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Co-Teaching With Multilingual Learners: Key Themes From Emerging Research

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This article presents a review of the major themes that have emerged in over a decade of research conducted by the authors and others on the practice of co-teaching for multilingual learners (MLs) in K-12 English language development (ELD) programs. It highlights six major themes from research and documentary accounts that focus on how teachers engage in a collaborative instructional service delivery for MLs. The authors review each of the major themes and relate them to best practices for the successful implementation of Integrated English as a New Language (ENL) instruction in New York State.

Keywords: Collaboration, Co-Teaching, Multilingual Learners, Research, and EL Content Support

Co-Teaching with Multilingual Learners: A Research Overview

Teachers are enmeshed in a continuum of change, trying to keep up with revised state mandates, the development of advanced district and school policies, adjustments made to instructional programs, adoption of new curricula, assignments to different grade-levels or schools, shifts in leadership, and new students, faculty, and staff, just to name a few. Yet amid the ever-changing landscape of teaching, including the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools, some teachers manage to thrive while others are leaving the profession altogether (Walker, 2022). In particular, teachers have seen the shifts in mandated policies for teaching multilingual learners (MLs), and although much guidance often is given for the procedural aspects of program change, student identification, testing, program placement, exit criteria, and so on, limited guidance is offered for how to bring about the directed changes to program implementation as well as the curriculum and instruction.

The scope of this article is built upon our decades of work and more specifically, our 2014 NYS TESOL Journal publication titled "Analysis of the Implementation of an ESL Coaching Model in a Suburban Elementary School" (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2014). Our 2014 report was from the New York suburban elementary school context whereby we conveyed findings from investigated factors that

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influenced a collaborative service model and program implementation to meet English learners' (ELs') instructional needs. While the report has surpassed a decade of continued educational reforms, key findings from 2014 regarding the necessary change-oriented collaborative mechanisms for administrators and teachers that lead to program success still hold true. For this reason and others, this article broadens the discussion to include aspects of curriculum and instruction as extension of the program implementation focus from our original work.

For New York State (NYS), the Board of Regents established a shift in policy for the instruction of MLs occurred in the 2015-2016 school year, to assure "English Language Learners equal access to all school programs and services offered by the school district, commensurate with the student's age and grade level, including access to programs required for graduation" (CR Subpart 154-2, p. 1). Part of the shift in practice was the inclusion of MLs in Integrated English as a New Language (ENL) where students receive both content and English language development instruction. For Integrated ENL, NYS determined parameters for who would deliver instruction. The options are: 1) one teacher who is dually certified as an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and as a content/childhood (grades 1-6) teacher; or 2) two teachers one of whom is a certified ESOL teacher and another who is a certified content/childhood teacher. The policy change in teaching practices produced the onset of co-teaching for MLs; a collaborative instructional model in which two or more teachers partner together to plan, teach, and assess students as a team within the same classroom. Although these changes as well as others were well-intentioned, not all of them have proven to be beneficial or executed in ways that supported the success of MLs (New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), 2020).

In 2017, NYSUT surveyed 424 members who identified as bilingual or ESOL teachers to gather feedback about the changes to services for MLs. Teachers reported a lack of training for co-teaching MLs, an absence of planning time with co-teaching partners, and that content/grade-level teachers sometimes treated ENL teachers as their assistants. We can also affirm from our extensive coaching and field-based research with teachers providing Integrated ENL services in NYS, as well as others who co-teach classes with MLs throughout the United States, that these issues as well as other concerns continue to persist. In light of these matters, what does the research reveal about best practices for successful co-teaching with MLs?

The Research

Drawing from our insights from examining over a decade of research and documentary accounts on co-teaching for MLs, six major themes emerged. We revisited the theoretical background from our 2014 report that was based on Fullan's (2007) framework for successful change to then conduct a forward-moving thematic review of current accounts. These factors to the extent that they positively influenced the implementation of co-teaching for MLs, and aligning with several of Fullan's framework elements were as follows: (1) the involvement and support of school leaders; (2) co-planning time and process; (3) capacity building; (4) integration of language and content; (5) co-teacher parity, compatibility, and relationships; and (6) establishing a framework for collaboration and decision making. We caution that these six variables represent a system of co-teaching practices, and that each factor in isolation may not bring about any sought-after change.

