

Better Together: Evidence for Co-teaching and Collaboration in Today's Classrooms

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Today's international schools are more diverse, culturally and linguistically, than ever before, providing schools with unique opportunities for collaboration. Since multilingual learners cannot wait to learn the core curriculum until they have full command of English, they need to be taught content and language at the same time (Mohan et al 2001). And when we recognize that all students deserve both high challenge and high support, the intentional practice of professional collaboration becomes a new norm. Especially in current virtual, hybrid and redesigned classrooms, collaboration helps all teachers to develop the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions to share responsibility for all students' academic, linguistic and social-emotional development.

In the past decade, international schools have shifted away from the fragmentation and segregation of pull-out EAL programs--ones that require specialists to plan and deliver language development classes, academic interventions or special education services in isolation--towards collaboration and integration offered by coteaching and in-class support. Additionally, when educators jointly plan, teach, assess student learning, and inquire together, they model the 21st century learning skills we hope to develop in our students (Nordmeyer, 2015). We know that teachers need to collaborate in order to serve a diverse international school community.

In order to help teachers maximize their work together at the classroom level, school leaders need to build a shared culture at the school and district level, and create both curricular

and administrative structures that facilitate collaboration. This also allows the entire school community to see collaboration as professional development: teachers working together to serve students builds collective efficacy and provides valuable, job-embedded opportunities for reciprocal learning (Hattie, 2015).

Collaboration requires developing not only skills but also dispositions. For example, we intentionally use “multilingual learners” rather than “English language learners” (ELLs) in order to recognize the diverse linguistic assets that students bring to our classrooms, rather than positioning English at the expense of other languages. A recent National Education Association (2015) publication clearly indicated that multilingual learners “desperately need educators who believe in them, who recognize their assets, and who have the support and training they need to do their best by all of their students” (p. 19). Teacher collaboration is one pathway for educators to examine their core beliefs and daily practices.

Why collaborate?

There is growing evidence supporting a collaborative approach to serving multilingual learners. English Language Development specialists cannot work in isolation, and segregating students is not the most effective approach (Greenberg Motamedi et al, 2019). To provide the most comprehensive support for multilingual learners, leaders need to understand the importance of collaborative practices and commit to facilitating collaboration. Three key reasons emerge from the research to support professional collaboration for the sake of multilingual learners.

Collaboration supports students' language development: A recent study in one large school district, suggests that dual language and co-teaching programs are more likely to promote long-term English language acquisition than pull-out programs (Greenberg Motamedi et al, 2019). Mohan, Leung, and Davison (2001) also observe that “differences notwithstanding, both ESL learners and native speakers are learning language for academic purposes, and both groups are using language to learn” (p. 218). When we recognize our collective responsibility to serve all learners, collaboration is not a luxury but a necessity.

Collaboration supports students' academic achievement: Collaboration between language and content teachers can further the academic development of all students (Davison, 2006). Genesee and Lindholm-Leary (2013) suggest that when content and language instruction are integrated, there is “authentic communication in the classroom about matters of academic importance that provides critical context for learning the communicative functions of the new language” (p. 6). However, if multilingual learners do not have an opportunity to engage in meaningful, academic conversations with their peers or if they are denied access to the core content, language acquisition as well as content attainment may suffer. Eliminating separate, fragmented, disjointed, and segregated instruction for students learning English in favor of collaboratively planned and delivered classes can improve multilingual learners' social-emotional, linguistic, and academic development. Based on a cross-case analysis of two elementary schools, Theoharis and O'Toole (2011) concluded that by eliminating pullout ESL services and focusing on community building, professional development, and collaboration, student achievement at both schools—in particular the

achievement of multilingual students—greatly improved, as did the connection with families.

Collaboration supports teacher professional learning: Viewing language teaching as an “integrated process rather than a discrete discipline introduces new ways of engaging with colleagues” (Nordmeyer, 2010, p. 7). While mostly known for his work on *Visible Learning*, John Hattie (2015; 2018) has documented the importance of collaborative expertise while also recognizing the power of teacher collective efficacy. He identified that the greatest barrier to students’ academic achievement is within-school variability. Thus, meaningful teacher collaboration—sharing successful instructional strategies, examining student data, reflecting on effective teaching practices—is key to student success. And in a review of three dozen methodologically rigorous studies, Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) found that “collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection into teachers’ own practices, allowing teachers to take risks, solve problems, and attend to dilemmas in their practice” (p. 10). When classroom teachers and English Language Development specialists collaborate, their collective efficacy—the shared belief that together they can achieve success with multilingual learners—increases.

