5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013

A Call for Multicultural Special Education in Hong Kong:
Insights from a Case Study

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Abstract

The increasing number of Mainland Chinese immigrant children with difficulties in Hong Kong schools mandates understanding of the complex interactions between cultural-linguistic differences and disabilities. This case study adopted narrative inquiry to probe deep into participants’ lived experiences to reveal that the special education teacher was primarily concerned about the student participant’s difficulty associated with his disabilities, totally unaware of the impact of her limited proficiency in the child’s first language. Researchers called for government policies to integrate special and multicultural teacher education.

1. Introduction

Global immigration trends create heterogeneous classrooms that pose substantial pedagogical challenges for educators (Lotan, 2006). As such, the need for culturally sensitive pedagogy (Tabulawa, 2003) and a teacher’s proficiency in his/her student’s first language has been recognized as significant for effective teaching of students who are speakers of languages different from the local language used in schools.

The diverse demographics in the United States have been cited as reasons to mandate training in multiculturalism for pre-service and in-service teachers (e.g., Dunn, 1993). Countries with demographic diversity such as Canada (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009), England (Teacher Education by Learning through Two Languages, 2010), Australia (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, & Youth Affairs, 2007), and New Zealand (May, Hill, & Tiakiwai, 2004) have had a long tradition of providing bilingual education and associated teacher training. In Asia, many educators still perceive schooling as being relatively stable and homogeneous while it is increasingly chaotic, complex, and beyond control (Townsend & Cheng, 2000).

The existing literature reflects that teachers are often uncertain as to whether a culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) student has difficulties due to disabilities or their limited proficiency in the second language (Gersten & Brengelman, 1994). Beginning in the 1980s, researchers and educators turned to examine training programs that
emphasized an interface between special education and bilingual education for teachers of CLD students with disabilities (e.g., Baca & Amato, 1989). Though research, policies, and practices of bilingual special education have been vigorous at the international level for over two decades, terms such as bilingual, multilingual, or multicultural special education are unheard of in Hong Kong, much less policies and practices. Only a handful of the huge volume of research studies (e.g., Yuen, 2004) have addressed issues of multicultural education in Hong Kong but none included students with disabilities. Earlier studies addressing the education of Mainland immigrant children either examined government policies (e.g., Townsend & Cheng, 2000), gathered teachers’ views through interviews (e.g., Chong, 2005) or surveys (e.g., Yuen, 2004). Little has been done on examining actual teaching and learning situations in Hong Kong. This case study thus seeks to answer one overarching research question: What is the status of teaching and learning involving Chinese immigrant students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)?

2. Method

Researchers of multicultural education (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) specifically advocate narrative inquiry as a methodology to probe deep into participants’ lived experiences that can reveal significant insight into learning needs and teacher preparation for multicultural settings. Thus, the narrative approach was used. I sought to respond to the overarching research question: (a) What skills did the teacher consider essential and how did she self-evaluate her skills to teach Chinese immigrant students with ADHD? (b) What strategies were employed?

2.1. Setting and participant

This study took place in a Hong Kong elementary school during a 6-month period. The school was in the heart of a government-subsidized housing estate, situated in a newly developed neighborhood on the outskirt of the urban areas. Most of the students were from the housing estate and some from private apartment complexes in the immediate vicinity while a handful of them came from neighborhoods farther out within the school district. The majority of students are considered to come from low income families. The school had 20 students diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD), many of whom also had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Except for a second grade student, Eric, these students received small-group instructions from the teacher participant, Ms. Chan, who was the only special education teacher in that school. All students with disabilities were served in this pull-out resource room. Eric was also the only Chinese immigrant student with ADHD. Considered to have a high level of learning needs, Eric was given individual lessons for Chinese language in Ms. Chan’s classroom.

2.1.1. Teacher participant

Ms. Chan is a Hong Kong born Chinese with a bachelor’s degree in social science and another in special education that qualifies her as a special education teacher. She also had basic training in inclusive education and counseling. Ms. Chan spent nine of her 11 years of primary school teaching as a special education teacher, working with students with LD, autism, ADHD, and mild intellectual disabilities.

