

Co-Teaching Playbooks: Secondary Classrooms' Solution to Limited Time and Shared
Content Knowledge

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Imagine the secondary inclusive classroom as a football team working toward a common goal. The game and classroom share challenges such as a clock limiting time. However, coaches and educators differ in how they prepare. Educators write text-based individual lesson plans that are hard to adjust once in motion while coaches rely on visual maps of plays that are used spontaneously in response to needs that occur during a game. Lesson plans are used once in each unit, whereas *playbooks* are planned once and used frequently in many games. Lesson plans are made for teachers, but playbooks are shared with the team, including specific roles and actions that use the strengths of each player. *Playbooks* are efficient and flexible, the qualities we needed in our co-taught lessons for students with a wide range of academic needs.

Over the last two years, 50 teams explored the use of *Co-teaching Playbooks*, through professional development in New York City. We worked primarily with co-teachers of secondary math, science, and English Language Learner (ELL) classes where planning meetings required learning unfamiliar subject matter in addition to organizing instruction for students. As one special educator (SE) reflected, “*It is hard for me as a co-teacher to access the curriculum without the guidance of the gen-ed teacher (GE).*” We sought a solution to the problems of limited time and shared content knowledge for secondary teams.

A Lesson as a Series of Frequent Plays

Playbooks, illustrate a “sequence of actions” that frequently occur in lessons. Elements such as: opening, introduction, mini-lesson, group learning, independent work,

and closing are planned once as a “*play*”. Once the “sequence of actions” is known as a “*play*,” then co-teachers use the “*play*” in any lesson without additional planning time. *Playbooks* can illustrate learning activities used in all subject areas including homework correction, test review, vocabulary instruction, and using feedback for revisions. The required planning time for SEs who often co-teach with every GE on a team was greatly reduced by *Playbooks* for frequent and common learning activities.

Start with Zoning

We started our *Playbook* approach by zoning the classroom for independent practice and small group learning. Rather than circulating, each teacher stayed in position working only with student groups in their “zone” for an established time, such as 5 minutes (Figure 1). This offered sustained close teacher proximity for all students. After 5 minutes, the teachers changed zones. Teachers used their own expertise to give targeted feedback, for example, one teacher coached students on strategies to remember vocabulary while the other asked conceptual understanding questions. Each teacher had a specific instructional goal for their feedback going far beyond just keeping students on task. Staying in a “zone” enabled teachers to follow-up with students ensuring feedback was applied.

We saw immediate improvements in learning, as students were held accountable for applying teacher feedback and more asked for help. Specific zones and types of feedback were called during lessons responding to student learning needs. As a SE reflects, “*The co-teaching playbook helps ensure that regardless of how much content knowledge I have, I can still have a meaningful contribution to the classroom and toward individual student learning, particularly in checking for understanding in conferencing.*”

Zones offered co-teachers flexibility to respond to learner needs, ability to use both teachers' expertise, and required no planning time outside of class. Zoning inspired us try different types of *Playbooks*.

Playbooks: Simple to Complex

We built *Playbooks* for instructional patterns that were already in place, such as both educators teaching at the board (Figure 2). We considered scenarios where our co-teachers had struggled and created *Playbooks* aimed at solving problems. Three examples illustrate how *Playbooks* might range from simple to complex sequences.

Example 1: *Whole Group Playbook*

A social studies GE describes how “[*the Whole Group Playbook*] was incredibly simple but served an abundance of functions. This tool can be used to focus on separate teacher strengths and weaknesses, enabling the best possible rigorous instruction for students.” The *Whole Group Playbook* (Figure 2) served two purposes: assessment or introduction of new content. For assessment, one teacher reviewed the lesson while the other collected assessment data or one teacher recorded ideas on the board while the other facilitated class discussion. For an introduction, teachers acted out a cliffhanger scene previewing the next lesson or demonstrated a new concept. We avoided problems such as co-teachers interjecting directions and questions over each other making it difficult for students to know where to focus through clear roles with specific instructional purposes. Teacher purposes were so routine that students often volunteered to play a teacher's role.

