

Research Article

The Relationship Between Professional Development and Teachers' Efficacy in Culturally Responsive Practices

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Abstract

Linguistically, racially, and economically diverse learners are growing populations in schools across the United States, making it necessary for teachers to implement culturally and linguistically responsive practices to ensure all students have opportunities for cognitive, social, and emotional growth. However, professional learning opportunities that address culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices do not correspond with the population growth of diverse learners. The result is educators who feel ill-prepared in the use of such practices. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between culturally and linguistically responsive professional development and teachers' efficacy when working with linguistically, racially and economically diverse learners. The study used a qualitative design in which participants of the study were a convenience sample of elementary general education teachers in an elementary school in the United States. Six elementary teachers participated in a series of professional development sessions that focused on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices within English language arts (ELA) during an eight-month period. The data collection was teacher interviews conducted before participation in professional development and again after participation in professional development. This qualitative data provided examples of teachers' background knowledge, use, and self-perceived professional growth regarding effective use of culturally and linguistically responsive practices when working with diverse learners. The results demonstrate that overall teacher efficacy was affected in understanding the definition and use of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. The information from this study will provide the beginning framework for professional development designed to educate and enhance teachers' use of effective culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices.

Keywords

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive, Professional Development, Teacher Self-efficacy, Diversity, Instructional Practices, Diverse Learners

1. Introduction

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is the incorporation of students' cultures, experiences, intellectual frameworks, and languages, into the learning process to develop the learning capacity and emotional growth of students [1]. Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices

leverage the cognitive and emotional experiences of each individual student, and connect these experiences to new learning [2].

Teachers in the United States are finding that a significant portion of their students speak another language other than

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English, are culturally diverse, and or of low socioeconomics According to the 2023 report *The Condition of Education* from the Department of Education, the number of English learner students increased from 9.2 percent in 2010 to 10.3 percent in 2020 [3] The National Center for Educational Statistics published a report in 2019 that states Between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of US children ages 5–17 who were White decreased from 62 percent to 52 percent and the percentage who were Black decreased from 15 to 14 percent In contrast, the percentage of school-age children from other racial/ethnic groups increased: Hispanics, from 16 to 25 percent; Asians, from 3 to 5 percent; and children of two or more races, from 2 to 4 percent [4].

In addition, the number of students living in poverty has increased In 2023, it was reported that approximately 14 percent of students aged 18 and under lived in poverty, with the three highest demographics of Native American/Alaskan American at 25.9 percent, Hispanic at 22 percent, and Black at 20.3 percent [5].

Though the classroom demographics have changed, initial teacher programs and school districts have not provided teachers with enough culturally and linguistically responsive training to meet the needs of diverse learners A review of the literature demonstrates that, many teachers are unprepared to work with diverse learners [6], and that linguistically diverse students are often placed with teachers who have had little training in language acquisition [7] Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) noted that many teacher education programs need to provide explicit learning that addresses the skills necessary to teach students who are culturally and linguistically diverse [8] Further research by Fergus (2017) demonstrates that while some teacher preparation programs have begun to provide culturally diverse experiences for their teachers, the workforce tends to have individuals who work with others who are culturally and racially similar than themselves [9].

Because culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices play a significant role in students' engagement and learning success, it is important to provide teachers with professional development that addresses the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices Unfortunately, many teacher licensing programs do not provide coherent programming [10] to provide teachers with opportunities to learn about Equity Pedagogy, a term that means Instructional strategies and classroom environments that help diverse learners attain the skills, knowledge, and habits needed to be successful academically and socially [11] Often, teachers receive "disjointed preparation for diversity and equity, dependent on the interests of individual professors rather than on a comprehensive conception of preparation for excellent teaching in racially diverse contexts" [10] Furthermore, few general education teachers receive preparation regarding the language acquisition needs related to linguistically diverse learners [12] The disconnection between teacher preparedness and the needs of diverse learners has had con-

sequential negative effects Researchers for The National Institute for Urban School Improvement have noted when the "cultural backgrounds of teachers differ significantly from their students because of ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic reasons [the students] are especially vulnerable to cultural disconnect" [13] As a result, diverse learners may not demonstrate proficiency in academic areas such as reading, writing, and math, and may be at risk for academic failure [14], As a result, when cultural knowledge is not part of the instructional delivery, students will not see the relevance of the content. When teachers do not understand the culture of their students and instruction uses surface culture knowledge inevitably results in students who become disengaged with the instruction and learning in the classroom [15].

For teachers to deliver effective culturally and linguistically responsive instruction to diverse learners, a comprehensive framework for ongoing professional development that addresses these practices must be in place Professional development that helps teachers learn, connect, and apply new learning about the cognitive effects of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching can support teachers' utilization of these practices, and also prevent misconceptions of this pedagogy An analysis of the literature demonstrates several common culturally and linguistically responsive practices that are beneficial to diverse learners and should be embedded within classroom instruction: teacher knowledge of culture, a safe and inclusive classroom environment, knowledge of language acquisition, and instructional scaffolding.

Therefore, there is a need for a professional development framework that provides teachers with opportunities to learn specific practices of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and apply these practices when working with diverse learners.

