



## Instructional Accommodations & Co-Teaching: A Broken Arm

Est. Time: 1 Hour

### Objective

Learn about and discuss some of the issues surrounding instructional accommodations and modifications and co-teaching.

### Scenario

Spelling was impossible for Jim, despite the accommodations made by his resource teacher. He was doing well in all his subjects, but a new teacher this year—one who considered spelling a necessary life skill—insisted that he perform as well as the other students. Jim’s embarrassment over the weekly posting of spelling grades was jeopardizing his successes.

For a number of years, Crossroads High School has had a successful co-teaching program for students with mild to moderate disabilities who are seeking regular diplomas. Under the school’s model, students who are assigned to a subject area teacher and students who are assigned to a special education teacher are placed in the same class, and the two teachers co-teach. Instruction is then organized in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish the general education students from those in special education. At Crossroads, this system has worked so well that some parents move to the school district in order to enroll their children in the program.

Mary King has taught in this program for five years. A fifteen-year veteran, she considers her time at Crossroads to be the most rewarding of her career—that is, she did until this year. Just before the beginning of the school year, her teammate in her English classes resigned, and Helen Williams, a twenty-year veteran, was assigned to take her place. Last-minute shifts in the programs at Helen’s former school had led her to transfer to Crossroads, which had one of the few openings in English in the district. Helen had not done so without some apprehension. She had never co-taught and was not sure what she thought about the school’s co-teaching model.

Helen took pride in her efficiency and high standards. For years, students had complained about how much work she assigned and how “hard” she was, but later those same students came back to tell her how much they had learned and how much they appreciated her standards. In contrast, Mary was soft-spoken and sensitive, a teacher who valued the relationships she formed with her students and the fact that her classroom was a safe and welcoming place for students with disabilities.



The contents of this resource were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, #H325E120002. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Project Officers, Sarah Allen and Tracie Dickson.



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### Scenario [Cont.]

Her students and their families spoke about how wonderful it was to have someone in their district whom they could trust and count on. Her colleagues praised her calm and collaborative style of work.

Though Helen knew about her assignment when she accepted the position, Mary did not know who she was co-teaching with until the first day of school. Disappointed that she had not been involved in the interview process, Mary nonetheless approached Helen with an invitation to start planning. Helen seemed a bit surprised. She had already been planning what she needed to do, but graciously agreed to the meeting.

Mary started the meeting with the statement, “Well, I guess the place to start is a discussion of our roles and who will do what. I understand that you’ve never co-taught before?”

Helen replied, “No, I haven’t but I don’t foresee any problems. There is so much content to cover in the English curriculum, and my students have always done well on the district-wide semester exam at the end of the term. I don’t see this year being any different, so I would prefer to be the one who presents the content. That way, you can do your job and focus on helping the ones having trouble.”

It seemed to Mary that Helen had made up her mind and that discussion would be futile so she said nothing, hoping that in the future they could develop a more collaborative, shared teaching arrangement.

Hearing no disagreement, Helen continued, “This semester we will start by reading Julius Caesar. Students will have daily writing assignments and a spelling test each Friday. It’s important that they be able to express themselves clearly and spell correctly. These mechanics will constitute one half of the grade.”

Knowing that some of the students in the class had difficulty with spelling, Mary questioned, “Do you think that might be too much of the grade for some students? What about the ones who have spelling problems?”

Helen replied, “Spelling is an essential skill required for the high-stakes testing that is mandatory for graduation. If you have to, take the students having trouble into the common area and give them some extra help, but I think they all should have to learn to spell correctly.”



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### Scenario [Cont.]

Mary decided not to make a big issue of the spelling but rather to accept Helen's approach to teaching the class. For her part, Helen thought the conversation had gone well, but she wished her colleague would speak up more.

