



Research paper

A cycle of fragmentation in an inclusive age: The case of English learners with disabilities



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Collaborations for English learners with disabilities are cyclical in nature.
- School and teacher conditions, interactions, and outcomes reinforce one another.
- English learners with disabilities become compartmentalized.

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Since the mid-1990s, inclusion education has gained momentum worldwide in primary and secondary school contexts (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Ferguson, 2008; UNESCO, 2009). Although implementation of inclusive school practices varies widely across global contexts (Meijer, Pijl, & Hegarty, 1997), inclusion is driven by political and social justice initiatives that call on schools to provide quality education for all students by creating learning environments responsive to their needs (UNESCO, 2009). For diverse learners, such as students with disabilities and English learners (ELs), inclusion is also a matter of equal access, specifically to the general education curriculum as well as their peers. Programs that restrict such access on the basis of students' individual differences—be it language or disability—have come under heavy criticism (see Baker, 2001; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Martinez-Wenzl, Pérez, & Gándara, 2012; Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003; Taylor, 2004).

With the ethical and legal imperatives to move toward more inclusive school practices, the need for effective collaboration among educators has never been greater (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Murawski & Dieker, 2008; Pellegrino, Weiss, & Regan, 2015; Snyder, Garriott, & Williams Aylor, 2001). Arguably, ELs with disabilities, students who are dually identified as having a disability and English language learning need, require the most concerted efforts from general

education teachers working in collaboration with specialists.¹ To provide services for ELs with disabilities as they learn, any combination of the following must coordinate their efforts: general education teachers, special education teachers, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and related service providers (e.g., speech–language therapists, occupational and physical therapists, etc.). As the EL population is steadily increasing in many English-majority countries (U.K. Department for Education, 2013; U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a; New South Wales Government, 2011; Ontario Schools, 2013), the prevalence of ELs with disabilities will likely rise, making collaboration a requisite of effective teaching and service provision. Yet, there is a dearth of research on the collaboration and coordination surrounding ELs with disabilities. Thus, this study addresses this exigent issue through a comparative case study of the interactions of teachers and specialists as they provide services for ELs with disabilities.

1. Literature review

With the increase of more inclusive practices, ELs with disabilities are no longer the responsibility of just one educator. In fact, providing multiple services to ELs with disabilities necessitates general education teachers working together with a number of specialists to ensure these learners have the opportunity for academic and linguistic development. Yet, there is a paucity of research regarding the state of such collaborations in service provision of ELs with disabilities. Instead, research has focused on the collaborative efforts of general education teachers with two groups of specialists, that is, general education teachers with special education teachers or general education teachers with ESL teachers, rather than

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¹ Specialists are school personnel who provide specific services and supports to ELs with disabilities. Specialists include special education teachers, ESL teachers, speech–language therapists, and occupational and physical therapists.

collaboration among the three parties. Empirical inquiry on the collaboration between these dyads paints a bleak portrait, chronicling the structural and ideological conditions (i.e., educators' beliefs, assumptions, and values) that often impede effective service provision (Austin, 2001; Bell & Baecher, 2012; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Liggett, 2010; Murawski & Dieker, 2008). While nascent research often conflates *coteaching* and *collaboration* (Friend et al., 2010), in this study, I adopt Friend et al.'s (2010) understanding of *collaboration*, which encompasses a range of interactions among teachers and specialists, including coteaching, coplanning, communicating, conferring, meeting, etc. Thus, in this study, *coteaching* is situated as one form of collaboration in which general education teachers and specialists support students in the same classroom.

1.1. Special education—general education collaborations

Prominently echoed throughout the literature on the collaborations between special education and general education teachers is the limited nature of time. In terms of institutional constraints, it is not surprising that special and general education teachers find a lack of time as a significant barrier to their collaborations, specifically to coteaching (Austin, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Patriarca & Lamb, 1994; Strogilos, Nikolarazi, & Tragoulia, 2012). Although teachers are often charged with coteaching, they are afforded little formal planning time to accomplish this demanding task. For instance, in Fennick and Liddy's (2001) survey of 168 general and special education teachers, 48% reported having no daily planning time with their coteachers. Further, only 22% reported having a weekly coplanning session consisting of at least one hour. Corroborating this finding, Austin (2001) uncovered that although teachers evaluated scheduled planning time with their coteacher as "very important," a majority had limited opportunity to enact these values. With limited time, coplanning itself can be reduced to informal conversations (Strogilos et al., 2012).