Example 2: *Test Review Playbook*

A GE Math teacher described the test review problem, “*It is rare that all of my students need the same "mini-lesson" or model. I struggled to facilitate multiple mini*

lessons within one period, to different groups of students, depending on their prior knowledge.” *Test Review Playbook* (Figure 3) addressed this problem, where each teacher provided 10 to 15 minute long mini-lessons to small groups while students in the center of the room engaged in independent practice or peer tutoring. Students attended the mini-lessons relevant to their learning needs and then rotated back to independent practice. This *Playbook* supported students in persisting with problems because they could not interrupt the mini-lessons. Students learned how to gain help to finish independent practice from peers, textbooks, and other resources in the classroom.

We also used this *Playbook* to provide interventions with small groups while most students engaged in independent practice. A GE Science teacher gives an example, “*I created a co-teaching Playbook for remediation and basic skills review before/during introducing a new skill in mathematics that builds off of a previously learned skill. This 15- minute mini-lesson can be used when needed to both efficiently and effectively help struggling learners to master needed skills before moving on to new material in the curricula.*” *Playbooks* support regular implementation of interventions and provide a reliable structure to spontaneously “call a play” in response to student learning needs during lessons.

Example 3: *Specialized Instruction Teacher Swap Playbook*

Teams created *Playbooks* to solve problems as illustrated by this SE, “*Our Playbook created a classroom environment where students that need more support are given more teacher time and students who can be more independent are given that space and time. We created a strong and effective learning experience for individuals with exceptionalities because two teachers were effectively using their time in the classroom.*”

For example, in the *Specialized Instruction Teacher Swap* (Figure 4), teachers served students in a specific area for a set amount of time then rotate to the next group. This enabled some groups to have constant teacher presence while others had independent time. We used this *Playbook* to tailor instruction to student learning needs by: (1) each teacher offered a different mini-lesson, (2) one assessed students while the other supported independent learning, (3) one provided review while the other conferenced with students, (4) both taught the same mini-lesson and then swapped groups for checking understanding, or (5) one teacher provided feedback through clarifying questions and value statements, while the other provided concerns and suggestions to guide revisions.

This play resulted in students using both teachers' expertise. A writing teacher reflects, "*Students that are not 'officially' mine are now seeing me as a resource both inside and outside the classroom.*" This play provided regular structure for us to give specialized help during class instead of students coming in during lunch or after school. A middle school science teacher observed that the clarity of teacher roles helped "*because it allowed students at different skill levels to receive the particular support or extension they need during a lesson.*"

Strong Start and Finish

A SE cautioned that even with *Playbooks*, discussions among co-teacher teams during planning times remain essential; she reminds us that "*the general and special education teacher need to be on the same page with a Playbook in order to make sure that the best instruction possible is being given to all students in the class.*" We found that using *Playbooks* for a strong start and finish to daily lessons led to grade level teams

effectively using *Playbooks* across all subjects. We used three plays to create strong starts and finishes.

Entrance Playbook

A SE noticed that “*Using routines at the start of class - a la playbook - may make best use of time limits.*” The *Entrance Play* is used as students enter the classroom.

Figure 5 shows the GE greeting all students at the door while the SE starts the class. The SE monitored the students engaged in practice problems, corrected homework using an answer key, or helped students organize notebooks. This play, used in all subject areas, resulted in meaningful roles for co-teachers without requiring planning time.

Introduction Playbook

The *Introduction Playbook* (Figure 6) differentiated the way we prepared students for lessons. While one teacher provided an introduction for most of the students, the other used the station to provide the introduction while also: (1) catching-up students who were absent, (2) explicitly teaching basic, advanced, or cognate vocabulary, or (3) preparing student leaders for upcoming group work. *Introduction Playbooks* were used at other times, too. For example, where one teacher provided an extension project, helped with homework questions, conferenced with students, or implemented a periodic assessment. Capitalizing on content expertise, we placed the GE at the small group station to assess students or provide tutoring.

Closing Playbook

A consistent *Closing Playbook* (Figure 7) during the last five minutes ensures that no one leaves class confused. In Figure 7, the SE took the position with the small group, to assess how students used IEP accommodations during class. However in Figure 6 the

GE has the small group during the *Closing Playbook* to challenge a math concept misunderstanding. The GE and SE could easily change position in a *Playbook* to use their expertise to meet student instructional needs.

