CIDDL Research and Practice Brief 12: Two Heads are Better than One: Developing Effective Co-Teaching

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Topic: Two Heads are Better than One: Developing Effective Co-Teaching

The problem highlighted in this brief

Research has consistently shown that co-teaching does little to change the design of education delivery despite its popularity as a model for inclusive education. Special education teachers often reported that they experienced unequal partnerships, insufficient time to plan and coordinate with their co-teacher, and a lack of change within general education (Scruggs et al., 2007; Weiss, 2004). As a result, much of the potential efficiency that could be gained by having two experts in a classroom is lost.

Why does this matter to teacher preparation?

It is likely that most new teachers will be expected to co-teach at some point in their career. Yet, many new teachers are only familiar with structural models of co-teaching that largely involve different ways of grouping students (Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). In this brief, CIDDL invites Dr. Peggy Weiss to share her insights into the practice of co-teaching. This includes how general and special educators can bring their individual expertise together in the classroom to lend a unique perspective on the design and execution of instruction. Dr. Weiss also provides several examples of how technology can be engaged during planning, instruction, and assessment to facilitate communication between instructors who may have limited time to collaborate.

Guest Expert: Dr. Peggy (Margaret) Weiss

Dr. [Margaret Weiss](#) is an associate professor in the [Division of Special Education and Disability Research](#) in the [College of Education and Human Development](#) at [George Mason University](#). Her research focuses on coteaching both at the secondary level – between general and special educators – as well as between faculty members in higher education teacher training. She is also interested in the use of technology to support teacher education.

What Will You Learn from This Brief?

Co-teaching is more than just having two teachers in a classroom. As Dr. Weiss highlights in this brief, one of the strengths of co-teaching lies in having two professionals who bring their unique expertise to meet the needs of a wide variety of students. Dr. Weiss discusses the three important elements of co-teaching – quality general education, making the curriculum accessible, and specially designed instruction. She also stresses that effective teacher development means helping teachers recognize their unique contributions to these processes. She then goes on to highlight how co-teaching is facilitated by technologies that provide opportunities for flexible collaboration and communication.

Policy and Research Context

Section 300.114 of The 2004 [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) establishes what is referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements. The law establishes precedence for students with disabilities to be educated to the maximum extent possible with children who are nondisabled, and that this education takes place in the regular educational environment unless the nature

or severity of the student's disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

More than two decades ago, Cook and Friend (1995) defined co-teaching as a model in which two or more professionals deliver substantive instruction to a diverse group of students in a single space. Most often, one educator is a general educator while the other is a professional in special education or related service; however, both teachers take an active role in planning and teaching. The LRE requirements established in IDEA, combined with U.S. policies mandating students with disabilities gain access to the general education curriculum with highly qualified teachers, lend a strong argument for the use of the co-teaching model (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017).

Co-teaching provides two advantages over other models of education delivery for students with disabilities (Weiss, 2004). First, co-teaching provides the special education teacher opportunities to be directly involved with the planning and teaching of the curriculum rather than just as a consultant. Second, this model of special education delivery can be less isolating to students with disabilities as they do not need to be removed from the class.

Despite the efficiency co-teaching would seem to bring to inclusive education, many co-teachers still report challenges with collaboration (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). A meta-analysis found that in many classrooms, co-teaching did little to change the way education was delivered (Scruggs et al., 2007).

In this brief, Dr. Weiss discusses a model for co-teaching that emphasizes how two co-teachers can bring their unique expertise together to form a more efficient model of co-teaching. The following insights from our interview with Dr. Weiss highlight three important elements of co-teaching that should be present during planning, instruction, and assessment as well as provide advice on how technology can support this process.

Key Insights

Q1: Could you walk us through what co-teaching is and why it is important in today's classes to support students?

> Dr. Weiss: *"You are going to have a wide range of students in an inclusive classroom... The idea is that you've got two experts from different arenas that can bring their expertise together to deliver quality instruction."*

The idea behind co-teaching sounds simple, but in truth, it is quite complex (Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). Two professionals bring their individual expertise together to provide access to the general education curriculum for a diverse range of students. Some of these students have individualized education programs (IEPs) and require specially designed instruction (SDI). According to Weiss and Rodgers (2020), a number of different models for co-teaching exist, but these are largely just different forms of grouping students. The strength of co-teaching lies in the ability to blend the instructional expertise of these two professionals.