2. Materials and Methods

The purpose of this study was to analyze how professional development sessions with a focus of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices influence teachers' culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices with diverse learners The information from this study will provide the beginning framework for professional development sessions that train and enhance teachers' use of culturally and linguistically responsive practices This framework, in turn, will provide a platform of future research on how these practices impact reading growth of economically, racially, and linguistically diverse learners.

The research question for this study was: Does professional development increase teachers culturally and linguistically responsive teaching efficacy?

General Background: This study used a qualitative research design, with data collected from initial and post interviews of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade participating teachers The initial interviews measured participants' knowledge and use of culturally and linguistically responsive

practices prior to professional development. Post interviews measured teachers' professional growth of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices after the professional development sessions.

The data collected from this study will provide educational facilities and school districts information on how best to create and deliver training to mainstream teachers regarding effective culturally and linguistically responsive practices. Additionally, this information may be used by educational facilities to help create culturally and linguistically responsive reading curriculums that impact the reading achievement of diverse learners.

Participants: The study used a convenience sample which consisted of 8 elementary teachers from an elementary school located in the midwest United States. The participant group was made up of 2 third grade teachers, 2 fourth grade teachers, 2 fifth grade teachers, and 2 sixth grade teachers. Participants were teacher volunteers who responded to a general email that explained the study and asked for volunteers.

Instrument and Procedures: Qualitative data in the form of individual, face-to-face initial and post interviews were collected before and after the implementation of the culturally and linguistically responsive professional development series. Both sets of interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. The intent of the interviews was to gain an understanding of teachers' perception of their own culturally and linguistically

responsive practices; what were perceived strengths, areas of growth, and confidence levels, prior to, and again after, the professional development series.

The following initial interview questions provided a baseline of teachers' culturally and linguistically responsive practices used in ELA instruction prior to professional development.

1. How do you incorporate students' background experiences into ELA lessons?
2. How do students share their thinking and perspectives?
3. What opportunities allow students to connect new learning to previous experiences or learning?
4. How can students express their new learning or content knowledge?

The post interview measured teachers' perceived areas of growth regarding culturally and linguistically responsive practices for ELA instruction after the conclusion of the professional development. Post interview questions 1-4 were the same as the initial interview questions.

The participating teachers received professional development that was based on literature reviews of culturally and linguistically responsive practices. The topics of the professional development sessions were Knowledge of Culture in the Classroom, Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment, Linguistically Responsive Instruction, and Developing Instructional Scaffolds (see Table 1).

Table 1. Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Professional Development Sessions.

Professional Development Topic	Focus of Professional Development Sessions
Knowledge of Culture in the Classroom	How knowledge of culture involves an understanding of student backgrounds and experiences, and connecting it to instruction [6]
Developing Instructional Scaffolds	How to develop instructional scaffolds to support learning capacity and cognitive growth of diverse learners [16]
Linguistically Responsive Practices	The principles of second language acquisition and instructional supports for linguistically diverse learners-[8]

Source: author's own development.

Each topic consisted of biweekly, fifty-minute sessions during the school day, for a period of eight months. After each professional development session, the school's instructional coach then modeled lessons with culturally and linguistically responsive practices, collaborated with teachers on lesson planning, and conducted coaching visits to classrooms to provide feedback to teachers.

3. Results

The qualitative data analysis included a pattern and theme identification in teacher responses. The data gathered from the initial interviews was analyzed for current teacher knowledge

and application of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices during ELA lessons. Post interviews were analyzed for trends in teacher growth and increased use of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices during ELA lessons.

Research Results: During the initial interviews the participant teachers shared information about their culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices during ELA lessons. Through the use of thematic analysis with the interview responses, common themes emerged from the initial interview data. The first theme to emerge was Instructional Reading Practices. The second theme to emerge was Instructional Materials Used for Reading Instruction. Statements during the

initial interview were also connected to upcoming professional development topics (see Table 2).

Table 2. Initial Interview Data.

Themes	Example Statements	Connections to Professional Development Topics
Instructional Reading Practices	“We use some hands-on activities during reading” “I like my students to move around the room and work in small groups” “I have students in guided reading groups” “The students turn and talk to share ideas and perspectives” “I scaffold my instruction and assignments for students below proficiency”	Developing Instructional Scaffolds
Instructional Materials for Reading Instruction	I use some visuals and manipulatives if the students need them” “We will use pre and post assessments This gets a knowledge of what they know, and this will drive how I choose what I use in a lesson”	Linguistically Responsive Practices

Table 2 shows that teacher responses to the questions as being basic, with little elaboration on how students’ cultural experiences connect to new learning. Two responses corresponded with professional development sessions: Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment, and one response corresponded with Instructional Scaffolds.

The post interview measured teachers’ perceived areas of growth and use of culturally and linguistically responsive

practices during ELA instruction at the conclusion of the professional development series. Post interview questions 1-4 were the same as the initial interview questions.

As shown in Table 3, two themes emerged within teacher responses during the post interview, as well as sub-themes. Theme 1, Instructional Practices, had two sub-themes emerge: Collaborative Practices and Constructivist Practices. Theme 2 addressed Language Acquisition Practices.

