CHAPTER 2

MAINSTREAM AND ELL TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

A Model of Collaboration

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Across the United States, many English language learner (ELL) teachers serve their students in the mainstream classroom through a pull-out, push-in, or coteaching model. However, an essential element is often missing in these models: effective collaboration between the mainstream and ELL teacher. The research literature suggests collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers is vital to the academic achievement of ELLs (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; Gottlieb, 2006; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004). In such collaboration, the ELL teacher contributes knowledge of second language acquisition and teaching strategies for language and academic content, whereas the mainstream teacher contributes knowledge of grade-level curriculum and standards. This combined knowledge allows for strategic planning and instruction.

THE CHALLENGE OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration can be challenging to establish or to sustain, as it is a dynamic and complex process heavily dependent on situational context

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and participants (Friend & Cook, 2010; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Collaboration will be particularly difficult to achieve, for example, if a general education teacher believes the ELL teacher should have the main responsibility for ELLs rather than embracing a shared responsibility. Collaboration depends upon factors such as the role of the participants (voluntary or involuntary) and the extent to which participants have shared goals and objectives (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Friend and Cook (2010) also emphasized the need for (a) personal commitment, (b) effective communication and problem solving skills, and (c) logistical considerations such as scheduling and planning time for collaboration. Further, Bean (2009) found administrator support to be also essential. Barriers that can prevent effective teacher collaboration from occurring include:

1. A lack of effort and an attitude that collaboration is not worthwhile (Davidson, 2006);
2. Personality clashes between teachers (Friend & Cook);
3. Different philosophies of teaching (Arkoudis, 2006);
4. Power struggles among teachers (Creese, 2005; Friend & Cook; McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010); and
5. Negative attitudes toward having to teach ELLs in the mainstream classroom (Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004).

Can meaningful collaboration take place given the previously identified challenges? The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate findings from a grounded theory study which answers this question.

THE STUDY

We examined ELL and mainstream teacher collaboration at three urban elementary schools in one school district in the eastern United States. The schools were chosen because of their reputation among area principals for promoting collaboration. Each school utilized a professional learning community (PLC) framework in which teams of educators met on a regular basis to define, create, and discuss goals for student achievement in a systematic, structured format (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Although the three schools did not share identical demographics (see Table 2.1), this did not appear to be a factor in the results of the study.

Participants included five mainstream teachers, three ELL teachers, and three administrators. In the study, teachers were observed for a period of 6 months during teaching, planning, and meeting times in

Table 2.1. Demographics of Schools Participating in Study

	Blue Creek School	*Red Oak School*	*Green Leaf School*
Total K-6 enrollment	919	986	673
Total K-6 ELLs	87	466	318
ELL % of total enrollment	9.47%	47.26%	47.25%
Ethnicity			
Asian/Pacific Islander	23.50%	13.18%	22.00%
Black	2.83%	5.68%	8.02%
Hispanic	8.81%	48.88%	50.97%
White	58.11%	25.46%	14.26%
Other	6.75%	6.80%	4.61%
Free and reduced lunch rate	13.49%	55.82%	64.19%
Percentage of ELLs passing English	97%	86%	91%
Percentage of ELLs passing mathematics	93%	77%	84%

order to document the collaborative practices that occurred. Additionally, interviews and a brainstorming session were conducted with the teachers, the school principals, and a district administrator.

A Model of Collaboration

As a result of this research, we propose a model for effective ELL/mainstream teacher collaboration (see Figure 2.1) that can be used by teachers, administrators, or policy makers interested in implementing or improving such collaboration by better understanding the contextual factors and processes in operation. The model consists of six components:

1. The rationale for collaborating;
2. The core phenomenon or the participants' shared definition of collaboration;
3. The collaborative practices that occurred between the ELL and mainstream teacher;
4. The contextual factors that made collaboration possible;
5. The barriers that existed; and
6. The outcomes made possible by the combination of factors and processes at work.