The Involvement and Support of School Leaders

Leadership support, consistent with the 2014 report, is still seen as a critical factor for the development of positive outcomes for co-taught programs with MLs. Santana et al. (2012) identified what they termed “nonnegotiable recommendations for school leaders to implement a successful co-teaching model” (p. 62), which included informing staff, parents, and students of the shift in instructional delivery; hand-selecting co-teaching partners; scheduling time for teacher collaboration; grouping MLs in fewer classes to support co-teaching efforts; providing materials and funding for resources; creating opportunities for teaching teams to collect and analyze student data; and continuing to be an ever-present and involved leader.

Some researchers pointed to challenges for implementation of teacher collaboration and co-teaching due to the lack of administrative support (O’Loughlin, 2012; Samuelson et al., 2012), while others noted the strong and consistent commitment of their administrative teams to not only provide time for teachers to collaborate, but they also set collaboration as a clear expectation for all teachers, holding meeting times as “sacred and not traded for other school initiatives” (Frederick & Ittner, 2020, p. 131). Russell (2020) examined the perceptions of both teachers and school leaders as to the purpose and implementation of co-teaching for MLs. Her study revealed that teachers and leaders held dissimilar views of the practice of co-teaching. One principal promoted co-teaching as small-group instruction; she viewed the ESOL teacher as the support teacher. As a result, some faculty did not think the ESOL teacher was someone who should be involved in co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing student work. The principal’s narrow view of co-teaching for MLs ultimately led to confusion about the roles and responsibilities of each co-teacher, devaluing the position of the ESOL teacher, and an overall lack of understanding about collaborative work.

When co-teaching has been mandated through state or district policies, there is sometimes little buy-in from teachers or administrators, particularly when there was little if any time to prepare for such instructional changes. However, in spite of such mandates, active and involved school leaders have embraced co-teaching for the sake of MLs and have fostered the commitment of teacher teams and teacher collaboration (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2020).

Co-Planning Time and Process

Without co-planning, there is no co-teaching because the “success of any true co-teaching practice depends on the success of co-planning” (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2018, p. 25). And yet, there are a number of variables that can either support or impede co-planning efforts. Genuine co-planning “supports the consistent, high-quality implementation of standards-aligned language, literacy, and core content curricula while allowing general education teachers and instructional specialists to coordinate and refine their plans for instruction and assessment” (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2022, p. 5). To this end, research on co-teaching for MLs overwhelmingly points to the need for consistent and deliberate collaboration and joint planning of instruction.

Lack of time for collaboration was most noted in the research for not co-planning lessons (Clark-Gareca & Mumper, 2020; Cole, 2020; O’Loughlin, 2012; Samuelson et al., 2012;). Clark-Gareca and Mumper noted from their observations of co-teaching that co-planning and co-assessing “were conspicuously absent, or when they were present, were conducted as an afterthought or on the fly” (p. 156). They also identified that beyond time constraints, it was difficult for ENL teachers to

coordinate co-planning with up to five teachers, each having different grade levels and content areas, as well as adjust year to year with new co-teaching partners.

On the positive side, Edgerton and Weiss (2020) investigated what successful collaborative teaching and co-planning for MLs really entailed. They reported that teaching in a school with culturally and linguistically diverse students propelled them to take a grassroots approach to building a culture of collaboration and teaching in their school. Parallel to our 2014 report and inspired by Michael Fullan's (2008) *Six Secrets of Change*, they embarked on the goal of recognizing and building upon "the unique talents and expertise of every individual teacher involved in the [co-teaching] model" (p. 188). With their fellow teachers, they committed to planning together as a team, embarked on lesson studies, took videos of their teaching to share with one another, and developed a workshop model with mini-lessons, work time, and reflection as the standard format for all co-taught lessons. This co-teaching routine deeply supported their co-planning efforts. Together, they embraced the idea of collective knowledge with each teacher buying into the process.