Table 3. Post Interview Data.

Themes and sub-themes	Example Statements	Connections to Professional Development Topics
Instructional Practices Sub-theme: Collaborative Learning Sub-theme: Constructivist Model Practices	“The students work together on mini-projects to share ideas and apply what they have learned” “My students will work in pairs or threes to find the answer to a problem” “Sometimes my structure for reading involves students discussing what they read, and supporting their answers or arguments within the peer discussion” “We have started using Socratic Seminar and the students really like it!” “I try to make the reading lessons relevant by connecting the skills or strategies to the real-world” “We have been taking our learning into the community, and then we talk about how our lessons relate to what we did” “I have the students reflect on their learning by stating on their exit ticket how a lesson helped them grow and the connections they made” “I think about the students’ background knowledge and background experiences when planning a lesson” “I attach physical motions to our phonemic awareness lessons” “I let my ELL students listen to the story with their story in front of them”	Knowledge of Classroom Culture Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment Knowledge of Classroom Culture Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment Knowledge of Classroom Culture
Language Acquisition Supports	“I scaffold instruction for my linguistically diverse students based on their language level”	Instructional Scaffolding Linguistically Responsive Practices Creating a Culturally Responsive

Themes and sub-themes	Example Statements	Connections to Professional Development Topics
	“I give my linguistically diverse students a little more time to process” “I do explicit vocabulary instruction with my EL students” “My EL students can use their native language with one another” “I let my ELL students listen to the story with their story in front of them”	Environment Cultural-Classroom Culture

Source: based on post interview responses.

Table 3 demonstrates how teachers’ knowledge and use of culturally and linguistically responsive practices increased after the implementation of the professional development series. The sub-theme of Collaborative Learning included methods that supported student-to-student interactions, small group problem-solving, and student-centered discussions. A second sub-theme that emerged was Constructivist Model Practices [17]. The sub-theme of Constructivist Model includes processes that allow a learner to make connections to previous learning through inquiry-based and collaborative activities. Practices included in this sub-theme included connecting new skills to the community, having students reflect on their learning, and using students’ experiences to scaffold learning. Practices within these sub-themes correspond with Knowledge of Culture in the Classroom, Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment, and Developing Instructional Scaffolds professional development sessions.

The second theme that emerged was Language Acquisition. The responses within this theme noted supports such as scaffolding instruction based on students’ English language level, explicit vocabulary instruction, and students’ use of their native language to make content connections. Practices within this theme correspond with Knowledge of Culture in the Classroom, Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment, Linguistically Responsive Practices, and Instructional Scaffolds.

4. Discussion

Student culture is more than race or ethnicity [6]. It is the interpretation of new learning, methods of communication, relationships, values and traditions of a people. Culturally and linguistically responsive instruction encompasses students’ cultures and allows educators to understand how a student will perceive and interpret the learning within the classroom [17]. Teachers who receive inclusive professional development that addressed culturally and linguistically responsive instruction developed instructional practices that were more interactive, collaborative, and student-centered lessons for students [18].

Data from the initial interview indicated the participating teachers did not associate students’ cultural background and learning experiences to pedagogy or curriculum. Teachers

reported that they used strategies such as guided reading, differentiated spelling groups, hands-on learning activities, and partner work, when they were asked how to incorporate students’ background experiences within ELA lessons. These answers were also provided when teachers were asked what opportunities are provided so students can connect new learning to previous experiences or learning. Teachers also reported that they chose instructional materials and activities based on what their pre-made lesson plans indicated they should use. These answers do not address how the learning environment, pedagogy, or curriculum are associated with students’ cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

5. Conclusions

Data collected from the study’s six participating teachers demonstrated a growth in their efficacy and new learning. The researcher recommends that culturally and linguistically responsive professional development continue to be offered as a professional learning opportunity for elementary teachers, and expand the research to include teachers of various school communities such as urban and suburban communities.

Future research can expand this topic in several ways. First, future research can study how culturally and linguistically responsive professional learning impacts teachers’ efficacy when more opportunities for teachers to practice and plan for cognitive scaffolds is provided [16]. It is this scaffolding of information that supports students’ growth toward higher-level thinking and making the connections between classroom learning and the world outside of the classroom [19].

Future research should also specifically address how professional development that focuses on language acquisition impacts teachers’ language scaffolding for English learner subgroups, as well as direct correlations between the teachers’ culturally and linguistically responsive growth and the increase in academic achievement of English learners.

Abbreviations

ELA English Language Arts

Author Contributions

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Karen Blaha is an Associate Professor at the University of St Francis. She completed her EdD in Educational Leadership at the University of St Francis in 2019, and her Master of Education in Reading from the same institution in 2011. Her research examines culturally responsive practices that support diverse learners. She has facilitated multiple presentations on equitable instructional practices for the National Equity Summit. She has also co-authored articles for the *International Journal of Modern Education Studies* and the *International Journal of Diversity in Education*.

Research Field

Karen Blaha: culturally responsive instructional practices, linguistically diverse learners, educational leadership, professional development for teachers, equitable reading instructional practices.