Chapter 3

Professional Development for Teachers of English Learners (ELs): How Constructivist Thinking and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Can Support Best Practice for ELs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the role of professional development in supporting teacher capacity for instructing English learners (ELs) while placing the reader at the intersection of three significant areas of research as they relate to ELs: culturally responsive teaching, effective PD, and constructivism. These lenses merge to highlight the important role theory coupled with pedagogical practices influence instruction. The research in this chapter provides key findings from the field as well as recommendations for how to utilize constructivism and culturally responsive pedagogy when planning effective PD. This chapter argues that in order for even well-designed reform models of PD to create sustained instructional change, there must be inclusion of deeper conceptual understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) and culturally responsive teaching.

INTRODUCTION

As teachers of English Learners (ELs), educators must consider multiple perspectives and influences that may impact their students’ academic learning and language acquisition. This chapter specifically examines how the literature of culturally responsive teaching, effective professional development (PD), and constructivism can be utilized to benefit ELs. By accentuating a distinct review of the literature and the results of an inservice research study, this chapter contains the following objectives:

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1. To guide the reader through the literature and allow the reader to construct potential connections from three lenses of theory (culturally responsive teaching, effective professional development, and constructivism) when planning teacher PD.
2. To allow the readers the opportunity to reflect on their own PD experiences and the learning opportunities they may provide for ELs.
3. To share key findings from the research study on effective professional development for teachers of ELs.
4. To provide implications and conclusions based on the findings.
5. To provide recommendations for effective PD for teachers of ELs.

BACKGROUND: PD FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSITIVE TEACHING

This chapter highlights key theories of literature and their relation to teaching English Learners: culturally responsive teaching, effective professional development, and the constructivist approach. With each theory, connections to English Learners and their second language acquisition (SLA) are demonstrated to provide the foundation to the findings of the author’s study. The purpose of this literature review is to present culturally responsive pedagogy in relation to the learning and language needs of ELs, what effective professional development looks like for teachers of ELs, and the constructivist approach to learning as it connects with both culturally responsive pedagogy and effective professional development.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Educators who practice culturally responsive teaching support changing pedagogy to fit the needs of marginalized students, including ELs (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Giroux, 2009; Bartolomé, 2009). This involves critically examining school curriculum and environments (Gay, 2002; Bacon, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2004). While culturally responsive, or culturally relevant, teaching has been a large focus in the field thanks to the works of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002), educators must reflect upon how the concepts relate to their current student population and practices. “Culturally relevant teaching sees excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity and individual differences into account” (Durden, 2008, p. 411). Culturally responsive teaching is cross-curricular and should encompass all teachers’ lessons and beliefs about how each of their students learn in the classroom (Gay, 2002). Having this belief system and creating this environment produces a deeper level of multiculturalism beyond the surface level, buzzword mentality (Banks, 1989, 2004). Fullan (1993) believes that “the teacher who works for or allows the status quo [italics in the original] is the traitor” (p. 14). In other words, while teachers’ biases in accepting inequities and the status quo may not be intentional, improving teachers’ understanding and awareness of their responsibilities in shaping the lives of their students can be supported through culturally responsive pedagogy.

Furthermore, being culturally responsive allows educators to discontinue prejudicial or inappropriate practices in the classroom and correct the inadequacies that occur with diverse students in schools (Nieto, 2013). This can be accomplished by having teachers educate themselves about the contributions of various ethnic groups and develop a cultural understanding of diverse groups of people, which can lead to mindful practice that changes the school environment for diverse students, including ELs (Gay, 2002; Bacon, 2014; Nieto, 2013). Schools with teachers who have a deeper understanding of culturally
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