for co-teaching as a teaching method in inclusive classrooms. In this study, we went to investigate which co-teaching approaches, according to Friend and Cooke (2014), are applied in classes where two teachers operate, the curricular one and the support one.

### **2.1.Co-teaching as a process and approaches**

Co-teaching is a developmental process. This means that it develops over time and proceeds through three basic levels or stages. At each level, special and regular educators communicate with varying degrees of interaction or collaboration (Gately & Gately, 2001) (see Table 1). Also, Gately & Gately identify eight components of co-teaching referring to the relationship between two teachers that contribute to the collaborative learning environment: 1. Interpersonal Communication 2. Physical Arrangement 3. Familiarity with the Curriculum 4. Curriculum Goals and Modifications 5. Instructional Planning 6. Instructional Presentation 7. Classroom Management 8. Assessment. They present data that the eight components can appear at diverse levels of development referring to the three identified stages, thus informing teachers about the aspects that can be improved to better develop co-teaching.

*Table 1. Level of Co-teaching process adapted from (Gately & Gately, 2001)*

<i>Level of co-teaching process</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b><i>I level</i></b> <i>(beginning stage)</i>	<b>Guarded, careful communication.</b> Teachers communicate superficially, as they develop a sense of boundaries and try to set up a professional working relationship. Moving from a social relationship to a professional relationship with a colleague may be difficult for some pairs of teachers. Some general educators may experience feelings of intrusion and invasion. Special educators may feel uncomfortable, detached, and excluded. At the beginning stage, teachers may tread more slowly as they work to determine role expectations. Communication may be polite, guarded, and infrequent.
<b><i>II Level</i></b> <i>(Compromising Stage.)</i>	<b>Give and take communication, with a sense of having to “give up” to “get”.</b> Teachers who have adequate work relationships display more open and interactive communication. An increase in professional communication is evident. Although students benefit from this increase in communication, a sense of “give and take” and compromise pervades at this level. The special education teacher may be taking a more active role in the classroom teaching but, in doing so, may have had to “give up” something in return. The compromises at this stage help the co-teachers to build a level of trust that is necessary for them to move to a more collaborative partnership. Open and honest “give and take” is the essence of the third stage.
<b><i>III Level</i></b> <i>(collaboration achieved)</i>	<b>Open communication and interaction, mutual admiration</b> Teachers openly communicate and interact. Communication, humor, and a high degree of comfort punctuate the teaching, collaborative classroom. This high level of comfort is experienced by teachers, students, and even visitors. The two teachers work together and complement each other. At this stage, it is often difficult for outsiders to discern which teacher is the special educator and which is the general educator.

Meanwhile, different approaches to co-teaching have been identified (Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend et al., 2010) such as: 1. Station Teaching. 2. Parallel Teaching. 3. Alternative Teaching. 4. Teaming. 5. One Teach, One Assist 6. One Teach, One Observe.

### 3. Methodology

#### Participants

This research involved 89 pupils, both primary (n.=52) and secondary school (n.=37), and 6 pairs of teachers (the curriculum teacher and support teacher who teach in the same class) from two schools in the region of Korca. In addition, 31 special education teachers and 88 general education teachers responded to the Co-teaching Rating Scale questionnaire (Gately & Gately, 2001), presented with Google Forms (see *Table 2* and *Table 3*).

**Table 2.** Sample data of Special Education Teachers that responded at CTRs

Special Education Teacher in CTRs (total n.=31)													
Age			Gender			Expurgated			ExperSpecEdu		Training		
range	n	%	Type	n	%	range	n	%	n	%	Resp	n	%
<b>23-25</b>	7	<b>23</b>	<b>F</b>	28	<b>90</b>	<b>no</b>	8	<b>26</b>	2	<b>6</b>	<b>Yes</b>	21	<b>68</b>
<b>26-30 y</b>	6	<b>19</b>	<b>M</b>	3	<b>10</b>	<b>1-5 y</b>	11	<b>35</b>	25	<b>81</b>	<b>No</b>	10	<b>32</b>
<b>31-36 y</b>	10	<b>32</b>				<b>6-10 y</b>	3	<b>10</b>	3	<b>10</b>			
<b>36-40 y</b>	8	<b>26</b>				<b>&gt;10 y</b>	9	<b>29</b>	1	<b>3</b>			
<b>&gt; 40 y</b>	0	<b>0</b>											

