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The What and How of Teaching Diverse Adult Learners

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Keywords: adult learners, instructional strategies, diverse learners

Abstract: In this paper, we present an in-progress study to better understand the process by which adult education instructors become more competent teaching diverse adult learners. We provide a brief review of the relevant literature. We then share the findings from the initial survey, which serve as the basis for our current study. The new questions that emerged from the data analysis and the research design of our current study are also described.

Introduction

Today's classrooms are increasingly becoming diverse with students from different cultures, backgrounds, and nationalities sitting under one roof. On one hand, diversity in school classrooms is adding value to the curriculum; on the other hand, it is posing a significant challenge for the teachers to design effective teaching practices. Adult educators should therefore formulate strategies to teach in rapidly changing diverse classrooms (Brand & Glason, 2003).

In this roundtable, we present an in-progress study built upon our findings from a previously administered large survey of adult education instructors' professional development needs in Texas. Through the study, we want to explore the instructional strategies used by the adult education instructors to become more competent in teaching diverse adult learners. We share the findings from the initial large survey, the new questions that emerged from the data analysis, and the research methods of our current study designed to follow up on the findings from the initial survey.

Synopsis of the Literature

Students' cultures and the ensuing classroom chemistry affect teaching style and selection of instructional tools (Mitchell, 2009). Additionally, training teachers to teach diverse classrooms is difficult because schools are not well equipped to provide a suitable platform for cultural exchanges and interactions between students and teachers (Pang, 2001). Therefore teachers should recognize their affiliation with a "culture, beliefs, biases, and assumptions" as teachers' associations with preconceived notions impact their teaching (Weinstein, 2003, p. 270). In agreement with Weinstein, Hurtado (2001) highlighted that "women and different racial/ethnic faculty have distinct teaching styles that influence both the content and delivery of knowledge in the classroom" (p. 196).

Culturally relevant teaching combines the learners' cultures with the learning context (Pang, 2001). Incorporating cultural values to the learning perspective is important and teachers who are aware of the cultural nuances are often adept in observation; they take help of body language and other non verbal cues (Pang, 2001). Although, it is impossible to create a single environment that can encompass the needs of all students from different backgrounds, researchers believe that teachers should respect the diversity brought to the class by each student by creating an encouraging, supportive, and healthy learning environment in classrooms (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2003).

Initial Survey Findings

The foundation of our current study stems from our findings of the survey which collected information about adult educators in four areas: a) demographic information b) preferences in professional development delivery, c) perceived skill in instructional content areas, and d) importance of various instructional content areas. Respondents were asked to self-assess their skill level in a variety of instructional areas, including the area of diversity, using the following scale: 1 = needs improvement, 2 = good, 3 = very good, 4 = excellent. 1147 responses were collected, representing a 45% response rate.

Teachers overwhelmingly acknowledge the importance of diversity, and feel competent to address the diverse learning styles, abilities, and cultures of their learners. Particularly the adult educators felt comfortable in the following four aspects of culturally inclusive teaching in classrooms: a) Incorporate aspects of learners' cultures and languages into instruction, b) Modify learning environments to accommodate the needs of special populations, c) Implement instructional practices that address the needs of learners with diverse learning abilities and differences, and d) Provide instruction to learners with diverse levels of cognitive and academic proficiencies.

Unanswered Questions/New Research Questions

The initial findings from the large survey suggest adult educators' competence in teaching diverse and special populations. However, adult educators do not have a clear understanding of the actual instructional techniques involved, or how they came to be competent. Therefore, the following research questions emerged:

- What are the instructional strategies that instructors are utilizing to incorporate aspects of learners' cultures and languages into instruction?
- How is instruction provided to learners with diverse levels of cognitive and academic proficiencies?
- What specific examples of training, if any, are most likely contributing to these findings?

Research Design

Our current study utilizes a qualitative approach. Data are collected through focus groups and one-on-one interviews, utilizing a semi-structured interview format. The participant sample includes adult educators who self identify as proficient or competent in teaching diverse and special populations.

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