TEACHING CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Teacher education programs across the nation are currently calling for a drastic reform in educator preparation in order to meet the needs of diverse population of students and effectively train pre-service teachers. Few teacher education programs are rigorously responding to his call by transforming their educational programs to meet those demands. A basic part of this transformation is rethinking the process how educators are prepared. Reforming teacher education means rethinking the entire educational process. Many aspects of these reforms are found throughout teacher education programs that invest in the teacher candidates and challenge them from the beginning of their training to help them grow exceptional educators. Participants in this study were pre-service teachers enrolled in a teacher education program at a large university in the Southwest. In this program, pre-service teachers were all given a mini ipad and a swivel to record their teaching sessions and share them online using Teachscape. In this study, twenty five teacher candidates in Block 4 implemented a variety of instructional strategies while working with diverse students in secondary classrooms. These diversities included different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, English Language Learners, exceptionalities, family structures, and local community needs. The teaching strategies took into consideration diverse students varying attitudes, perceptions, expectations, realities, and abilities that classroom teachers must consider in order to develop learning experiences responsive to students’ differences. Pre-service teachers’ video-recorded teaching sessions using Teachscape software and tagged their teaching session for effective instructional strategies. Each Teacher candidate received feedback from two peers and from the instructor. Based on peer and instructor feedback, teacher candidates wrote self-reflections evaluating their own instructional practices and strategies implemented to target specific needs of their diverse students. Each participant in this study was expected to implement at least 4 differentiated instruction strategies they learned during the course of their teacher education training. Participants were required to keep a log to document the level of success when implementing the strategies. From time to time they are asked to try specific strategies and post the level of success implementing those strategies either on a discussion forum, upload the information on the website link, and/or report on the their use of the strategy in a chat session. Students were required to post and share their selected strategies before videotaping and sharing their lessons. Students were required to provide at least four journal entries. A total of 100 journal entries featuring effective strategies were collected for the purpose of this study. In their recorded lessons pre-service teachers were required to first, incorporate diversity into curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Second, develop strategies that reflect an understanding of, and appreciation for diversity. Third, implement strategies that are sensitive to multiculturalism and diversity, and fourth be able to evaluate their cultural responsive teaching strategies and communication styles with their diverse students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive Teaching, Leveraged practices, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students.

1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of this project is two pronged: a) to investigate the barriers/ challenges that pre-service teachers face in their effort to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLDS); and b), to use this understanding to create a portfolio of effective instructional strategies that are culturally responsive and effectively address the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in the secondary classrooms. This study is conducted in a teacher preparation program of a large university in the Southwest of the United States which has taken drastic steps towards the reform movement. The study therefore evaluated the current curriculum, instruction and assessment practices for preservice teachers as a way of identifying the barriers to cultural competency.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is an approach about teaching and learning that is grounded in the belief that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have an equal opportunity to succeed in academic endeavors (Banks, 2008; Gay, 2010; Lock, 1988; Phuntsog, 1999; Pohan, 1996; Sheets, 2005). Advocates of this practice call for the acknowledgment of students’ cultural background, experiences, prior knowledge, and individual learning preferences in order to facilitate the teaching-learning process (Siwatu, 2007). Proponents of CRP equally urge teachers to exercise additional efforts in order to build their competence toward classroom instruction, management, and assessment.

Research has shown that the culturally responsive teaching approach has positive impacts on students from diverse backgrounds. Teachers effectively use their students’ cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to make learning more suitable and meaningful (Schmitz, 1999; Villegas, 1991). Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching is intended to build bridges between diverse students’ environments outside the school and their school experiences. The bridges are assumed to break the barriers that prevent culturally and linguistically diverse students make smooth transition between their home and school environments. It is also assumed that teachers adopting this philosophy of teaching use a wide variety of instructional strategies that best fit their students’ needs and learning styles. Furthermore, it enriches the curriculum by incorporating multicultural information and materials to which diverse students can relate. However, Culturally Responsive Teaching is challenging especially for pre-service teachers expected to teach in diverse educational contexts (Banks, 2008; Gay, 2010).

Research and in field observations, however show that there is a lot that needs to be done to prepare pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive practitioners. Research also refers to an existing gap between teachers’ multicultural training and CLDS’ performance. Therefore, rigorous educational reforms should be designed to help preservice teachers become exceptional educators. Since they are also expected to develop higher-level skills and products competencies, the training they are receiving is expected to be positively reflected in their instruction and connected to the achievement of students.