Once school started, however, Mary's concerns began to grow. One of the students assigned to the co-taught class was Jim O'Hara, a six-foot tall, 200-pound, seventeen-year-old athlete who had language learning delays and auditory processing deficits. Beginning in the second grade, Jim had received both direct and indirect special education services. He had been in a small, directed reading group all during his elementary years. By the time he had reached middle school, he was included in general education classes with consultation provided to his teachers from the special education teacher. With this support and the instructional modifications that were made, he had managed to successfully keep up with his classmates. He was a motivated student who wanted to go to college on an athletic scholarship. His parents were proud of his academic accomplishments and strong advocates for the special education program.

The first week of school, as planned, Helen gave the students twelve spelling words to study and told them they would be tested on Friday. The words were well below the reading level of most of the students in the class, and Helen felt it was reasonable to expect tenth-grade students to spell seventh- or eighth-grade words. But on Friday, as Mary graded the spelling tests, she was dismayed to see that Jim had gotten every word wrong. "I better get busy," she thought and made a mental note to catch Jim early next week to plan some new spelling strategies.

The following week she gave Jim six words on Monday and six words on Tuesday. She helped him make flash cards and showed him how to use them to study at home, but again he missed all twelve words on Friday's test. When she looked at Jim's records that afternoon, Mary found that he had earned a grade equivalent score of 4.6 in language arts and 1.8 in spelling. "No wonder he is having so much trouble on these tests," she said to herself. Jim was doing adequate work on the literature section of the course because all of the stories were being read out loud in class. "Spelling could definitely keep this student from making a passing grade in the class. I wonder how he's doing in his other classes," Mary thought. She double-checked his writing and found that it was okay. He had a computer at home and used spell-check and the grammar guides to help him, and he was making A's and B's in math and science and C's in history. Because she knew Jim was a motivated student, she was optimistic that she could find a way to adapt the spelling requirement so that he could be successful.



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### Scenario [Cont.]

In the following weeks, Mary tried a number of strategies. She gave Jim even fewer words each day, spreading the required words out over the week; she taught him rules about the structure of the words (e.g., “i before e except after c”); she asked Jim to write the words over and over. Nothing seemed to work. Each Friday, when he took the test, as he explained, “I can’t remember. It looks right to me when I write it.” He was still failing each test.

Mary hadn’t said anything to Helen about her concerns about Jim because Helen seemed satisfied with his performance. After all, he participated quite appropriately in class. As the end of the grading period neared, Mary could wait no longer. She approached Helen during their planning time.

“Helen, we need to modify Jim’s spelling test in some way, or he is not going to get a passing grade in this class. He’ll lose his scholarship opportunities. It just won’t work. How about allowing him to pick the correct spelling word out of a choice of three, or perhaps match the word in a sentence?” she suggested hopefully.

“That will not work because those skills do not test spelling!” Helen replied. “It’s really not in his best interest. He won’t do well on the high-stakes testing, which is mandatory for graduation, or later in college if he can’t spell. Spelling is something everyone must be able to do! I don’t think it would be fair to lower that standard or my expectations for him or anyone else.”

“Helen, I don’t think spelling is a skill that Jim will ever be able to master. It is simply part of his disability. If he had a broken arm would you still expect him to write, or read printed material if he were blind?”

“Educated people must be able to spell! I know I have high standards, but I want the best for my students!” Helen replied. Helen was trying to build a professional relationship with Mary, but she was beginning to wonder if they would ever see eye-to-eye. With the new legislation, she was feeling a great deal of pressure for all of her students to attain high test scores. She thought, “These students have to learn to spell; otherwise, I have to answer for it!” She was also concerned about the way the other students would react. She wondered, “If I make modifications for one student, won’t the other students expect the same? Am I going to have to come up with individualized tests?”

Mary, however, was not satisfied. Jim was facing a failing grade in English, with no solution in sight. And, worse, he was becoming frustrated and had begun to skip class. Mary called Jim’s home later in the week to talk with Mrs. O’Hara about Jim’s problems with spelling, as well as



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his numerous absences from class.

