

Collaborative Inquiry and English Learners

Addressing Critical Issues

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"My inquiry group has definitely changed my thinking on allowing ELL students to speak in their native language during class time. I previously thought that it was inappropriate and rude for students to speak in another language in my room, as I was mostly worried about what the student was saying about others in the room. Now, I have allowed ELL students to converse with each other during discussion times and on projects, especially if the ELL student is in the silent phase. I have paired stronger ELL students (who are more able to switch from L1 to L2) with those who are struggling with a particular topic or problem. This has shown great improvement in morale of the "silent" student, as well as a more in-depth conversation and understanding about that certain subject."

PARTICIPANT COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY
MURRY & HERREA, 2010

Collaborative Inquiry can be defined as a method by which members of a professional learning community come together to systematically examine their educational practice. Teams work together to ask questions, develop theories of action, determine action steps, and gather and analyze evidence to assess the impact of their actions.

Research indicates that Collaborative Inquiry has a positive impact on student outcomes and teacher efficacy. Reeves (2010) found that inquiry process was one of nine characteristics that had a measurable and significant effect on gains in student achievement in reading and mathematics in both elementary and secondary schools. City et al. (2009) found that by using Collaborative Inquiry, individuals and teams reflect on their assumptions and come up with new and creative solutions to address problems. Huffman & Kalnin (2003) found that Collaborative Inquiry not only positively

influences teachers, but also helps them engage in a continuous improvement process allowing them to take more ownership over local data and expand their role in their school's decision-making process.

The use of Collaborative Inquiry to address teaching and learning practices for English Learners is gaining momentum. In this Best Practice issue we highlight two of these projects. The first project entitled *Video-mediated teacher collaborative inquiry: Focus on English Language Learners* (Baecher et als. 2012) is a project conducted by a teacher educator, with content and ESL teachers at one urban high school in New York City. This teacher-led collaboration combines two powerful tools in professional learning - teacher collaborative inquiry and video analysis of teaching - as a means to focus across content areas in EL pedagogy. The research design for this project was conceived as a university and school partnership in which

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members of both institutions collaboratively construct theory. The three questions guiding the study are: 1) In what ways did examining videos from participating teachers impact their understanding of classroom practice for ELs? 2) To what extent were participants able to move from dependence on the outside facilitator to facilitating their own inquiry? 3) What did participation in the group mean to the teachers? Over a period of four months, seven teachers voluntarily agreed to meet after school for two hours to participate in a total of eight sessions. The sessions were facilitated by a Hunter College facilitator. The content of the sessions was organized in consultation with the teachers. Earlier sessions involved the teachers examining videos of teaching and practicing peer coaching conversations. Later sessions involved teachers bringing in short 3-5 minute video clips of their own teaching for discussion. At each session teachers use questioning techniques and listening protocols to address pedagogical challenges faced by the teacher's video footage. As a result of this experience, teachers reported great gains in their understanding of how to provide differentiated instruction for ELs. They also reported interest in sharing what they have learned with other staff in the school. Most importantly, participants indicated that the project had provided them with a great desire to learn and grow. They shared that the Collaborative Inquiry process was an authentic, genuine professional learning experience contrasted with traditional professional development.

The second project is entitled *Collaborative Inquiry Groups: Empowering teachers to work with English Language Learners*. The project was featured in an article by Murry & Herrera (2010) in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning*. Their

paper describes a program designed to prepare in- teachers for enhancing their instructional effectiveness with EL students in a general education setting. The project emphasizes the use of Collaborative Inquiry groups in which teachers serve as critical colleagues and challenge one another to implement research based practices. Most importantly, the project provided an opportunity to reflect upon their existing assumptions with regard to the instruction of EL students. The project was designed to address the following questions: 1) In what ways do teachers' perspectives on language differences and appropriate literacy paradigms for ELs change as a result of their experiences with Collaborative Inquiry groups? 2) When teachers are in communities of inquiry are encouraged to use a critical lens to examine such issues, what outcomes are possible? To answer these questions the researchers administered a qualitative open ended survey to examine the perspectives of grade level classroom teachers in five states: Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, New Mexico and Pennsylvania.

All the respondents had participated in training using the CLASSIC© Model. This model targets communities of inquiry through its emphasis on collaboration among teachers of ELs. A total of 125 teachers responded to the survey. Results indicate that teachers experience a significant transformation on their perspective of ELs. Moving from a perspective of ELs as bi-illiterate (Escamilla 2006), to realizing that bi-literacy among ELs is not a deficit but an asset to be nurtured and developed. Evidence from teachers' responses suggests that colleagues were instrumental in participants' questioning their assumptions and culture-bound perspectives. The Collaborative Inquiry experience provided a context to re-examine issues and negative

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assumptions and to develop a new perspective. All teachers reported new ways of engaging and teaching ELs that were based on these new

perceptions of their students. They used the acquired knowledge to develop strategies that foster the achievement of ELs.

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