2.2 Culturally responsive practices

Both theory and research show that culturally responsive teachers’ self-efficacy to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students benefits learning of curriculum content (Banks, 2008), the learning context, classroom environment (Sheets, 2005), student-teacher relationships (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006), instructional practices, and performance assessments (Boyle-Baise, 2005). In this respect, there is a high expectation that culturally responsive teachers be competent in areas of curriculum and instruction development, classroom management, student assessment, and cultural enrichment (Siwatu, 2007). In terms of curriculum and instruction development, a culturally responsive teacher should be able to integrate students’ expectations and pride stemming out from their cultural identity and belongingness in the formal curriculum as well as everyday classroom practices (Ladson-Billings, 2002).

3 METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research study explored the following research questions:

1. Are pre-service teachers using the appropriate differentiated strategies to accommodate culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students (CLDS) in secondary classrooms?

2. What instructional strategies are proven to be effective in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in secondary Education?

3. What are preservice teachers’ perceptions about their instructional competencies as culturally responsive practitioners?
3.1 Research Design

This study used an exploratory research design, based on the Grounded Theory GT (Glaser/Strauss 1967). Exploratory research design does not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions, but merely explores the research topic with varying levels of depth. “Exploratory research tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done” (Brown, 2006, p.43). This study is conducted in order to determine the current challenges and barriers inhibiting pre-service teachers from being culturally responsive and competent practitioners. The study proposed effective multicultural responsive strategies to teach CLDS. The coding scheme that has been implemented to analyze the (1) differentiated strategies, (2) their personal reflection journals, (3) the peer review journals, and (4) the discussion forum chats, implemented by preservice teachers. The study used rich sets of data (video, screen captures, journals, and personal reflections). Codes are theoretical, not just descriptive; they have explanatory value for the phenomena. Constant comparison was conducted. Observed instructional practices were compared and checked across disciplines many times in order to create concepts that are precise and consistent.

3.1.1 Setting

In this study pre-service teachers are teaching in their natural environments, which is their own classrooms, either on their own or with their mentor teachers. Each pre-service teacher is responsible for recording his/her own classroom. The teaching setting is mainly in pre-k through 12 educational institutions in Southwest Texas. Part of data collection (pretest-post test, journals, reflections and focus groups) will be conducted inside the research institution all our preservice teachers are attending to become certified teachers.

3.1.2 Measures

a) **Video recording**: Pre-service teachers will be responsible for recording a series of classroom instructional videos during their clinical placement in pre-k through classroom settings. Each preservice teachers enrolled in this Teacher Education Program is equipped with a mini i-Pad, a tripod, and a swivel. Preservice teachers are held accountable to video-tape, and upload their videos to Teachscape. All videos become part of the TEP digital data set that is made accessible to preservice teachers, mentor teachers and administrators for continuous evaluation and assessment.

b) **Observational protocol**: the researchers will develop an observational protocol detailing the dependent and independent variables this study intends to measure in order to trace pre-service teachers’ preparedness, efficacy and culturally responsive practices. The observational protocol will serve as guidelines to keep the thematic data coding organized. Coders’ logs of observed and coded videos will be compared and analyzed for inter-rater reliability.

c) **Strategies Journals**: pre-service teachers will be instructed to provide a narrative of at least 4 different Differentiated Instructional (DI) strategies they implemented during their clinical practice when teaching Math and Science to CLDS. In these journals pre-service teachers are required to report on at least two DI strategies that were the least effective and provided an explanation why they did not work and what they your do differently to make them work next time they will implement them with their CLDS students. Similarly, pre-service teachers should report at least two of lost effective DI strategies they successfully implanted, explain why they worked and evaluate their degree of effectiveness in different contexts.

d) **Self-Reflection papers**: pre-service teachers will be equally required to provide 4 personal reflections related to multicultural responsiveness and sensitivity in teaching Math and Science to CLDS. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to freely share their opinions, struggles and challenges as well as successes they had during their clinical teaching experience.

e) **Discussion forums and Chat rooms**: Preservice teachers were highly encouraged to post their comments and any feedback online by logging into the public space provided to all pre-service teachers on Blackboard.
4 RESULTS