### Scenario [Cont.]

“He is so frustrated and embarrassed,” Mrs. O’Hara confided. “The spelling grades are posted in the class, and everyone knows that Jim is the one making the zero grade every week.”

“I don’t blame him for not wanting to come to class,” Mary thought as she hung up the phone.

“We have got to do better for Jim, but how can I convince Helen to make accommodations in spelling for him?”

This issue had already put a strain on the two teachers’ relationship, and Mary was hesitant to confront Helen about Jim again. It would not be good for them to become adversaries, especially so early in the year. Mary believed, however, that it was their shared responsibility to help Jim succeed in this class.

### Questions/Discussion Topics

1. List what you learned about each of the characters in the case. What do you think is motivating the thoughts and actions of each of the characters?
2. What are the issues and problems in the case? Discuss the common problems and issues faced in co-teaching. What steps are required to establish successful co-teaching relationships?
3. When is it appropriate to make instructional accommodations? Modifications? Discuss techniques for modifying instructional methods and materials. What instructional accommodations and modifications in spelling did Mary make for Jim? Were they effective? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the importance and benefits of communication and collaboration that promotes interaction with students, parents, and school and community personnel.



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### ★ What a STAR Sheet Is

A STAR (STrategies And Resources) Sheet provides you with a description of a well-researched strategy that can help you solve the case studies in this unit.

### Discussion Points

- Common problems and issues faced in co-teaching
- Requirements to establishing successful co-teaching relationships
- When to make instructional modifications
- Techniques for modifying instructional methods and materials
- Benefits of collaboration and communication between students, parents, school, and community personnel

### What the Research and Resources Say

- Some common concerns expressed by teachers regarding co-teaching include concerns about adequate planning, support from administration, resources, professional development, and willingness of teachers to be involved in co-teaching. High school general education teachers expressed particular concern about grading (Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004).
- Key areas that need to be addressed in order to facilitate successful co-teaching relationships are:
  - Deciding who is responsible for students in the classroom and when those responsibilities change
  - Establishing grading guidelines
  - Setting classroom management expectations
  - Creating specific physical space (i.e. desk and chair) for each teacher
  - Informing students that they have two teachers and that they have the same authority
  - Involving parents when planning and establishing a collaborative teaching arrangement
  - Setting aside time to co-plan (at least 45 minutes per week) (Vaughn, Schumm, & Argyles, 1997)
- Instructional modifications and accommodations should be made when a student is not able to participate and/or be successful in the general education curriculum. Possible modifications and accommodations to instructional methods include shortening assignments to focus on mastery of key concepts, substituting alternatives for written assignments, allowing students to use computers to complete written work, and specifying exactly what students will need to know in order to pass.



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### What the Research and Resources Say [Cont.]

Possible modifications and modifications to materials include providing alternative books at an easier reading level, allowing students to listen to audiotapes of books, giving page numbers to help find answers, and providing summaries of chapters (*School Accommodations and Modifications*, 2003).

- Teaching students learning strategies is another instructional practice that has shown positive results. Researchers at the University of Kansas have developed a three-strand curriculum consisting of teaching students how to acquire information, store information, and express and demonstrate understanding of information. Strategies taught include paraphrasing, mnemonics, and test-taking (Boudah, & O'Neill, 1999).
- Important teaching strategies to use in an inclusion setting include:
  - Making necessary accommodations and modifications for students
  - Using different instructional delivery systems (audio, visuals)
  - Using various grouping variations
  - Teaching students to understand how they learn as an individual
  - Teaching students to use both cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Beckman, 2001).
- Finding ways to engage families and communities in the education of their children carries definite benefits. Research shows such students perform better academically, stay in school longer, and are more likely to pursue higher education (Henderson, & Mapp, 2002).

### Keep in Mind

- Positive rapport and open communication are key in a co-teaching relationship.
- Developing successful co-teaching relationships takes time.
- Modifications and accommodations need to allow access to the curriculum. They do not necessarily guarantee success.
- Students often need to be explicitly taught on how and when to use specific accommodations and modifications.





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### Resources

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