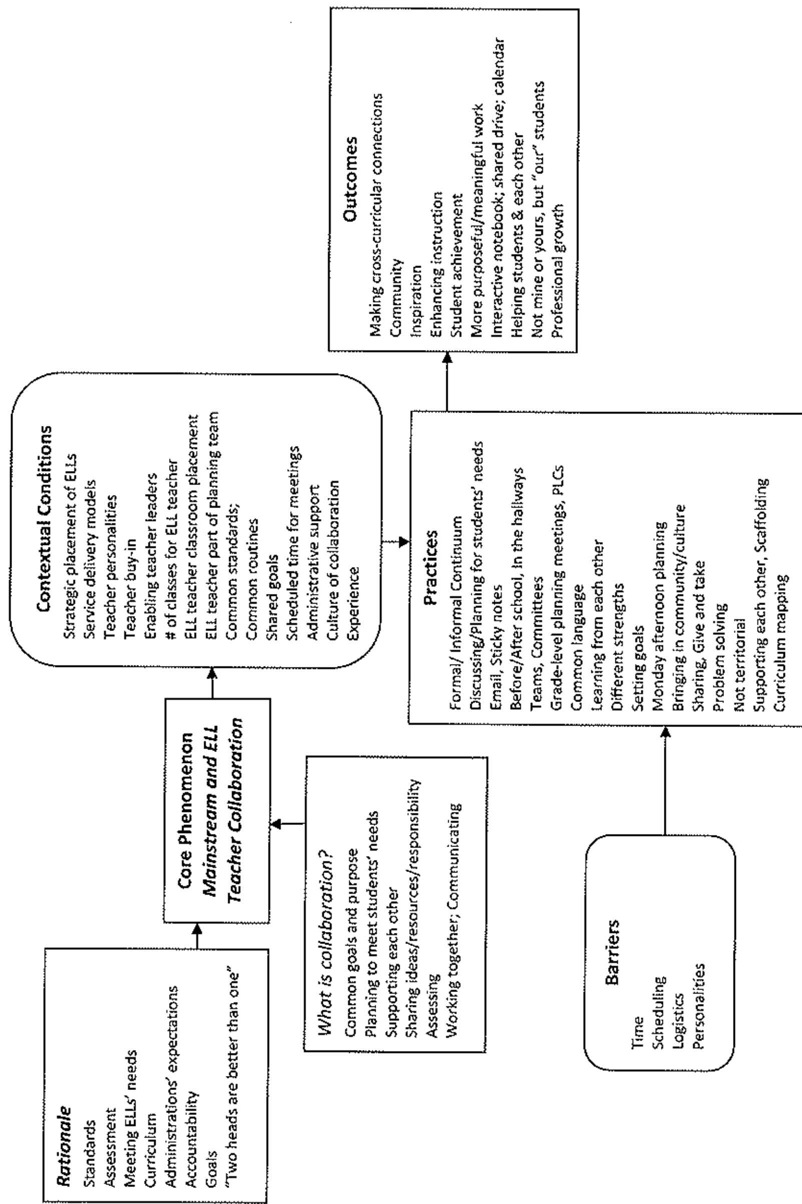

Figure 2.1. Model of mainstream and ELL teacher collaboration.

Findings from this study—as depicted in Figure 2.1—demonstrated that effective collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers can exist if conditions support it. The following section describes each of the model's components in detail.

Rationale

Teachers are more likely to collaborate if they see a genuine need for it. Like in most U.S. schools, teachers and administrators in the study were concerned with accountability and meeting the needs of ELLs. There was an emphasis on using grade-level standards to teach and to assess students in the district, which led educators to teach language through content, and as a result, teachers needed to understand what was going on in each other's classroom.

Though there was a districtwide plan to implement PLCs, teachers in the study also realized the benefits of collaborating outside the PLC framework. Several teachers commented that they collaborated "because two heads are better than one." One teacher explained that working with more than one person meant "we can share the load" and "play to each others' strengths." With the given accountability measures, teachers found benefits in working together to strategize how to meet students' needs.

Core Phenomenon

The core phenomenon being investigated was collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers. Participants across school sites shared common ideas of what it meant to collaborate, including (a) having common goals, (b) sharing a purpose, and (c) planning to meet students' needs. Frequently teachers mentioned they worked together and communicated with each other; shared ideas, resources, and responsibilities; and overall, offered support to each other. Participants also indicated that collaboration consisted of mutually assessing students and using the data to respond to their students' needs.

Contextual Conditions

Even though different in size, diversity, number of ELLs, and percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, the three schools shared many common contextual conditions. First, all participating administrators genuinely supported their teachers. During summer planning, many factors were taken into consideration to optimize collaboration, including: strategic placement of ELLs, service delivery models, teacher personalities, teacher buy-in, and logistics (classroom location and ELL teacher caseload).

