Analysis of the Implementation of an ESL Coteaching Model in a Suburban Elementary School

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Research on school improvement over the last decade has identified several efforts to implement program innovations to increase student achievement for English learners (ELs). Some schools have been found more successful than others in implementing exceptional models of instruction to meet or exceed student achievement expectations for linguistically diverse students. In order to investigate the factors that influence the establishment of a successful program for ELs, we examined the process of implementing an integrated, collaborative service delivery model of instruction for English learners in a New York suburban elementary school.

Keywords: coteaching, English learners, models of instruction, program implementation

Innovative program implementation in a school environment needs to be investigated from a comprehensive perspective to take full account of the numerous elements that induce change in general and the variety of human factors that influence the change process (Fullan, 2007; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Goodlad, 2004). Successful program implementation for school improvement is dependent upon multidimensional components, such as personal belief systems, distinct judgment, individual experiences, and group influences of those involved (Schein, 1992; Supovitz & Weinbaum, 2008). In addition, leadership approaches (Cruz, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Fullan, 2007; Goodlad, 2004), administrative and teacher collaboration (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Hayes-Jacobs, 1997; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009), and effective staff development strategies (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Glickman et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009; Sparks, 2002, 2005) significantly affect the process of program initiation and sustainability.

Coteaching is a practice well known in the field of special education (Friend & Cook, 2012; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013), and research of its implementation in classes with English learners (ELs) has emerged over the past ten years (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012). Systematic data collection on the impact of coteaching on ELs' performance began approximately in 2003; over a three-year span, the successful implementation of an exclusive coteaching service delivery was documented in the public schools in St. Paul, Minnesota (Pardini, 2006; Zehr, 2006). Coteaching and its associated collaborative practices for the sake of ELs has also been examined from a variety of perspectives, including social justice and inclusive models of instruction (Theoharis, 2009), teacher leadership (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010), and collaboratively designed standards-based curriculum and instruction (Short, Cloud, Morris, & Motta, 2012).

In order to examine the implementation process, the focus of this study centered on the perceptions of members in an elementary school community concerning the initiation, adoption, employment, establishment, and outcomes of an innovative model of instruction for English learners—coteaching. We concentrated on the mechanisms involved in generating administrative and faculty support for the coteaching model's implementation, providing the necessary professional development to build teacher capacity to employ the new instructional model, and overcoming any barriers that impeded its successful execution.

Purpose of the Study

The academic achievement of ELs has been a growing concern among the many school districts that have seen an increase in this student population over the past several years. Despite policymakers mandating higher achievement for all students, Hill and Torres (2010) identified: "The lagging achievement of many U.S. Latinos . . . Latinos have the highest high school dropout rate. Further, second- and third-generation Latinos in the United States perform less well than do recent immigrants" (p. 95). There are many causes for their lack of academic success. Although Latino children often come from stable, supportive families, they "face economic and social problems related to poverty, living in poor neighborhoods, and their parents' immigrant status" (Mather & Kent, 2009, para. 5). Not only are Latinos falling behind academically, but other groups of ELs also often fall below their native English-speaking peers in meeting grade-level expectations.

More than ever before, schools are in jeopardy of failing to meet the mandates for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Asimov, 2008), as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind act (2001) to determine how public schools are progressing academically. If school districts are to improve overall student achievement, information regarding how to implement innovative programs to increase EL learning is vital, particularly in light of the new set of rigorous academic standards being adopted in the majority of states. There is much concern about how achievement for ELs will be measured once these new standards are in place. All too often, ELs are singularly tested in English without consideration of the necessity for a framework of accountability that will accommodate the uncommon needs of these students.

Taking into account the complex issues concerning the education of ELs, the purpose of this study was to document the implementation and outcomes of a year-long process undertaken by a New York suburban elementary school's piloting an innovative program for Grades 3 to 6 to improve instruction for ELs through an English as a Second Language (ESL) coteaching model. Targeting the predominantly Latino population of youngsters in the school, a collaborative service delivery framework was developed and cooperative partnerships between general educators and ESL specialists were forged. With this instructional model, both teachers were responsible for planning, teaching, and assessing all of the students assigned to a classroom (Friend & Cook, 2012; Gately & Gately, 2001; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). The building principal selected classes for this pilot program based on the willingness of both the classroom and ESL teachers to participate and constructed a schedule for cotaught lessons to occur on a daily basis for one or two class periods per day.

Theoretical Framework

Fullan's (2007) model for successful change served as the primary theoretical framework for the study. He posited that (a) behaviors can change before beliefs; individuals gain understanding through the act of trial and error, and (b) shared vision and ownership "is more an outcome of quality change than its precondition for success" (p. 41). Drawing on his and fellow researchers' experiences, Fullan established 10 key elements of successful change, which served as a foundational scaffold for this study:

1. Define closing the gap as the overarching goal.
2. Attend initially to the three basics.
3. Be driven by tapping into people's dignity and sense of respect.
4. Ensure that the best people are working on the problem.
5. Recognize that all successful strategies are socially based and action oriented—change by doing rather than change by elaborate planning.
6. Assume that lack of capacity is the initial problem, and work on it continuously.
7. Stay the course through continuity of good direction by leveraging leadership.
8. Build internal accountability linked to external accountability.
9. Establish conditions for the evolution of positive peer pressure.
10. Use the previous nine strategies to build public confidence (p. 44).

Fullan's framework was selected because it is not only comprehensive but also incorporates a large body of organizational theory that examines administrative practices, an engaged workforce, and organizational cultures. According to Stranack (2011), "His [Fullan's] appreciation of the complexity of organizations and the change process makes his work stand out."

