Teaching English Language Learners: A Mainstream Response to Rural Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

English language learners (ELLs) are increasingly placed in classes with mainstream teachers lacking training and experience to teach diverse populations. Rural areas are being characterized by a growing number of ELLs, challenges to attract and retain qualified educators, and budgetary constraints. One solution to this quandary is to provide all teachers with ELL-related knowledge and skills prior to certification. The purpose of this article was to explore the experiences of secondary preservice teachers across a variety of disciplines in a rural teacher education program as they learned about and implemented strategies for differentiating instructions for ELLs. The article sought to examine if a simulation experience contributed toward an inclusive view of teaching ELLs and if preservice teachers were able to apply learned strategies to lesson planning and reflection activities. By studying how these experiences impact future teachers, this study attempts to contribute to improving teacher education that ultimately leads to a better educational experience for all learners.

KEYWORDS

English Language Learners, Mainstream Teachers, Rural Education, Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

Approximately one-third of all public schools and one-quarter of all American students are located in a rural school (NASBE, 2016). While the term rural is not easily defined and one community may vary greatly from another, pervasive issues related to poverty, lack of resources, and isolation often serve as unifying characteristics. With the growth of new industries, however, rural areas have begun to attract workers from all over the world (Fogle & Moser, 2017). Census data highlight this trend—26.7 percent of all rural students are minorities and 3.1 percent are identified as English Learners (ELs) (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). In recent years, the largest increases of ELs have been seen in areas with traditionally low numbers. Mississippi and Alabama, for example, have been recently listed in the top ten highest English-learner-growth states (Horsford & Sampson, 2013).

Such growth places considerable demands on rural schools given budgetary constraints and the difficulty attracting and retaining qualified teachers (de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013). According to the most recent Why Rural Matters report, Mississippi continues to be identified as the highest priority state in terms of rural education (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Hartman, 2017). Over half of all districts in the state of Mississippi are rural and the population of ELs in the state’s public schools...
has increased by over 50% in the past four years (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2016). Like other rural states, Mississippi has difficulty responding adequately to such changes in student population. For instance, while the number of ELs enrolled in the public-school system has significantly increased in recent years, the number of qualified English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in the state remains stagnant (MDE, 2016). This is reflective of a national crisis in other rural communities as well (Boyle et al., 2014).

In response to this challenge, and as a response to build teacher capacity in rural contexts (NASBE, 2016), it has been suggested that teaching ELs should be normalized and considered a mainstream issue beginning in teacher preparation (Bunch, 2013). While there is no consensus regarding what mainstream teachers need to know about language, it can certainly be argued that all teachers need to develop a pedagogical language knowledge (Bunch, 2013). Before we can identify best practices that advance and contribute to this knowledge and skill base, it is clear that all teachers need concrete experiences to combat their ill-preparation with ELs once they enter today’s classrooms (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Lucas, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of secondary pre-service teachers across a variety of disciplines at one teacher education program in Mississippi as they learned about and implemented strategies for differentiating instruction for ELs. The study sought to examine if a simulation experience contributed toward a more inclusive view of teaching ELs and if pre-service teachers were able to apply learned strategies to lesson planning and reflection activities. While teaching ELs is not solely a rural issue, given the significant increase of culturally and linguistically diverse learners attending public schools in these contexts and the challenges (e.g., reduced budget, fewer resources, strong ideologies in place about multilingualism/multiculturalism) that directly and adversely impact the education provided to this population, understanding how best to prepare rural teachers prior to certification warrants investigation. By studying how these experiences impact future teachers, we hope to contribute to improving rural teacher education that ultimately leads to a better educational experience for all learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today’s teachers are increasingly placed with little to no support in classrooms with ELs (Salerno & Kibler, 2013). Further complicating this issue, these teachers often have not confronted their own beliefs about language and culture (Bunch, 2010), they represent a predominantly White and middle class social group (Bunch, 2010; Bunch, 2013; Salerno & Kibler, 2013), and their previous classroom experiences as former students have likely never required them to demonstrate a solid command of another language in order to succeed academically (Bunch, 2010). Despite these challenges, mainstream teachers proportionally spend the most instructional time with ELs (Bunch, 2010), and very few teacher education programs require or provide specialized training to teachers who will very possibly confront ELs as students (Bunch, 2010). This finding is significant because the burden to assist teachers with this population of students falls upon schools and districts (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). In rural contexts, “offering this crucial professional development is an onerous task” (Hansen-Thomas, Richins, Kakkar, & Okedeyo, 2016, p. 309).

Given the critical, perhaps central, role of language in teaching and learning (Bunch, 2013) and the increased expectations of new standards that require students to use language in complex academic contexts, all teachers should know how to confidently work with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. The teaching to assist these learners in meeting these lofty goals is no longer an issue solely for ESL specialists but rather for all educators during their academic journey (Bunch, 2013). Teachers must engage in practices that examine and question their own beliefs about linguistic diversity, force them to analyze critically the language needed to be successful in their disciplines, and lead them to appreciate and advocate for learners who speak other languages (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).
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