At Blue Creek Elementary, the principal met with the ELL teachers and teams to ensure strategic student placement. Together, they contem-

plated the ELL service model when assigning ELLs to mainstream classrooms. For example, after attending a summer literacy workshop, the ELL teacher and a third grade mainstream teacher voluntarily decided to work together as a team to implement the instructional practices they had just acquired. The teachers asked the administrators to schedule third grade ELLs into the mainstream teacher's class, and to schedule the ELL teacher into the language arts period, so they could coteach.

When determining student placement, teacher personalities and teaching styles were also considered to ensure a sound relationship could be established between the ELL and mainstream teacher. Scheduling and routines were deliberated, so ELLs would not miss crucial content instruction in a pull-out model, and so teachers could push in to classes during specific instructional times. Logistics—such as the proximity of the ELL teacher's classroom to the mainstream classrooms and how many classes the ELL teacher would be responsible for—were also carefully planned.

Administrators maintained high expectations for accountability and were active participants in the school's PLCs. Meeting times were structured and included an agenda, a note-taker, and a facilitator. There were also norms to follow; for example, at Red Oak School, teachers met at the beginning of the school year to establish team norms and decided on the following rules:

- Appreciate one another's expertise.
- Engage fully in all learning experiences.
- Invest in your own learning.
- Open your mind to new ways of thinking.
- Unite in purpose to improve student learning.

These norms were posted at the top of the PLC agenda. In addition, there was a schedule they adhered to during the current meeting, a list of actions from the previous meeting, and a list for future discussions. At Green Leaf School, the note-taker maintained a professional learning communities team learning log, which included team discussions in response to the following four questions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006):

1. What do we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if and when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they don't?
4. How will we meet the needs of those who "already know?" (p. 91)

During PLC meetings, held on a regularly scheduled basis, the ELL teacher and mainstream teacher(s) were part of a planning team.

Together, teachers planned long- and short-term goals for their students by analyzing assessment data. The principal of Red Oak said collaboration at his school "should be figuring out for an individual student what they need regardless of who's working with them." He added that his teachers should be "keeping track of how students are doing and using the time that they are together as a team to share strategies, think through and better understand the curriculum, and brainstorming, troubleshooting with certain students."

In each of the schools, teachers noted the emergence of a *culture of collaboration*. Administrators and educators credited each other for the trust and camaraderie which helped create a positive work environment. One administrator compared collaboration to a dance. She stated, "It might not be your time to move; it's got to be a give and take; it's got to be a very nice dance between the two of you." A teacher described the culture of her school remarking, "You can learn from each other. There is no territory. There's no this is *my* classroom—this is *our* classroom ... so there's this inclusiveness ... we're going to treat each other respectfully."

Camaraderie between ELL and mainstream teachers was also evident during observations. Teachers were seen engaged in discussions before and after school, in the halls, and during planning. During PLCs, the conversations were serious and focused; after school, however, ELL and mainstream teachers were observed laughing and planning for social events together.

Experience with collaboration was also a factor contributing to success. Some participants were in their first year of teaching, whereas others had over 30 years of experience. Teachers new to collaboration were supported by other teachers with more experience. However, teachers with more experience also learned from the more novice teachers. One ELL teacher with over 15 years of experience revealed she enjoyed learning new techniques a first year teacher brought with her from her university experiences. What was more important than how many years teachers had been in education was how long the teachers had collaborated together. For example, one ELL teacher said she and another teacher, who have been working together for a number of years, created a calendar on the school's shared drive where they could manage what was happening in the mainstream teacher's class. The teachers, regardless of years of experience, welcomed collaboration, and those who had collaborated for a longer time, found it became easier.

Barriers

The teachers in the study mentioned barriers to collaboration that have also been frequently documented in collaborative research, most critically, a lack of time to collaborate. Despite all of the effort the partici-

pants invested in planning time, scheduling, and logistics, challenges still existed. Teachers had so many responsibilities that it was often difficult for them to find time to meet to discuss students' needs. Scheduling remained a hardship in some instances. For example, one teacher did not have common planning time with another teacher and found it difficult to collaborate with him.

