

## **Preparing Teacher Candidates for Co-Teaching: Where's the "Special" in Special Education?**

*Presentation for the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Teacher Education Division of CEC  
Indianapolis; November 7, 2014*

Marilyn Friend, Ph.D.  
Professor Emerita, UNC Greensboro  
marilynfriend@marilynfriend.com

Lynne Cook, Ph.D.  
Professor, CSU Dominguez Hills  
lhcook@csudh.edu

### **Examples of What Is Clear**

Over the past two decades information about the education of students with disabilities has come under close scrutiny, and options for fostering their success have gradually evolved and become more precise. The following are examples of the current knowledge base related to educating these students.

#### **Co-Teaching Practices**

- With the school reform mandates of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, co-teaching has become an increasingly common option for educating students with disabilities, even though it does not exist in federal special education law in the same way that other service delivery alternatives are described.
- Although it is extraordinarily difficult to design and conduct rigorous research on co-teaching effectiveness, a growing number of case studies and program evaluation studies demonstrate that it can be an effective means for improving academic, behavioral, and other outcomes for students with disabilities without negatively affecting the achievement of typical students.
- Considerable concern exists about the roles and responsibilities of special educators when they function as co-teachers (e.g., quality of partnership, parity, teacher-treated-as-paraprofessional).

#### **Instructional Concepts**

- Federal law/regulations specify the three instructional elements for students with disabilities: (a) special education which is defined as specially designed instruction and which is the only universally required element; (b) related services; and (c) supplementary aids and services, including accommodations and modifications.
- Contemporary practices in education emphasize tailoring instruction to learner needs, using principles based on universal design for learning (UDL) operationalized through differentiation of that instruction.
- A considerable knowledge base exists on instructional practices that engage students, motivate them, and result in their learning. Many authors have compiled anthologies of such strategies (e.g., Hattie, Marzano).

## **Evidence-Based Practices for Students with Disabilities**

- The field of special education has been engaged for decades in the effort to identify evidence-based practices for educating students with disabilities, including identifying standards for judging the quality of practices proposed as appropriate for these students.
- Evidence-based practices include those that are implemented directly with students within or separate from a program (e.g., student participant strategies), instructional programs (e.g., Fusion Reading), and those that exist at a macro level (e.g., strong school leadership).
- Among specific practices with a strong evidence base for use with students with disabilities and wide applicability across grade levels and learner needs are these: specific peer mediated instructional strategies (e.g., PALS, reciprocal peer tutoring, numbered heads together), self-regulated strategy development, and direct and explicit instruction (e.g., in reading, word study, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension). Of course, there are many others that span academic, behavioral, communicative, functional, vocational, organizational, and other domains.

### **Examples of What Is Not So Clear**

Perhaps one universal understanding of co-teaching that has emerged is that it is far more complex than it appears on the surface. Co-teaching leads to re-examination of many aspects of school programs and structures (e.g., scheduling, assignment of students to classes), and it often highlights dilemmas related to the education of students with disabilities. Further, mixed results for students when co-teaching is instituted leads to questions about its efficacy. The following are examples of what is not clear in co-teaching:

- The appropriate roles and responsibilities of special education teachers when in a general education classroom. One example of a concern relates to the issues arising in teacher evaluation when special educators are expected to function in a way that makes them interchangeable with their general education colleagues.
- Special education candidates' ability to distinguish among differentiation, accommodation, modification, and specially designed instruction, and so select appropriate practices based on data.
- The effectiveness of various co-teaching approaches (e.g., station teaching, alternative teaching, teaming) and the types of instruction or situations in which they should be implemented.
- The extent to which special educators in co-taught classes are providing various types of student support (e.g., content support, accommodations, specially designed instruction) and the relative effectiveness of those types of supports.
- The factors that should be included when considering whether co-teaching is being implemented with fidelity.
- The impact of various field experiences related to co-teaching on the early-career implementation of co-teaching.

## Examples of What We Can Do to Improve Candidate Understanding

The knowledge base on co-teaching is likely to continue to grow slowly. Until clearer answers to the preparation of teachers for co-teaching are available, these are some suggestions to consider:

- Articulate and expect candidates to clearly understand and apply instructional vocabulary that they will hear in their schools.
- Explicitly build the connection between co-teaching and the expectation to deliver specially designed instruction rather than accommodations and content only.
- Teach special education candidates how to discuss appropriate co-teaching practices with their teacher colleagues as well as their administrators.
- Provide opportunities to have candidates embed specially designed instruction into general education lesson plans and lessons in the context of co-teaching.
- Discuss with colleagues in general education disciplines how co-teaching is being introduced to other teacher candidates, looking for common understandings and seeking ways to provide all candidates with experiences that will build their knowledge of and skills for implementing this service option.
- Offer professional development to cooperating teachers on effective co-teaching.

## Related References

- Brinkmann, J., & Twiford, T. (2012). Voices from the field: Skill sets needed for effective collaboration and co-teaching. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 7, 1-13
- Conderman, G., & Hedin, L. R. (2014). Co-teaching with strategy instruction. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 49, 156-163.
- Council for Exceptional Children. (2014). *Council for Exceptional Children standards for evidence-based practices in special education*. Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Evidence-Based-Practice-Resources-Original>
- Council for Exceptional Children. (2012). *The Council for Exceptional Children's position on special education teacher evaluation*. Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.cec.sped.org/Policy-and-Advocacy/More-Issues/Special-Education-Teacher-Evaluation>
- Dessenmontet, R. S., & Bless, G. (2013). The impact of including children with intellectual disability in general education classrooms on the academic achievement of their low-, average-, and high-achieving peers. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 38, 23-30.
- Friend, M. (2014). *Co-teach! Creating and sustaining effective classroom partnerships in inclusive schools* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Greensboro, NC: Marilyn Friend, Inc.
- Rivera, E. A., McMahon, S. D., & Keys, C. B. (2014). Collaborative teaching: School implementation and connections with outcomes among students with disabilities. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 42(1), 72-85.
- Solis, M., Vaughn, S., Swanson, E., & McCulley, L. (2012). Collaborative models of instruction: The empirical foundations of inclusion and co-teaching. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 498-510.