2.1.2. Student participant

Eric, the 7-year-old student participant came from Mainland China and lived in a university staff quarter where his father was a professor. Eric’s older sister was in Grade 8 of the same school and had good academic performance. They both attended the same international school and enjoyed schooling there. At home, his sister and their living-in maid spoke English during their interactions. Eric thus spoke fluent English which was his preferred language. Both parents spoke Putonghua at home. For reasons unknown to the school, Eric’s parents decided to transfer him to the current school shortly after the beginning of second grade. He had only been in this school for less than a year at the time of study. Eric was diagnosed with ADHD in kindergarten. His parents employed a behavioral therapist to help him at home for 5 months prior to his enrolment in Grade 1.
2.2. Data Collection and analysis

Data collected from field notes, unstructured- and semi-structured reflection interviews of the participating teacher, and several classroom observations. We talked about her training backgrounds, experiences, skills she considered essential to teach Chinese immigrant students with ADHD, Eric’s greatest needs, her view on the effect of his cultural-linguistic diversity, and strategies she selected to facilitate Eric’s learning. Classroom observations focused on implementation of strategies and effect of ADHD and cultural-linguistic diversity on both teaching and learning. Post-observation interviews provided an opportunity for reflections and clarifications of what I thought was happening. Data of this study was transcribed and coded to find elements that respond to the research questions of the study. Verifications of interpretations with the teacher participant were done throughout the coding process.

3. Findings

3.1. Self-evaluation of competencies

Throughout our many conversations, Ms. Chan asserted that she was perceived as the expert of working with students with ADHD in her school, that other teachers looked up to her for solutions when they had difficulty in meeting students’ needs, and that she had acquired skills necessary to teach them effectively. Ms. Chan considered it effective to structure learning activities with incentives to encourage desired behaviors that would benefit learning. Thus, she devised a few routine learning activities with a sticker-system to encourage Eric to concentrate and participate in learning activities. She believed that such a structure was effective with Eric and used this approach for the 8 months she worked with Eric.

3.2. Linguistic differences and behavioral responses

Eric came to Ms. Chan for Chinese language lessons of which Putonghua was designated as the medium of instruction. Even though Ms. Chan believed that Eric should be instructed in English and Putonghua and that she was supposed to use Putonghua according to the school policy, she alternated between Cantonese and Putonghua because of her limited proficiency in Putonghua. When Eric had difficulty to understand, she switched to English. Because of her limited proficiency in English, she would try Cantonese or Putonghua again. Eric was repeatedly seen with tremendous difficulty to focus when he could not understand Ms. Chan’s instructions, both when she used Cantonese that he had greatest difficulty with or English/ Putonghua with which she struggled. Sometimes he would correct her English when he figured out what she was trying to say. The frequent consequent behavior was to ask “what did you just say?” and “can I go play now?” If the lesson remained difficult to understand, he would get out of seat and go to the play area of the classroom. His irritability level aggravated when Ms. Chan, desperately trying to get him focused, repeatedly reminded him of the need to focus so that he could progress at the same pace as his peers in another classroom and threatened to report his behaviors to the assistant principal who was responsible for disciplinary issues. In our post-lesson discussions, Ms. Chan insisted that Eric’s irritability and out-of-seat behaviors were probably results of not taking Ritalin even though she did not know for sure. When asked if frustration caused by not understanding the content through Chinese might be a possible cause, she firmly disagreed. However, he was observed to be calmer when he was allowed to converse in English, in which his proficiency was judged to be equivalent to grade 4 using school curricula as a benchmark. He also won first place in English achievement competition of his grade.
4. Discussions

4.1. Policy impact on teacher competence

According to Gorski’s analysis (2008), eliminating educational inequities is identified as the underlying goal of multicultural education. The Hong Kong government policy clearly aims at immigrant children’s early integration into the Chinese education system (Education Bureau, 2009a). Acculturation and adjustment are perceived as a matter of students’ understanding of the education system, central curriculum, and expectations. Such a view has resulted in the government policy of using induction and language programs outside the classrooms to deal with student needs. The government also stresses that no separate curriculum be developed or another language be used as the medium of instruction (Education Bureau, 2009b). This orientation moves away from securing equity through education in which multicultural curricula and teacher competence are deemed fundamental (Grant & Sleeter, 2006).