4.1 Effective Instructional Strategies

Based on the analysis of the 100 journal entries of our 25 participating preservice teachers, the data revealed that preservice teachers have been exposed to a breadth of various instructional strategies during their teacher education program. The instructional strategies in general were geared toward direct implementation in the main stream classrooms with mainstream students. They are all labeled as “effective” or “Leveraged” instructional strategies based on research findings and concrete evidence collected through continuous assessment and feedback from both teachers and students. Preservice teachers mentioned that the availability of a wide repertoire of what is called “leveraged” or best practices made the process of selecting and implementing these practices in their own classrooms an overall successful experience. It is worth mentioning, however, that it was the task of preservice teachers to test out and learn how to differentiate these best practices with diverse students. The challenging part of classroom implementation was how can they modify the same leveraged practice to meet the need of a second language learner, an ADHD student, or an Asian student with limited English proficiency while maintaining the same high expectations. In this regard and for the purpose of this study, preservice teachers were asked to try out at least four different instructional strategies with their diverse students for the first time and experience the process of differentiation when it is needed with their culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Out of the 100 journal entries, some of the commentliest used instructional strategies were the following:

4.2 Effective strategies to Teach CLDS

The main effective instructional strategies reported by preservice teachers to be effective in teaching CLD students in secondary classrooms are: Activating schema, building background knowledge, purposeful use of manipulatives, teaching academic vocabulary, peer-to-peer instruction, increasing student language production in the content area, have students share problem-solving strategies, encourage higher order thinking practices, incorporate short-write writing activities like reflections and journals and use of technology.

4.3 Degree of Effectiveness in Teaching Diverse Students

After reporting what strategies they have chosen and implemented in their classrooms, preservice teachers were asked to explain what worked and did not work during the process of differentiation. Overall, preservice teachers were more willing to first share and explain what worked really well for them and most of them were enthusiastic about describing why and how they used a specific strategy in their classroom. They were also eager to share the degree of effectiveness. When asked how did they know their differentiation worked well with their diverse students and what methods they used to reach this conclusion, preservice teachers reported that they used mainly exit tickets, one-to-one checking for comprehension, brief feedback surveys administered at the end of the sessions and test scores. Pre-service teachers reported that the most successfully implemented strategies were the following Think-Pair–Share, Peer-to-Peer instruction, Socratic Seminars and Philosophical chairs class practices.

The least successful strategies were the following; grouping based on similar skills; using rewards; one minute journal and exit tickets because students simply do not take them seriously or consider them as busy work.

4.4 Evaluation of preservice teachers Self-reflection

The Evaluation of preservice teachers’ self-reflection was done in two steps. The first step included the analysis of peer review journals. Each preservice teacher’s teachscape video was viewed by two different peers. Each video tag was also checked for accuracy and relevance to the content taught by the observed preservice teachers. Peers were randomly assigned in order to diversity the quality of feedback keeping in mind that preservice teachers are teaching different disciplines mainly in STEM education and the rest are in English, history and physical education. A total of 50 peer review journals were analyzed. The peer evaluation is based on four criteria which are (1) Grouping Arrangements, (2) Student Roles and Expectations, (3) Student Accountability and (4) Varied Grouping. For grouping arrangements the observed preservice teacher is required to select
appropriate student grouping (whole class, small groups, pairs or individual; heterogeneous or homogeneous ability). Second, for student roles ans expectation criterion, the observed preservice teacher is expected to provide his/he students with clear instructions about their roles, responsibilities, and group work expectations. The third, criterion of student accountability the observed preservice teachers were required to make sure their students are held accountable for their group work and individual work. Finally, the fourth criterion of varied grouping requires the observed preservice teachers to vary their instructional group composition (e.g. race, gender, ability, and age) to, most of the time, accomplish the goals of the lesson. Each peer review included evidence from the video and from the students’ work of the four mentioned above criteria.

5 DISCUSSION FORUM AND CHAT SESSIONS

Additional insightful information regarding leveraged instructional practices were informally discussed in two online forums on Blackboard. All preservice teachers who participated in this study were encouraged to post any comments or feedback about areas of refinement and/or reinforcement. These comments can be directly derived from their own self-evaluation or their peer-evaluation. The posts on the discussion forums and chat sessions helped increase the degree of collaboration between preservice teachers and served as a coaching forum. Some of the posts were just technical questions some preservice teachers asked their peers about suggestions on how to implement specific strategies in their content areas. The responses were usually prompt and insightful suggestions sharing personal classroom practices from different content area. Preservice teachers showed interest in experimenting different new instructional practices that they did not implement before and then they go online and share with the group what went well and point to specific classroom practices they will refine next time they would teach a different content and decide to adopt the similar instructional practice. Another benefit from the discussion forum and chat session was sharing classroom artifacts such as handouts, hands-on activities, and games that are made available to the whole group if they want to reuse them in other disciplines or modify based on their students’ needs.

REFERENCES


