Podcast: Co-Teaching in the Real World

HOST: Welcome to the latest episode of Teaching Exceptionally podcast. Teaching Exceptionally is produce by the Council for Exceptional Children, the leading professional association for special and gifted education teachers. For more information, please visit CEC.SPED.org. In this episode we're talking about co-teaching in the real world. Our guest is Dr. Marilyn Friend, and internationally renowned author and speaker, and CEC past president. Over her career Marilyn's been in every role imaginable, including general education teacher, special education teacher, teacher educator, and staff developer. She's currently the professor emerita of education at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Marilyn, thanks so much for joining us today.

Marilyn: Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

HOST: Co-teaching continues to be one of the hottest topics in special education. It can be really daunting for new teachers, and even teaching veterans. What would you say are the most common challenges for new co-teaching teams, and what advice do you give for them to overcome those challenges?

Marilyn: It's true that new co-teachers can face quite an array of challenges, partly depending on how well informed they were before they began, and partly based on their teaching conditions. It think one of the biggest challenges though, is the transition as a professional from the concept of mine to the concept of ours. That affects the physical arrangement of the classroom so that there are two places for teachers to be, rather than just one. It affects classroom instructional postings. For example, making sure that there's not a bulletin board that says one teacher's name, like Smith's Stars, but instead reflects the fact that it's a two teacher classroom, even if it's only part of the time.

Another piece of that challenge is how teachers talk to students so that a teacher is not saying my class, when I checked your papers, when I was getting ready, but instead says, when we were preparing, or when we looked at your paper. Yet another one, is just flat out sharing instruction. Teachers are accustomed to teaching by themselves and sometimes it's difficult to frame how to divide instructional responsibilities between two people. One solution, especially for that last one, is the concept of simultaneous instruction. That is, both teachers have a group of students, and so both teachers are teaching at the same time.

Now, that raises issues about noise and the physical arrangement of the classroom, but it's so important for new teachers to get into the habit of simultaneous instruction, rather than falling into a pattern of turn taking, where one teaches while the other one walks around. That's not a good use of two teachers in the classroom, and probably won't have a great impact on student achievement.
Overall, general ed teachers often have to let go a little bit, because co-teaching of course happens in their classrooms, and they're accustomed to it being their own class. Sometimes special educators have to step up a little bit. They're not there to do whatever a general ed teacher thinks would be good for kids, instead special educators really need to understand that they're there to ensure that students are getting their special ed services, and to make sure that happens. For both teachers, the way to overcome early challenges, really truly, is to make sure they participate in some type of professional development that gives them the opportunity to discuss their preferences, to talk about who they are as professionals, and what their priorities are, and to negotiate some of the ways that they will share their teaching, they will share their classroom, they will share their students. That should help tremendously.

Host: We received a question via Twitter from Hailey in Texas. Her current challenge is teaching with someone who has a different teaching style than she has. That's a tough one. How do you recommend teachers handle different teaching styles and personalities in a co-teaching environment?

Marilyn: I usually tell co-teachers that there is no eHarmony for co-teaching--that we're not going to match people on twenty-nine key characteristics so that they can have a lifetime of happiness. It's a serious issue, but it's one that I think we have to make sure we're looking at from a professional lens. Collaboration is a prerequisite to effective co-teaching. A starting point is that two teachers, even before they enter the classroom, should sit down with one another, discuss what their priorities are, discuss their teaching styles, discuss how they're similar and how they're different, and what that might mean when they're actually teaching. That opens the door to negotiating how they might make the classroom work. It also can help build trust for one another, and also tolerance for someone who is not exactly the same as the other person.

Overall, I think teachers really need to keep asking themselves, what's the goal for both of us being here? It's not about us and whether or not we like one another, we can usually find a way to share our classrooms if we keep in mind that we are here for the students. In a co-taught classroom, we can actually overcome quite a bit of the difference by making sure that we are doing that simultaneous teaching, because if I'm working with a group of kids, and you're working with a group of kids, we're not tripping over each other, and some of those style differences, and those personality differences, really become much less important.

However, if it's a crisis, and either teacher really believes that interpersonal differences are having a negative impact on the instruction, at some point it's appropriate to involve a third party, perhaps an instructional coach, maybe a counselor, or someone else who's not supervisory. That person could sit down with the two co-teachers and function as a mediator, and really help them identify the source of concern, and perhaps ways to work around it. We all have personalities. Part of the joy of co-teaching is enjoying the fact that we do have those personalities, and I'm confident that if people stay aware of that, and if they really work to keep their focus on the students, they'll be fine.

HOST: We have another question from Twitter. This is from Deb in California. She asks, "What are time savers that teachers can use when planning for co-teaching?" We know that's
one of the hardest things for new teachers, the time they need for all the paperwork, all the planning, not to mention the time they're actually spending with the students. Do you have any strategies to share about how co-teachers can use their time more effectively, other than just a mess of coffee?

Marilyn: I have one phrase for co-teachers on the issue of planning time, and that phrase is get into the cloud. We have a habit in education of wanting to have all of our planning interactions be face to face, and in the rest of the world, and in most other professions, that's simply not the way it works anymore. What I recommend that co-teachers do, is this, they should meet periodically face to face. That would be to sketch out what's coming up, maybe over the next three or four weeks, so that both teachers have a sense of that, but then for their day to day planning, it's so very important to switch to a more electronic model.

For example, some teachers are planning on a shared calendar in either outlook, or perhaps on Google’s calendar. What they'll do, is the general ed teacher will put the lesson plans for each day in the description block within an appointment, and then the special educator can annotate that appoint with specially designed instruction, accommodations that need to be made for students, and by having it on a shared calendar, both people have access all the time, and if one person is better planning early in the morning, and the other person is better at planning late in the evening, it's okay, because cloud planning can be asynchronous.

Another similar option that many teachers like, is a plan book. It's called planbook.com and it is a low cost, last I checked it was about a dollar a month, but it's an electronic planning option designed for teachers, by teachers. In plan book teachers can import the standards they're teaching from, import a lesson plan, create the lesson plan, share it with their administrator, share it with their co-teacher. Special educators can add notes to general educators' lesson plans so that they truly have a shared lesson when they're finished, and by doing that type of electronic planning, both teachers can do their part of the job, and it's efficient.

A few teachers like Google Drive. That's a similar model and many teachers know Drive. Any of these electronic options make planning more efficient and I just cannot say enough about encouraging people to get into the cloud, rather than trying to meet face to face. Too much time is spent doing detail that doesn't have to be shared at the moment, and often, special educators find that if they meet face to face, the general ed lesson planning gets done, but too often not the special ed part, and that's really too bad, because then that has to be done after the fact. Planning in the cloud, that's the direction for contemporary professionals.

HOST: That sounds like a great use of technology, and that is all the time we have. Marilyn Friend, thanks so much for being with us today, and thanks for sharing this great information.

Marilyn: You're very welcome. It's been a pleasure.
Please visit the CEC website at www.CEC.SPED.org for information on student membership and student discounts to the 2016 CEC convention in St. Louis, where you can find dozens of sessions on co-teaching and register for a half day workshop Co-Teaching in Action: Classroom Practices to Improve Student Outcomes led by Dr. Friend. Stay tuned for the next episode of Teaching Exceptionally coming soon.