As currently practiced, schools and teachers of immigrant students with ADHD are charged with little responsibility to deal with the impact of cultural-linguistic diversity inside the classrooms. The government policy is undeniably shaped by the underestimation of the impact of cultural-linguistic diversity on Chinese immigrant students. The impact can be clearly felt in the observed teaching and learning situations. Because of her previous special education training, Ms. Chan demonstrated skills in assisting Eric to learn by devising an incentive system and establishing routines. In the absence of policy to adequately prepare teachers for the multicultural and multilingual classrooms in Hong Kong, Ms. Chan’s lack of readiness was clear when she did not see any association between Eric’s difficulties and frustrations with her limited proficiency in English and Putonghua for effective communication and instruction.

4.2. Cultural and linguistic dissonance within the same ethnicity

In a position paper, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO], 2003) stated that speakers of mother tongues that are different from the local language, are often disadvantaged in the schooling process, comparable to that of receiving instructions in a foreign language. It further complicates the matter when the use of the term ‘mother tongue’ often fails to discriminate between all the variants of a language (UNESCO, 2003). Speakers of various Chinese dialects around the world are commonly perceived as speakers of the same language when they often cannot communicate with one another through their dialects. Dutcher and Tucker (1997) conducted a comprehensive review of research on the use of first and second languages in education for the World Bank and identified two teacher elements vital to successful multilingual language programs: (a) teachers’ high proficiency of the language of instruction, whether it is their first or second language; and (b) teachers equipped with cultural competence, subject knowledge, quality basic training, and continual upgrade of skills through professional development. The absence of support for language and cultural adjustments in Eric’s school may reflect similar thinking the UNESCO has identified. Eric has been disadvantaged because of his Chinese ethnicity. Neither Ms. Chan nor other teachers of the school was equipped with the language proficiency and cultural competence to provide quality education for Chinese immigrant students.

The lack of cultural and language competencies also contributed to Ms. Chan’s focus on strategies commonly used to assist students with ADHD and why she attributed all his misbehaviors to the lack of attention span. If the Cultural Competence Continuum (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989) were used to rate Ms. Chan and her school, they can be said to be at the midpoint of the continuum, namely cultural blindness. Organizations and individuals at this stage believe that culture makes no difference and that all people are the same. Individuals at this stage may view themselves as unbiased and believe that they address cultural needs. Services or programs created by organizations at this stage are virtually useless to address the needs of diverse groups. They place little value on training and resource development that facilitate cultural and linguistic competence and dedicate few resources to acquiring cultural knowledge. Findings affirm the cultural and linguistic dissonance between Ms. Chan and Eric, even though they are of the same race and the significance for the teacher to be aware of such differences.
5. Conclusion

The above dissonance speaks to the need for better preparation and training of special education teachers. Chinese and English language teachers in Hong Kong schools are required to pass the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers in order to be qualified for the teaching of these two subjects (Education Bureau, 2008). At present, there is still no language proficiency requirement for special education teachers of languages. Existing training programs for special education teachers do not include multicultural competences. Even though Hong Kong teachers have been found to lack knowledge and skills in these aspects (Chong, 2005; Poon-McBrayer, 2002), the issue of teacher preparation for CLD environments has yet to be addressed (Poon-McBrayer, 2002). To this date, bilingual or multicultural special education is basically unheard of in Hong Kong. Thus, we call for policies on integrating special and multicultural teacher education as done in many Western countries. Policymakers must work with teacher education providers to reform teacher education to address the identified needs. A comprehensive review of the existing literature (e.g., Dutcher & Tucker, 1997) concluded that individual cognitive skills, literacy skills, and content materials are most easily developed when using a familiar language of the child. Because teachers being the key to the quality of teaching and learning (Tattoo, 2006) and almost all special education teachers in Hong Kong schools are mainly responsible for helping students in language learning, the significance of connecting culture and language with disabilities cannot be undermined.

References