Seven Benefits: More Important than Saving Time

Playbooks are a new invention with much more to learn and explore. However, in the last two years, we have observed seven benefits that challenge and inspire our teaching.

Students are Part of the Game

Unlike lesson plans, *Playbooks* are shared with students facilitating learner autonomy. In the past, students had a hard time remembering the directions, anticipating transitions, and knowing how to use both teachers' expertise. With known reliable procedures during lessons, students put all of their energy into the topic under study. As one teacher describes, “[*Playbooks*] help students be in charge of their learning, be a part of directing learning rather than just being a participant; students understand where they are; and where they want to go in science.” *Playbooks* greatly reduced the amount of time teachers spent giving directions during lessons and increased student independence.

Purposeful Planning

A math teacher described how *Playbooks* focus attention on planning purposeful instruction: “*Designing the co-teaching Playbook and truly mapping out exactly where a co-teacher and I will physically be in the room at any given moment was a great opportunity to think through the way in which I want to structure a learning environment. The ability to plan purposefully for the grouping and location of all actors in the*

classroom made me aware of the responsibility and also difficulty of this objective.”

Teachers commented that prior to the *Playbooks* they were often not totally clear of their instructional role beyond behavior management and monitoring task completion. For example, a SE reported how *Playbooks* “*taught me to be useful to students in a co-teaching classroom aside from making sure they are taking notes and not acting disruptive. For example, I could pull out students and review vocabulary.*” Time spent defining reusable plays came back to us in time savings both through more efficient instruction and better use of planning meetings.

Structure to Differentiate Instruction

One GE observed that *Playbooks* “*help me differentiate my instruction in a way that doesn't take excessive amounts of time. It also improves my teaching by giving me ‘moves’ that can be readily adapted for different situations.*” Teachers noted how *Playbooks* provided a clear description of how differentiated instruction and specialized supports were given to students through co-teaching. For example a math team described, “*My co-teacher and I made a comprehensive playbook. For example, we have a play for when a group of students needs to have a concept explained to them a few different ways. I have the ability to pull aside those students in order to personalize their learning during a lesson.*”

Confidence to Explore Innovative Teaching Methods

Playbooks inspired confidence and creativity in co-teacher teams. For example an English GE reported, “*I teach for durations of 100-minute blocks in my school every day and all of my students like movement to break up the length of the class. This movement was difficult to achieve because it required a lot of preplanning with my co-teacher. By*

creating several co-teaching Playbooks I feel more confident in using movement in my class and it requires less planning on the part of me and my co-teacher.” Routine use provides opportunities to perfect the delivery and establish the amount of time needed to accomplish a “play”. The results of *Playbooks* are reliable, creating an environment where teachers and students feel comfortable taking risks.

Use Expertise of All Professionals

Drawing and labeling *Playbooks* by the instructional or feedback purpose forced us to make clear decisions which led to greater use of teacher expertise. As a GE reported, “[*Playbooks*] made me rethink my practice in a co-teaching setting, considering how to really utilize having two teachers with different specialties in the room in order to provide multiple entry points and extensions in planning curriculum.” When the instructional purpose is not clear, we found that co-teachers often default to the role of managing behavior which is not as helpful for students as providing instruction and feedback on learning.

Clear Communication for Service Providers and Administrators

The co-teaching *Playbook* is particularly useful for diverse settings where many service providers collaborate to support students. The visual representation of how instruction flows communicates quickly to paraprofessionals, parent volunteers, and mentors where support is needed. Administrators could immediately see specific instructional roles for both co-teachers during observations.

Effective for Students with Disabilities

Most importantly, students with disabilities who rely on successful co-teaching to receive required services benefitted from *Playbooks*. For example, shared *Playbooks*

across classes on a grade level resulted in continuity for students. This is particularly helpful for students with disabilities, who may feel more empowered and comfortable with consistent instructional patterns and grouping arrangements throughout their school day.