Logistics proved to be yet another barrier. For instance, one ELL teacher's classroom was on the first floor, and the first grade teachers were on another level. She was less likely to communicate with the first grade teachers than she was with the third grade teacher, whose classroom was a few doors down the hall. Finally, although personalities did not appear to be an issue among the teachers in this study, one participant indicated if the teachers did not get along as well as they did, collaboration would be difficult.

Practices

Both barriers and contextual conditions affected the collaborative practices, the actions and interactions between the teachers, as demonstrated by the arrows in the model. At the three participating schools, informal and formal collaboration practices were perceived on a continuum. Informal collaboration often occurred *on the fly* in order to address immediate concerns. Teachers would typically inform the ELL teacher of schedule changes or ask questions about students before or after school or during transition times. As one ELL teacher described her strategy for on-the-fly collaboration, "I carry Post-It notes with me all the time," and then "confirm things over email." Formal collaboration included planned, scheduled events such as PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and other meetings where teachers systematically designed instruction together using curriculum maps and assessment data to identify language and content objectives. Additional planning teams and committees, not as formal as PLCs, also met to discuss events such as field trips.

Outcomes

Teachers and administrators in the study identified many positive outcomes of collaboration. The following is a list of the benefits described at the three schools:

- A sense of community: The *give and take* of collaboration helped create a sense of belonging at the schools. One teacher stated, "I feel like I am a part of something bigger than myself."
- Creative cross-curricular teaching: Because teachers from different content and specialty areas collaborated, they had opportunities to bring innovative ideas to support common goals in their classes.

- Purposeful, meaningful work for teachers and students: The mutual goals teachers set and worked together to achieve helped teachers and students relate to what was happening each day.
- Professional growth for teachers: Teachers developed a *common language* representing terminology and ideology from each other's respective content areas. Teachers also learned strategies and practices from each other that they implemented in different settings. For example, the ELL teacher increased her repertoire of reading strategies as a result of working with a language arts teacher. The math teacher began posting language objectives alongside content objectives after observing the ELL teacher daily repeat that practice. Teachers at Blue Creek also benefitted from discussions during PLCs when they read and reflected upon current scholarly articles related to their practice.
- Enhanced lessons promoting academic achievement for ELLs: By sharing expertise, teachers improved their lessons, which led to increased student achievement. All schools made adequate yearly progress in the year of this study.
- Mutual *ownership* of ELLs: Teachers worked together on common goals for *their* students and assumed joint responsibility for their success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Results from this study indicate that collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers can be successful if the following factors are considered:

1. There must be a compelling rationale for teachers to voluntarily collaborate; it could be based on need (expectations for meeting adequate yearly progress, integration of content and language standards in the curriculum), school philosophy or structure (PLC, shared goals, administrators' expectations), or desire to better their practice (information sharing to improve instruction for ELLs).
2. Teachers and administrators must share a common understanding of the core phenomenon: What does it mean to collaborate? What are the goals and purpose of collaborating?
3. As many of the contextual conditions that foster collaboration must be in place as possible. There are many factors listed on the model that should be addressed before implementing a collaborative approach to teaching between mainstream and ELL teachers.

Consideration must be made in regards to the ELL teacher's caseload, schedule, and service delivery model, as well as to collaborating teachers' personalities and attitudes. Teachers must be afforded time and opportunities to meet, and there should be expectations for what occurs during those meetings. There has to be administrative support in order for effective collaboration to occur. Contextual factors which are not addressed can become barriers to collaboration.

4. Some barriers will remain regardless of sincere attempts to eliminate them. Time is the most difficult barrier to overcome; it requires administrators' support and careful planning to alleviate its negative effects on collaboration.
5. Collaboration practices are impacted by the contextual conditions and barriers at a school. For instance, teachers who have a common planning time may be able to share ideas and support each other's language and content goals during instruction more than teachers who do not have a common planning time.
6. If teachers perceive collaboration to be beneficial, share a common understanding of what it means to collaborate, and have the contextual structures in place to support their actions and interactions among other teachers, the outcome can be successful, effective collaboration.

CONCLUSION

We did not write this chapter to say collaboration is easy. In fact, the model presented (see Figure 2.1) should demonstrate the complexity of the components that promote or prohibit collaborative efforts. By illuminating the issues surrounding collaboration, educators and administrators can address conditions to initiate, sustain, and/or improve collaboration between mainstream and ELL teachers. Attention *must* be given to contextual conditions, barriers and practices in schools; simply saying educators should or must collaborate is not enough to create a successful partnership.

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