

Introduction

How can collaboration among teachers and other school staff affect teaching and learning for English language learners? This book aims to describe the experiences of exemplary ESL and classroom teachers who regularly collaborate for the educational achievement of English language learners (ELLs).

Our research led us into classrooms, staff lounges, cafeterias, hallways, and parking lots where we observed the discussions and partnerships of many dedicated teachers. The teachers we chronicle in this book are stretching the mold of what it means to be a classroom teacher in a U.S. public school. They open their classroom doors, ask for help from their colleagues, observe one another in classrooms, team teach, and turn teach in an effort to improve professionally and to increase the academic achievement of the diverse learners in their classrooms.

In three states, Texas, Missouri, and Florida, we found teachers who engaged in critical assessment of practice within a forum of trust, collaboration, and experimentation. These conditions did not arise overnight. Indeed, many teachers worked in lonely isolation for years before they began to collaborate with others. For some, the collaborations arose because of outside pressures from administration or state and federal testing requirements. For others, collaboration began as a grade-level friendship that led to a wider arena of trust for coteaching and coplanning.

The types of programs we observed were also diverse. We observed early-exit bilingual programs, dual-language programs, sheltered ESL, transitional ESL programs, and English-only classrooms. Additionally, the school districts we spent time in were located in urban as well as rural communities. We found that teachers collaborate in both settings, and through such collaboration they find ways to meet the needs of individual students.

In this book, we attempt to show the many different factors that lead to collaborative partnerships as well as to identify the characteristics of effective collaborations. Through the use of vignettes and discussions, we record excellent instructional

practices for a variety of content disciplines: writing, math, social studies, literacy, and science.

We examine collaboration using a sociocultural framework. We believe that “social relationships and political realities are at the heart of teaching and learning” (Nieto, 2001, p. 5). Indeed, in order to flourish, collaboration requires a school culture of rich social and personal relationships. Social skill development often occurs hand-in-hand with other forms of professional development. In addition, we advocate a learner-centered educational process in which children actively construct meaning, question, and dialogue with teachers.

Our methodology included teacher interviews and classroom observations. The teachers we interviewed were nominated by their school districts’ ESL/bilingual coordinators, principals, and peers in their schools. They are exemplary professionals who encourage critical thinking, promote active learning, focus on collaborative decision making, and connect their teaching to their students’ life experiences or cultures.

Each chapter treats a separate topic: curriculum, standards, language, culture, assessment, community, and advocacy. Chapters consist of three parts. The first part presents prereading questions and a narrative or vignette. Through observations of team planning meetings, individual planning sessions, and classroom lessons, we created vignettes illustrative of the professional practices that arose from the collaborative teams in Texas, Florida, and Missouri. The second part of each chapter links theory to practice by expanding upon the theoretical background of the chapter topic. We examine research pertaining to the topic, collaboration, a content area, and English language learning. Each chapter closes with an authentic case study illustrating problematic and challenging situations that occur when teachers collaborate. The case studies require in-depth reflection and discussion and will help graduate and undergraduate students in teacher education classes develop their own approaches to solving the problems inherent in the case study. A set of guiding questions following each case study highlights areas for analysis. Each chapter also includes a rich resource list with print and/or electronic sources.

Helping English Language Learners Succeed in Pre-K–Elementary Schools provides a snapshot of professional collaborative practice. As such, it illustrates the diversity of school structure and the variety of ways in which teachers work to raise student academic achievement. We hope that this snapshot is a preview of many more collaborative partnerships in the future.