**Table 3.** Sample data of General Education Teachers that responded at CTRs

General Education Teacher in CTRs (total n.=88)													
Age			Gender			ExperGenEdu			ExperSpecEdu		Training		
range	n.	%	Type	n.	%	range	n.	%	n	%	Resp	n.	%
<b>23-25</b>	4	<b>5</b>	<b>F</b>	82	<b>93</b>	<b>no</b>	32	<b>36</b>	4	<b>5</b>	<b>Yes</b>	36	<b>41</b>
<b>26-30 y</b>	5	<b>6</b>	<b>M</b>	6	<b>7</b>	<b>1-5 y</b>	34	<b>39</b>	12	<b>14</b>	<b>No</b>	52	<b>59</b>
<b>31-36 y</b>	13	<b>15</b>				<b>6-10 y</b>	22	<b>25</b>	14	<b>16</b>			
<b>36-40 y</b>	18	<b>20</b>				<b>&gt;10 y</b>	0	<b>0</b>	58	<b>66</b>	14		
<b>&gt; 40 y</b>	48	<b>55</b>											

#### Procedures

Data collection was both quantitative (through the CTR scale) and qualitative, through focus groups with pupils and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The teacher interviews were audio recorded and then faithfully transcribed. The qualitative analysis of the content of the interviews was carried out using the Atlas. ti software. Furthermore, observations of class hours (a total of 12 hours observed) were conducted within the classes where the pairs of teachers taught. The two questionnaires, referring to the Co-teaching Rating Scale, addressed to special education teachers and general education teachers, were translated and adapted into Albanian and then piloted in a small sample of teachers through the Google Form.

Collected data from the two questionnaires were subjected to Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis with SPSS software. Alpha indices show an excellent consistency for CTR for the general education teacher scale and a good consistency of CTR for the special education teacher scale.

**Table 4.** Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis of CTRs

Reliability statistics (General Educator Teacher Questionnaire)		Reliability statistics (Special Educator Teacher questionnaire)	
Alfa di Cronbach	N di item	Alfa di Cronbach	N di item
<b>,909</b>	24	,828	24

The focus groups with pupils and teachers were oriented to collect data on the teaching process, from the point of view of pupils and teachers. The hours of direct observation in the classes where the two teachers taught had the aim of observing the co-teaching models that were applied in class by the two teachers.

#### **4. Results, discussion, and recommendations**

From the qualitative analysis of the data collected in the focus groups with the pupils, it was found that the support teacher dedicates most of his time to the pupil with a disability for whom he was hired. Only 5 pupils expressed that the support teacher sometimes also helps the curriculum teacher in the activities that take place in the classroom. When asked if the support teacher sometimes directs the lesson in the classroom, none of the pupils confirmed this practice. Furthermore, 14 pupils expressed that sometimes, for short moments, the support teacher also helps other pupils during class activities. 12 pupils confirmed that, rarely, the support teacher takes part together with the curriculum teacher in the presentation of the lesson or other teaching activities, such as the assessment of homework. The data collected from the teacher interviews were guided by the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), analyzing the content of the transcribed interviews to arrive at identifying factors that the teachers themselves presented in carrying out the co-teaching. From the analysis of the content of the teachers' interviews, 6 codes were identified: the role of the support teacher (RolSupTech); the impact of the presence of the support teacher in the work of the curriculum teacher (TechImpact); the impact of the support teacher on pupils (PupImpact); co-teaching models (ModCoteach); perceived difficulties in co-teaching (DiffCoTech); co-teaching understood (Conco-teach). From the analysis of the interviews, it appears that the support teacher is strongly linked to the presence of the pupil with a disability for whom the support teacher has been included. This perception that comes from both groups of teachers seems to be fundamental in the development of co-teaching practices. Thus, the special education teacher must work only with the pupil to whom he is assigned (perception expressed by all six teachers interviewed).

Therefore, if the support teacher is considered as the teacher of the pupil with a disability and not a teacher who offers support to the class where the pupil with a disability is also integrated, this probably leads to a lack of co-teaching, i.e. the lack of collaboration of the two teachers to plan, schedule and execute the co-teaching. Also, from the observations conducted in the classes, it can be concluded that co-teaching does not occur in any pair of teachers. The data collected from the observations, combined with the data collected and analyzed from the interviews, leads us to think that the lack of co-teaching practices is the result of a bad interpretation of the role and function of the support teacher, not only by the curriculum teachers but from the definition given to the figure of the support teacher in the legal framework of pre-university education. Instead, it appears that from the CTRs questionnaire, both curriculum and support teachers show a high level of collaboration within the classroom, in all eight factors identified by Gately and Gately (2001) (see Table 5 and Figure 1). The data collected from the questionnaire makes us reflect that the teachers who answered the questionnaire either did not understand co-teaching as a practice in its complexity or we are dealing with the effect of social desirability as a bias of the questionnaire.