In all, much of the research pointed to the positive outcomes of co-planning when teachers committed regularly to the practice as well as had specific goals in mind (Frederick & Ittner, 2020; Gibb et al, 2020; Lachance, 2020; McDermott & Honigsfeld, 2020). Frederick and Ittner identified co-planning sessions as "sites of negotiated meaning and knowledge construction as teachers solve problems, share experiences, make sense of data, and reflect on their own teaching and learning" (p. 126). Many of the studies citing co-planning as an essential factor to co-teaching had some form of routines and processes in place that supported sustained teacher collaboration and program success.

Capacity Building

According to Fullan (2015), capacity building experiences increase people's understanding, abilities, and willingness to take action, and the best way to promote continuous learning is through the development of "focused collaborative cultures" (p. 229). For this reason, both teachers and school leaders need to continually participate in collaborative work to create a shared understanding about the nature of teaching and learning for the sake of MLs.

Theoharis and O'Toole (2012) observed school leaders who sustained learning opportunities for teachers that focused on an inclusive model of instruction for MLs. One leader offered grant-funded coursework leading to ESOL certification while another leader used grant money to fund a part-time collaboration facilitator to support the shift of instruction for MLs to co-teaching. The researchers also noted how leaders promoted community building by connecting students and their families with faculty and staff to encourage parental involvement and foster family-school partnerships. Other school leaders envisioned building capacity for teachers differently. They instituted a formal structure for professional development and support for co-teaching implementation that included very specific learning opportunities—training sessions for collaborative teaching partners, online book studies, on-site consulting, and organized school visits (Cole, 2020).

Other ideas for building capacity positioned ESOL teachers as co-teaching coaches. Norton (2020) reported how ESOL teachers perceived their roles in the co-taught class as ones that build the capacity of general education teachers to use appropriate strategies to meet the needs of MLs. One ESOL teacher noted that in spite of co-teaching being met with some resistance, her role was to go slowly, be flexible, adapt to existing systems, and work on building a relationship with her co-teacher before promoting any changes.

There are several fundamental issues with implementing a co-taught program, and to that end, building teacher capacity. To better connect intention with the realities of co-teaching practices, Russell (2020) identified the following recommendations:

1. Create an innovative professional learning plan for teachers who are co-teaching.
2. Sustain job-embedded, joint learning experiences for all teachers of MLs.
3. Support and guide co-teachers from the very beginning of their co-teaching experiences.
4. Develop the expertise of school leaders; support them to establish a vision and mission for co-teaching MLs; reinforce their ability to lend co-teachers the help they need; and advocate for an overall plan for co-teaching success.

Most recently, Daza (2022) examined the attitudes of ESOL and general education co-teachers towards co-teaching during integrated ENL classes and found a large variability in their disposition. She concluded that administrators should establish protocols for creating effective co-teaching teams and provide targeted professional learning opportunities to build relational trust and enhance their partnerships.

Integration of Language and Content

The integration of content and language learning is the hallmark for best practices in teaching MLs. For this reason, co-teaching partners must “create integrated language- and literacy-rich learning opportunities and environments to make instruction across all grade-level and core content areas accessible as well as develop facility and fluency in English” (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2022, p. 146). It is critical for MLs to be able to access grade-level core content, interact meaningfully with their English-fluent peers, and express their ideas and learning through oral and written discourse.

A common issue that has surfaced from co-teaching practices for MLs is the emphasis on teaching content-area curriculum and the absence of teaching language and literacy skills in integrated ELD classes. McClure (2020) reported that ESOL teachers believed that “co-teaching had shifted the focus of their work from teaching language to teaching content” (p. 29). When comparing their roles in the co-taught class to their roles in standalone instruction, they identified their main focus in the co-taught class was to teach content while they were better able to address language needs in standalone classes. ESOL teachers further reported that they felt their language learning expertise was not being utilized.