Another notable institutional barrier to the collaborations between special education and general education teachers pertains to training. Despite both a need and desire to improve their ability to coteach, general and special education teachers alike reported limited access to in-service professional development for coteaching practices (Austin, 2001). This result, however, seems to contradict an earlier study that found roughly 63% of participating educators received in-service professional development for coteaching (Fennick & Liddy, 2001). However, with more than one in every three teachers receiving no coteaching professional development, it can be argued that teachers lack the institutional support to improve their collaborative efforts with their colleagues. Aside from promoting more effective coteaching pedagogy among educators, professional development pertaining to students with disabilities can transform the culture of a school (Kangas, 2014). This can be a critical outcome of professional development in an inclusive age, as the institutional climate also drives the efficacy of collaborations among educators. In particular, a school climate that is unwelcoming of students with disabilities correlates with unsatisfactory relationships between special education teachers and their colleagues (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008).

Some scholars have found that personal ideologies, too, exert their own force in teachers' collaborative endeavors. Particularly, what educators believe about the professional roles and responsibilities of not only themselves but also their colleagues can adversely affect their ability to work together (Austin, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001) and with students (Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2015). In Austin's (2001) mixed methods study, participants believed that in collaborations a demarcation of responsibilities was essential, and yet their execution of this practice fell short with

many not establishing these roles. Discrepant beliefs about role responsibilities among collaborating educators perhaps become most salient in coteaching relationships. A telling example is highlighted in Fennick and Liddy's (2001) study, as general and special education teachers were not in agreement about who should be responsible for delivering content instruction and monitoring student behavior. Moreover, each coteacher perceived herself as carrying more responsibility than her counterpart.

Even when responsibilities are jointly agreed upon, the differing roles of educators may inadvertently result in the subordination of one teacher, typically the special education teacher. Perceived as a "visitor" by their general education counterparts (Austin, 2001), special education teachers can take on the role of an assistant rather than an equal partner (Patriarca & Lamb, 1994). These beliefs about teachers' role responsibilities affect the students themselves (Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2015). For instance, Strogilos et al. (2012) identified a belief among general education teachers—that students with disabilities were the responsibility of special education teachers. Likewise, Murawski and Dieker (2008) assert that both the discursive and pedagogical practices of coteaching must avoid the tempting boundaries of "your kids" and "my kids," and instead must be based on the premise of collective responsibility for all children.

1.2. ESL education—general education collaborations

Collaborations between general education and ESL teachers often take form in the ESL push-in model, wherein an ESL teacher enters into the general education classroom to provide linguistic scaffolding for ELs while they are learning content. Ideally, more would be gained from the push-in model than lost; however, current structural and ideological constraints make coteaching in this model insuperable.

Consonant with the literature on special education—general education collaborations, coplanning between ESL teachers and their general education counterparts is deemed nonnegotiable for coteaching in the push-in model. Generally, coteaching literature underscores how effective coteaching is inseparable from designated, consistent shared planning (Bell & Baecher, 2012; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; Percy & Martin-Beltrán, 2012). Investigating perceptions of coplanning, Bell and Baecher (2012) conducted a survey of 72 ESL teachers, finding that a majority of the respondents did not prefer the push-in model because a lack of coplanning and communication relegated the ESL teachers to the status of an aide. Although coteaching hinges on the ability to coplan and exchange ideas consistently and purposefully, 85% of ESL teachers in the push-in model reported that their collaboration ranged from *mostly informal* to *somewhat informal* (Bell & Baecher, 2012). More formal collaborations between general education and ESL teachers, such as jointly planning lessons and student goals, were altogether infrequent. These findings comport with administrators' perceptions that coplanning time to develop curricula and to discuss pedagogical approaches remained an uncommon occurrence between bilingual specialists and general education teachers in their schools (Sakash & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). Yet, administrators themselves play a pivotal role in "creat[ing] opportunities for teachers to interact beyond the classroom in order to protect and support important spaces for collaboration" (Percy & Martin-Beltrán, 2012, p. 670).

Institutional logistics aside, administrators also exert substantial influence in "setting the tone" for how ESL teachers—and consequently their students—are perceived by general education teachers (Liggett, 2010; Russell, 2012). Liggett (2010) found that when ESL teachers had the support of the administration, general education teachers were more likely to collaborate with them,

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