Q2: What are the important elements that ensure co-teaching is successful?

> Dr. Weiss: *"I like to think about co-teaching as the product of co-planning, co-instruction and co-assessment. You can't have quality co-teaching without any of those factors."*

According to Weiss et al. (2020), instruction in a co-taught classroom can be thought of as a combination of three elements. These elements include quality general education instruction, making the general education curriculum accessible, and SDI. The first of these elements, quality general education instruction, involves maximizing engaged learning time and using the evidence-based practices (EBPs) of the general education discipline. To make the general education curriculum accessible, the second element of co-teaching, the special and general educator work together to incorporate EBPs from special education and other accommodations for students with disabilities into the general instruction to ensure accessibility for all students. Finally, the third element of effective co-teaching means including SDI to ensure that students with disabilities can reach the unique goals present on their IEPs (Weiss et al., 2020).

Q3: How can we better prepare preservice educators for co-teaching in the field?

> Dr. Weiss: *"if we can help teachers understand the value and their unique expertise that they bring to a co-teaching situation, negotiate between the two, and then figure out how to hit these three elements in their instruction, I think we'll be able to really prepare them to use the six approaches and meet the needs of the students that they work with."*

A consistent factor that comes up frequently in research around co-teaching is the importance of blending the expertise of two instructors in one classroom (Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). In a 2015 study, Weiss and colleagues referred to the initial period of time in which educators are getting to know one another as the "blind date" phase. The second phase, "pushing through" was characterized by educators confronting the challenges in developing an effective model for working together. Weiss et al. (2020) found that when educators were provided training in the three elements of co-teaching, educators developed more confidence regarding their roles in the co-taught classroom. In turn, this confidence helped educators recognize that they did not have to be two identical individuals, but each could contribute differently. One possible way to strengthen this sense of identity in preservice teacher training is to have students practice collaboration with individuals from outside their own discipline (Weiss et al., 2016).

Q4: How can technology be engaged to support co-teaching during planning, instruction, and assessment?

> Dr. Weiss: *"For example, in co-planning, the ability to share documents... There are also shared presentation platforms... There's, you know, Zoom conferencing like we are doing... You also have all of the options now that are available through the variety of learning management systems that schools are using."*

In their article [Co-Teaching in a Virtual World](#), Weiss and Rodgers (n.d.) provide advice on how to capitalize on the flexibility of technology for co-teaching. Whether a classroom is face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online, the features offered by shared documents,

learning management systems and video conferencing platforms can support organization and implementation of co-teaching. For example, one teacher can model note-taking strategies on a presentation while the other teacher teaches. Meanwhile, breakout rooms can provide an organic means of grouping students in class and can minimize distractions (Weiss & Rodgers, n.d.).

Q5: How can co-teaching be used in both synchronous and asynchronous instruction?

> Dr. Weiss: *"Particularly for synchronous instruction… you can be co-creating or co-constructing documents with students just like you could be with teachers, right? co-teachers were also able to do all the groupings - like station teaching, parallel alternative teaching - in breakout rooms… For asynchronous instruction, we saw teachers as almost dividing and conquering… They spent a lot more time with the planning aspect, because the delivery of instruction was completely different in these asynchronous situations."*

With online learning platforms and applications, co-teachers are able to provide quality education to students with and without disabilities (Weiss & Rodgers, n.d.). In the case of asynchronous instruction, for example, teachers are better able to divide work: allowing one teacher to record follow-up presentations for students who need additional support while the other teacher grades. In synchronous instruction, both teachers are still present in the virtual classroom and actively engaged, whether it be visiting breakout rooms to check on student progress or modeling the day's lesson.

Resources

For some video models on how to use technology to support co-teaching in both face-to-face and virtual classrooms, Dr. Weiss has produced a series called [Co-Teaching in a Virtual World](). Over the course of seven videos, Dr. Weiss presents examples of different co-teaching models, including One-Teach-One-Assist, Parallel Teaching, Station Teaching and Team Teaching, as well as SDI delivery.

Link to Video

This Research and Practice Brief can be viewed on video online at
https://tinyurl.com/CIDDLBrief12Video

Suggested Readings

Cook, L., & Friend, M. (1995). Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices. Focus on exceptional children, 28.

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Transcription of Interview

Transcription of the interview can be found at
https://tinyurl.com/CIDDLBrief12Transcript

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