Chapter 29

Patterns of Practice and Teacher Identity: Insights from the QTEL Professional Development Program

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ABSTRACT

The increasing diversity of public school students presents challenges both to institutions of teacher education as well as professional development providers as mainstream educators must now be versed in skills and techniques that result in rigorous and effective learning for English learners (ELs). This chapter presents insights from a university-run professional development program for pre- and in-service teachers closely examining the ways one participant engaged in a variety of practice-based identities within her classroom as a result of her participation in the professional development program. These practice-based identities include the tool collector, content monomath, and polymath, with each bring particular strengths to the classroom for ELs. This work suggests a need to consider the ways in which professional development participants conceptualize themselves as they make sense of their own educational experience as well as to provide insight into the most meaningful elements of such an experience.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a multitude of challenges facing classroom teachers in contemporary times: from increasingly sophisticated technologies to dwindling public budgets to new and evolving standards for teaching and learning, educators find themselves expected to know a wide body of information from policy to pedagogy. Furthermore, beyond these professional and institutional structures, the students in these classrooms are increasingly diverse, bringing with them a variety of languages, social practices, and ways of knowing. While students are coming from increasingly diverse backgrounds, teachers remain relatively homogeneous. While diverse students may comprise forty percent of the students enrolled in public schools, Black and Latino teachers represent approximately fifteen percent of the teaching faculty (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Moreover, in approximately forty percent of schools, there are no teachers of diverse background (United Negro College Fund, 2008). Nestled within these statistics is the underlying challenge of language diversity; while our classrooms are filling with students speaking a variety of languages, our teaching force continues to be overwhelmingly monolingual, yet charged with educating students who are learning, simultaneously, multiple languages.

The challenges facing teachers in their classrooms are mirrored in teacher education programs, which must actively engage in the preparation of candidates to teach in these increasingly diverse classrooms, despite an overwhelmingly white, monolingual teacher candidate population. Teacher educators grapple with the fact that, while many factors shape the academic achievement of their students, it is their teacher who will have the greatest impact on that child’s learning.

In response to this charge, the Quality Teachers for English Learners (QTEL) program at the University of Missouri, St. Louis seeks to provide both pre-service as well as in-service educators with opportunities to engage in coursework designed to foster inclusionary classroom environments in which English learners are recognized and supported for the particular strengths they bring to the classroom as well as the scaffolding required for rigorous, durable learning in literacy as well as the content areas of science, math, and social studies. While the emphasis of the program is supporting the language practices of English Learners, QTEL approached this task widely across the curriculum, infusing culturally responsive pedagogy in not only language arts and the various disciplines in the field of social studies, but also within science and mathematics. Participants in the program included pre-service elementary education students at the university in addition to in-service elementary and middle school teachers recruited from school districts surrounding the university supporting large numbers of English Learners in their classrooms. Participants enrolled in a series of university-based courses specifically targeted toward understanding language, including language acquisition and sociolinguistics, assessment, and instruction development; these courses functioned as an integral part of the pre-service teachers’ program of study and allowed in-service teachers the necessary credits to apply for a TESOL emphasis on their certification. Each of the six courses was designed to support the development of teacher background in pedagogical language knowledge (Galguera, 2011), particularly the ways in which a teacher, who may themselves be monolingual, can support students learning not only English but their home language or languages as well. In addition, program participants engage in several professional development opportunities throughout the school year as well as a five-day summer institute; these summer institutes allowed participants to explore application through hands-on workshops, exposure to presenters who shared their own successful implementation of strategies for engaging English Learners in high levels of academic engagement, and reflection on their own practices in anticipation for the coming school year through focused experiences in lesson design, seeking connections between the content of the courses.