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Good Practices Work for All Students

Silver Mesa Elementary is a Spanish Dual Immersion School located in Sandy, Utah. This is my seventh year as an administrator at this school, and I've learned so much from our excellent teachers. Over the last several years we've had teachers from Spain, Venezuela, Peru, and Mexico teach in our school. We truly have a multi-cultural staff! We also have three ACC classrooms with students with special needs. Integrating dual immersion and the Accommodated Core Curriculum classes within our neighborhood school is challenging as well as rewarding. As I reflect on these past years, I can identify five practices I've learned at my school that I feel are significant for any school.

- 1- *Unity in a school doesn't just happen; you have to plan for it.* With students in different programs in the same school, we purposefully plan for opportunities for students to interact with each other. When our students go to Brain Boosters (Art, PE, Music, etc.) we mix up the students from the different classes and programs. It makes it more difficult to organize, but it's important for students to learn and play with others in their grade level. At lunch, students may choose to sit anywhere in the lunchroom, not just with their class, in an effort to foster more relationships among their grade-level peers.

We also look for opportunities for everyone in our school to hear and speak some Spanish. When we do our video announcements, there is a section in Spanish. It's not a very long segment, but we want our students to recognize that we are all learners. Each morning I greet my youngest grades out front as they file into school. I will alternate my greeting between "Good Morning!" and "Buenos Dias!" One morning I had a student not in dual immersion return my greeting with "Feliz Navidad!" This was not in December, and I loved his attempt to speak in Spanish with the few words he knew!

Grade level programs include everyone, and teachers try to incorporate some Spanish into the presentation. It might be a song they have all learned, a dance, or a poem. My students in special education classrooms mainstream with their general education peers for science and social studies. Our school-wide theme of kindness helps unite everyone as we celebrate acts of kindness across the campus.

Planning for unity in a school is important, even if you don't have different programs you're trying to connect. This unity initiates a school culture that permeates the building and creates a feeling of belonging.

- 2- *Students need to talk at school.* Whenever you are learning a new language, speaking it is pretty important. But it's difficult to take that risk when you are unsure if your grammar and pronunciation are correct. In the dual immersion classrooms, speaking is a huge focus. Students are asked to speak a lot, while being given the scaffolds that are needed. It is not a choice for students but rather an expectation.

This same expectation should be in all classrooms. All students are learners of English and can benefit from structured classroom discussions. It's not typical for most students to use academic terms in their speaking vocabulary at home or on the playground. It's up to the classroom teacher to promote that vocabulary and provide opportunities to speak and practice with a partner or small group. Quiet classrooms are important for independent work or assessments, but they don't lend themselves to improving speaking standards and increasing vocabulary.

Talking also helps a learner to articulate his thoughts and verify he has learned a concept. When you are able to talk through the math concept with a partner or discuss with your table the science experiment, it solidifies the learning.

- 3- *Sentence frames help all students communicate better.* With their focus on speaking, Spanish teachers have incorporated sentence frames for many years. But all students can benefit from this simple practice. As you work to include more academic language or longer utterances, sentence frames can be a great scaffold for many students.

Our school goal this year has been to include more Structured Classroom Discussion in all grades, and sentence frames support students in being successful with this goal. All verbal students may not need this, but it doesn't hurt to provide the structure for them. Less verbal students greatly benefit from this support. As a non-Spanish speaker, I find myself able to participate in the Spanish classrooms when I have a sentence frame to support me.

At a recent professional development, the presenter said, "What is good for English Learners is good for all learners." This is what I've thought about our dual immersion classrooms. Language learners—whether it's Spanish, Chinese, or English—benefit from strategies that support their language development. And all students are learning language.

My students who are in a special education setting often struggle with language. It is key for their development to have that consistent focus on speaking and listening. Throughout their day there are many opportunities to include sentence frames. From greetings as they arrive, to describing what they've learned that day as they leave, students can be successful at various levels with provided sentence frames.

- 4- *Content Integration is not just a buzzword.* My Spanish teachers are required to have a language objective with every content objective. If they are teaching odd and even numbers in math, they must also state clearly to the students that they will focus on a speaking, listening, reading, or writing standard as well. In this way, the teachers are integrating two standards in every lesson, with that emphasis on language happening all the time.

With that learning of language as a top focus in dual immersion, my Spanish teachers have become experts at including language strategies throughout their day. We strive for the same focus to be in the regular classrooms as well. Content integration takes some planning, but it's not difficult—especially if you're adding language standards to other content areas.

In the Accommodated Core Classrooms, teachers integrate curriculum all day long. They continually look for opportunities to connect the learning for their students. With each student having an individual education plan, they are masters at including those goals in other content areas. With limited time to include everything in a school day, content integration makes sense to get the most out of each hour of the day.

- 5- *Good teaching is universal.* I am in awe of our teachers at Silver Mesa. I watch my teacher from Spain with her engaging delivery. My 5th grade teacher could star on her own YouTube channel to model how to teach reading. The teacher from Mexico includes some remarkable technology in her lessons. My Accommodated Core teacher has an amazing rate of positive feedback for her students. My Venezuelan teacher shines in building relationships. These teacher strengths are recognized in any culture and setting. Exemplary teaching is easy to spot.

Being an administrator at a school with three separate programs is challenging. It has forced me to look for methods to increase unity. It has also given me the opportunity to observe teachers in various settings and notice the approaches they are using to reach their population of students. Central to what I've learned is the strategies that are effective for them can be effective for all teachers. Good practices work for students in all settings. Even with these successes, our work is not done. Our next step will be to increase our public practice so teachers can learn from each other. Because the teachers at Silver Mesa are rockin' it!