The problem with teaching language and literacy skills in standalone classes is that specific language skills such as academic forms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, vocabulary, general academic and subject-specific concepts, grammar, and language functions are frequently taught in isolation. Lachance (2020) described the opportunities that MLs have in the co-taught class compared with standalone instruction. The participants in her study reported, “pullout services may create impressions of students’ *flat* language development in isolation rather than a language-rich, all-inclusive collaborative classroom” (p. 90). They also identified that MLs’ confidence levels are reduced when they are pulled from their regular class for instruction.

One study investigated the extent to which the curriculum for Integrated ENL programs contained core content instruction, English language development instruction, and appropriate ML instructional supports (Dove, 2018). The findings revealed most schools investigated did not have a written curriculum for Integrated ENL. However, one school district had initiated curricula writing, which consisted of

adding appropriate instructional supports for MLs to their standard curricula. In each case the core content drove the instruction and there was little evidence of systematic English language development instruction in Integrated ENL classes with the exception of vocabulary development (Dove, 2018).

Frederick and Ittner (2020) reported the process of one school to determine the reading interventions needed for MLs when standard interventions seemed to fail. Strategies to boost the reading comprehension of MLs were devised by a multi-perspective team of educators to include a reading specialist, an ESOL teacher, and three primary grade-level teachers. "Over the course of ten weeks, the team engaged in a series of purposeful co-planning sessions and used guiding questions to draw on the diverse perspectives of the members of the group" (pp. 129-130). The team used their collective knowledge to identify strategies that were later implemented with MLs. After six weeks, they reviewed student data and reported that all students demonstrated progress in reading and language learning.

Secondary co-teaching teams can also pool their strengths and knowledge to support the language and literacy development of MLs. McDermott and Honigsfeld (2020) investigated a high school social studies team that co-taught classes; about one third of the students in each class were identified as MLs. In spite of administrators not providing any scheduled co-planning time, they met regularly to plan lessons together for their students. They identified their roles in the planning and teaching process as follows:

. . . one focuses on the academic demands and the core content goals of the social studies curriculum, whereas the other focuses on the linguistic demands of the same curriculum and the ways students' language and literacy development may be systematically connected to the core content (p. 178).

Toppel (2020) summed up her team's goals for integrated language and content instruction of MLs in the co-taught classroom as follows:

- To affirm the integration of language, literacy, and content instruction,
- To facilitate MLs' interactions with their English-fluent peers,
- To increase the confidence levels of MLs to accomplish tasks in their grade-level classes, and
- To assure an increase in the consistency of instruction and a less fragmented school day for MLs.

Co-Teacher Parity, Compatibility, and Relationships

Partnership building is an integral part of a successful co-teaching team. It requires a commitment to having a shared ownership for fostering the academic, linguistic and social-emotional learning needs of MLs. Building trust, sharing goals and decision making, taking instructional risks together, and relying on each other's expertise are only some of the factors that support the development of collaborative teaching partners (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2018).

Flores (2012) explored the power differentials between co-teaching partners, identifying that when teachers are not on an equal footing, true collaboration does not exist. He uncovered the relationships of ESOL and content-area teachers and documented the issues one high school faced when co-teaching practices for MLs were initiated. Flores determined that what the content-area teachers considered collaboration was actually pseudo-collaboration from the viewpoint of the ESOL teacher, brought about by the lack of equity and balance in the teaching partnership. He found that ESOL teachers "are not seen as having equal status to mainstream

teachers . . . This is especially true at the secondary level, where content expertise is seen as the most valuable characteristic of teachers” (p. 192). This lack of equity between the teachers caused the ESOL teacher to have little or no impact on the instructional delivery that was taking place in the co-taught class.