## Recommendations

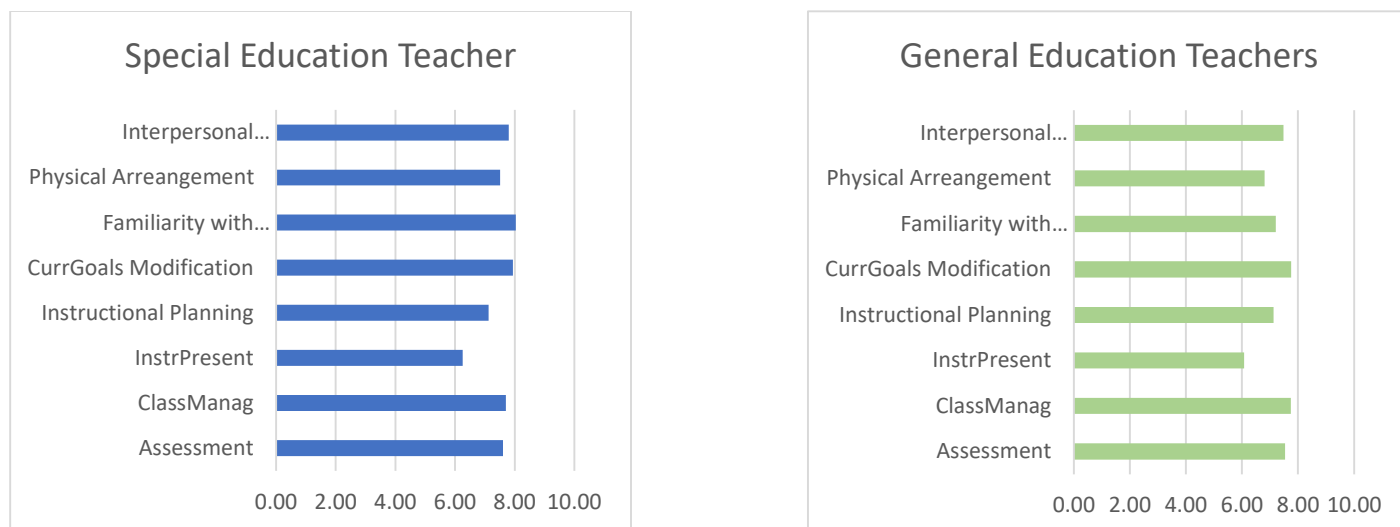
Referring to the findings of this study, we can recommend that co-teaching practices be introduced as a teaching method in inclusive classes in teacher study programs, enabling new teachers with co-teaching knowledge and practices to include students with special needs within regular classrooms. Furthermore, the figure of the support teacher must be re-proposed as a teacher who supports the inclusion of pupils with disabilities within inclusive classes by collaborating in close contact with the curricular teachers as two professionals who work together with groups of students; sharing the planning, organization, delivery, and assessment of instruction, as well as the physical space. (Bacharach et al., 2010) Also, there is a need to revise the description of the role and functions of the assistant teacher, not as a professional figure detached from the classroom context but as a close collaborator of the curriculum teacher in the ideation and implementation of inclusive practices. This requires a review of the definition of the support teacher in the legislative documents of the pre-university education of the Albanian state.

## 5. Limitations of the study

This data leads us to think, also referring to the qualitative data that social desirability has contributed as a disturbing effect in the collection of data with the CTRs. This discrepancy in qualitative and quantitative data makes us understand the need to deepen this research, using more qualitative data collected from direct observations and focus groups or interviews.

**Table 5.** Data analysis of CTRs - Special and general educators.

	Special Education Teachers CTRs				General Education Teachers CTRs			
	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Mean	SD	Max	Min
<i>Assessment</i>	7,61	0,80	8	7	7,53	1,15	9	5
<i>ClassManag</i>	7,71	1,07	9	6	7,75	1,33	9	3
<i>InstrPresent</i>	6,26	1,63	7	4	6,08	1,68	9	3
<i>Instructional Planning</i>	7,13	1,31	8	5	7,13	1,35	9	4
<i>CurrGoals Modification</i>	7,94	1,06	9	6	7,76	1,30	9	3
<i>Familiarity with Curriculum</i>	8,03	0,98	9	7	7,20	1,61	9	3
<i>Physical Arrangement</i>	7,52	1,26	9	6	6,81	1,66	9	3
<i>Interpersonal Communication</i>	7,81	0,83	8	7	7,48	1,20	9	4



**Figure 1.** Graphic presentation of data -CTRs for Special Education Teachers and CTRs for General Education Teachers

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