This study focused on changes in instructional practices, namely coteaching for the sake of ELs, and investigated the complexities of initiating and fostering teacher buy-in as well as documenting teachers' understandings and attitudes about the process. Additional theoretical frameworks and empirical research studies that informed our research included seminal work by Capper and Frattura (2009), who championed inclusive models of instruction for ELs and students with special needs; Collier and Thomas (2002), who focused on educational policies for English learners; and Cummins (2001), who highlighted how power relations influence policy and practices for bilingual youngsters.

Methodology

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation process, we investigated the strategies utilized by one school community to implement a coteaching model of instruction for ELs and compared those strategies with the key elements of successful change (Fullan, 2007). With this single case study, a mixed-methods design was chosen to achieve an in-depth understanding of the "research problem by converging (or triangulating) both broad numeric trends from quantitative research and the detail of qualitative research" (Creswell, 2008, p. 100). The research questions were investigated through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, which included an analysis and review of classroom observations, teacher surveys, participant interviews, and field notes. This approach is congruent with the research problem of this study, and its methods provide for inquiry in the natural setting of the school environment (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Research Questions

The following research questions and subsequent guiding questions directed this study:
1. What was the process utilized to implement the ESL coteaching model at a suburban elementary school? Guiding questions included:
   - To what extent were the principal and faculty involved in the decision to implement this model?
   - What factors facilitated or impeded the implementation process?
2. What were the outcomes of the implementation process, and how were they measured? Guiding questions included:
   - What methods were utilized to evaluate the model's implementation success?
   - What data evidenced the model's effectiveness?

Data Collection

The collection of study data from multiple methods occurred simultaneously over a 10-month period beginning September 2009 and ending June 2010. The purpose of this time frame was to create multiple "snapshots" of the school throughout the academic year to capture specific points in time in the implementation process. Inasmuch as "case studies are bound by time and activity" (Creswell, 2008, p. 13), various collection procedures were incorporated over a specified duration of time (Stake, 1995).

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data aggregated for this study were analyzed both preliminarily and at the culmination of the research. Data collection yielded interview transcripts of administrators and teachers, data from teacher surveys, and narrative descriptions and checklists of class observations. Different data sets initially were organized and coded separately. After coding was completed, the information from

individual data sets was merged. Coding categories generally reflected the research and guiding questions previously stated. In addition, codes identified participant attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and general ways of thinking.

Results

Following the framework of the research questions, the raw data were organized into separate categories. The first section related to the analysis of the implementation process, including program selection and adoption, the elements that effected change, and a comparison of previously employed and current ESL program models. A second category addressed the perceived outcomes of the implementation of the coteaching model, including its impact on teachers' classroom practices.

Key Findings

Overall findings indicated that the impetus for establishing a coteaching model was twofold: first, as an additional practice to enhance an ongoing school initiative for English learners, making achievement an overarching goal (Fullan, 2007), and second, as a practical solution to offset the lack of classroom space for a stand-alone ESL program. The data revealed that the design of the model's employment appeared to be dynamic in nature, developing over time as different aspects of the model were introduced and following the idea of "change by doing rather than elaborate planning" (p. 41). In addition, the model's implementation was negotiated via (a) formal professional development workshops, (b) instructional coaching, and (c) coteaching members' individual and group reflections. In this way, capacity building over time was viewed as an ongoing necessary element for the change process (Fullan, 2007).

Building leadership proved to play a key role in the implementation process; the interim school principal demonstrated strong support for the initiative by her continuous, active participation in the workshops, coaching sessions, and team observations and feedback. These initial findings contrasted to some degree with the state of the initiative after a new principal, who took office during the second half of the school year, demonstrated far less support for the initiative. Because "the leadership of others in the organization in the interests of continuity and deepening of good direction" (p. 59) had not been developed, there was much evidence for the importance of school leadership overall. Subsequently, the implementation process began to falter considerably during the latter part of the school year.

Based on the end-of-the-year teacher feedback and program evaluation, there was ample data to support the success of the model's implementation—particularly during the first half of the school year, when a double period of instruction was reserved for coteaching ELs in a shared general-education classroom. The positive outcomes of the model included (a) an increase in the collaboration between ESL and classroom teachers and (b) a greater sense of a shared responsibility and accountability for all students. The data also revealed that later in the year, the coteaching model presented challenges, partially due to a decrease from two periods to one period of instruction for coteaching and the institution of an additional reading initiative. Additional challenges included a lack of continuity and regularity with the overall implementation of the model, the decrease of instruction in all four skill areas of language acquisition (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and the need to improve differentiated instruction according to student levels of language proficiency.

Educational and Scholarly Significance of the Study

ESL program concerns stem from the specific learning challenges of the EL population and the desire of the learning community to have these students meet with academic success. The study results should help both teachers and administrators to better understand the ways in which whole-school approaches to educating ELs and the way school initiatives are implemented can enhance and/or impede student progress and program success. In addition, educators may improve teaching and learning practices to

increase understanding and the establishment of effective strategies for second language and literacy acquisition in all classes.

We are beginning to understand how overall school policies and practices for educating ELs reinforce the established goals of adequate academic progress for all students and why certain strategies work while others do not. The evidence shows that an examination and restructuring of the delivery of instruction for ELs allows for certain second-language skills to be obtained and research-based strategies to be implemented in order for ELs to acquire the content knowledge they need to meet established learning standards.

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