A Winning Game Plan

Our goals for *Playbooks* soared beyond increasing time and content knowledge. We tackled previously difficult types of instruction through *Playbooks*. A math GE reflected, “*Playbooks helped with how to create groups and how to conference [with students] and then use that data in a meaningful way.*” As we couldn’t improve co-teaching by adding more planning minutes to the clock or instantly increasing subject knowledge expertise, the *Playbook* is our game changer, offering a time-saving effective approach to planning for secondary co-teacher teams.

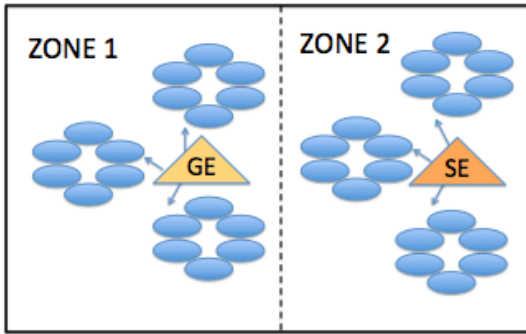


Figure 1. Co-teachers in zones.

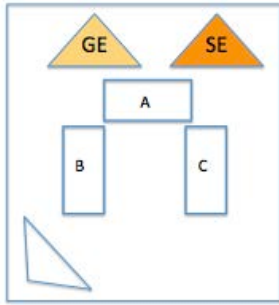


Figure 2. Whole Group Playbook.

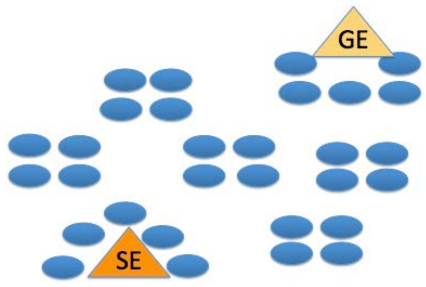


Figure 3. Test Review Playbook.

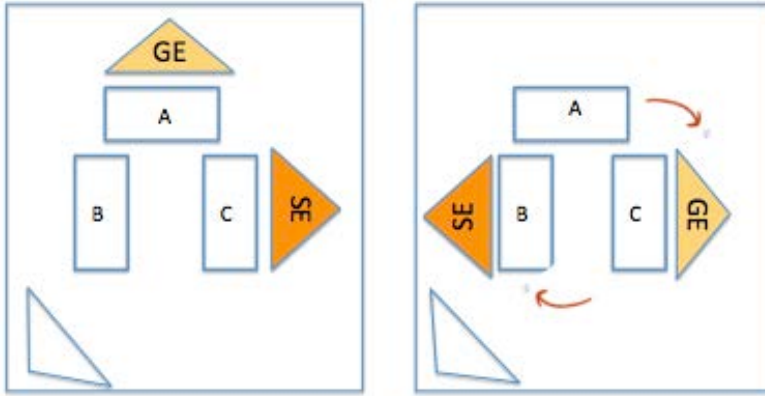


Figure 4. Specialized Instruction Teacher Swap Playbook.

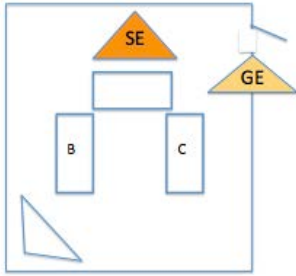


Figure 5. Entrance Playbook.

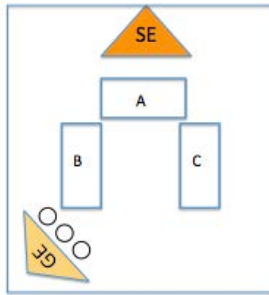


Figure 6. Introduction Playbook.

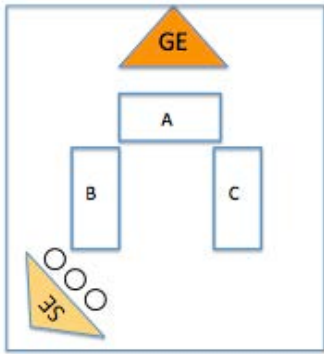


Figure 7. Closing Playbook.