When co-teaching partners attain a position of parity, they can initiate honest conversations about the needs of students and adjust their instructional practices. Giles and Yazan (2020) examined the budding partnership of two middle school teachers and how they negotiated planning and teaching a seventh-grade math lesson. The researchers noted that the math teacher made assumptions about MLs, equating them as similar to other struggling students. Through their collaborative efforts, the math teacher became more aware of the needs of MLs, and the ESOL teacher gained a better understanding of initiating and sustaining collaborative partner work. Giles and Yazan concluded that both teachers had to overcome their assumptions and learned to negotiate their roles and responsibilities in the co-taught class.

Through their efforts to collaborate, co-teachers uncover a wealth of knowledge about the expertise of their teaching partners. Shockley and McDaniel (2020) investigated co-taught classes between an ESOL teacher and multiple teaching partners with a special educator, an elementary general educator, and a bilingual aide. They observed multiple class configurations for co-teaching, some more successfully implemented than others, and they noted that each class used some form of culturally responsive pedagogy. Interestingly, both the ESOL teacher and the special educator believed that the instruction provided to students was just as important as the way the class was configured for co-teaching as well as the relationship between the co-teachers. The researchers concluded,

. . . simply placing an ESOL educator and a special educator in the same class does not always yield a wide range of positive outcomes, and using multicultural topics in the form of worksheets without instructional support or the intended student connection also does not prove beneficial (p. 231).

Yet among other factors, the key finding of the study was that successful co-taught lessons depend upon the development of positive collaborative teaching partnerships. Similarly, Cordeiro (2021) found that when the collaborative cycle of instruction (consisting of co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing, and reflection) is implemented with fidelity, teachers experienced parity in their partnerships with a clear understanding with each other’s roles and responsibilities. However, inequitable teacher hierarchies emerged without clear leadership support, and ESOL teachers found themselves in supportive roles or in subordinate positions.

Establishing A Framework for Collaboration and Decision Making

In order to sustain teacher collaboration, frameworks that support its consistent practice need to be adapted or developed along with teachers being willing to change what they do as well as how they think (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2022). Scanlan et al. (2012) adapted Brisk’s (2006) framework for quality schooling as the basis for collaborative team efforts. This framework identified three responsibilities of school communities:

“(a) cultivating language proficiency to academic grade level, (b) ensuring access to high quality curriculum within effective teaching and learning environments, and (c)

promoting sociocultural integration of all students” (p. 6). Promoting a framework such as this one can focus a school community to recognize the needs of MLs and to collaborate within a structure of shared understandings of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Other researchers identified the importance of frameworks for collaborative conversations including ones that were fully developed from collected data (Bell & Walker, 2012) to already established frameworks for discussing teaching practices such as Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Faulkner & Kinney, 2012; MacDonald, et al., 2012) and Understanding by Design (UBD) (Baecher, 2012). More recently, Porter (2020) developed a framework for co-teaching implementation to ensure stakeholders had the same information about the fundamental components for a successfully taught co-taught program. Using the six stages of implementation from Fixsen et al. (2005) 1) exploration; 2) program installation; 3) initial implementation 4) full operation; 5) innovation, and 6) sustainability; her team examined and documented the implementation of their school’s co-teaching program. They developed what they called a vision guide for program success and provided MLs with equitable access to cohesive learning opportunities that accelerate their social and academic English, providing meaningful access to grade-level content. Their efforts resulted in an increase in the overall achievement of MLs through the practices of teacher collaboration and co-teaching.

Conclusion

Integrated collaborative instruction is based on the equity principle that MLs should not need to leave their general education classes nor their English-speaking peers to develop proficiency in English. Nor should they receive disjointed or fragmented support services that focus on isolated, deficit-based remediation. For students to have a sense of belonging and thrive academically, they need to be taught by subject-specific experts, the content and grade-level teachers in collaboration with language-development specialists. In this way students are given strategic, multidimensional opportunities to develop their English-language skills while simultaneously learning the core-curriculum. As indicated in this review, research on the topic is emerging, yet more studies are needed on how teachers negotiate the collaborative instructional cycle and what the impact of co-teaching is on students’ academic, linguistic, and socio-cultural development.

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