How can leaders promote collaboration in today’s classrooms?

The evidence in support of teacher collaboration has been expanding in the past decade. In our daily practice of researching and building professional learning opportunities for teacher collaboration, we have frequently observed teachers sharing the work of planning and

delivering integrated language and content instruction that promotes success of multilingual learners (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2018; Honigsfeld & Dove 2019; Greenberg Motamedi et al., 2019; Nordmeyer, 2015). See Table 1 for a summary of the four key collaborative practices, each aligned to goals, expectations and opportunities for leadership support.

Table 1.

	What teachers can do	What leaders can do
<i>Collaborative planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-develop instructional routines and strategies • Prepare unit/lesson plans with attainable and rigorous content/language objectives • Design appropriate formative and summative assessment measures • Select instructional accommodations and accelerations based on students' academic and linguistic needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide common planning time • Establish schoolwide norms and expectations for co-planning • Ensure all necessary curricular materials and instructional tools • Provide professional development, coaching and support to maximize collaborative planning
<i>Co-teaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-deliver differentiated instruction to scaffold learning • Share ownership of instruction through intentional student grouping and teacher roles • Demonstrate co-equal partnerships by selecting & adapting a variety of co-teaching models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a manageable and flexible schedule that allows for a variety of in-class support configurations • Build staffing ratios and relationships to support a limited number of coteaching partners • Engage counselors and teachers in determining class composition • Provide professional development, coaching and support to build collective efficacy
<i>Collaborative assessment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop, administer and evaluate the outcomes of formative and summative assessment measures • Set goals for (and with) students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify additional time devoted to data collection and analysis • Provide all necessary assessment materials and tools

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use assessment data collaboratively with colleagues, caregivers and students • Jointly analyze student data to identify areas that need improvement or targeted intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain professional development, coaching and support for school-wide assessment literacy and evidence-based assessment practices
<i>Collaborative Reflection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively examine the effectiveness of the collaborative instructional cycle • Discuss the impact of collaboration on both student learning and teacher pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions • Regularly engage in <i>reflection in action</i> and <i>reflection on action</i> (Schon 1983) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in collaborative reflection with teachers • Provide systematic support and a schoolwide commitment to improve collaboration • Integrate a process of reflecting on new learning and applying new collaborative practices • Showcase successful partnerships and practices

Amplifying our collective impact

In the past six months, the global pandemic has taught us that collaboration is more important than ever; what used to be a luxury is now a lifeline (Honigsfeld & Nordmeyer, 2020). In the past, some teachers might have appreciated their autonomy, but in this new learnscape, most teachers don't want to go it alone. As we collaborate with colleagues, we can also offer social-emotional support and engage in honest conversations about what works and what doesn't. The professional learning curve has been steep. Most teachers are in the process of building an entirely new online learning ecosystem, or in many cases, repurposing an online platform that was used for flipped or blended teaching before school closures (Honigsfeld & Nordmeyer, 2020). Collaboration is also essential for teachers to maximize hybrid learning environments and the new blended approach of synchronous plus asynchronous interaction as

well as for creating a new pathway for returning into the physical classroom in the foreseeable future.

In the coming year we have the potential to transform school as we know it. International school leaders have a unique opportunity to leverage the research on collaborative practices, and build truly collaborative learning communities—across grade levels and departments—as well as with EAL and Learning Support specialists. Educators need to develop both the will and the skill to collaborate; and leaders need to provide school-wide structures to create the conditions for co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing and co-reflecting to thrive. Accurate and accessible student learning data should drive all phases of collaboration, helping teachers to build on the assets of each student, identify targets for growth and differentiate strategically. School-wide norms can support cultures of collaboration, helping teachers to develop agreements that build both trust and shared understanding. Schedules should provide common planning time and teachers can make the most of this precious commodity by using collaborative protocols and shared electronic curriculum documents.

Evidence from professional literature and examples from contemporary practice clearly indicate that leaders are essential in building shared understanding of successful practices and building cultures of collaboration. International school leaders can provide structural support for the initiation, implementation, and on-going innovation of collaboration to serve multilingual learners – and in the process improve learning opportunities for all students.

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