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RESEARCH

Teaching Preservice Teachers to Teach Diverse Learners: A Pilot Study

SAMANTHA CAUGHLAN AND ELLEN CUSHMAN

Preservice, English Language Arts teachers preparing for student teaching or internships need opportunities to interact with a range of students, within the full range of English language arts, and in a range of activities: one-on-one, in small groups, and in actual classrooms. In recent years, English educators have moved from merely trying to get their candidates working with students earlier and for longer hours to making sure such field experiences are truly educative, cohering with what they learn in university classrooms.

However, it can be a challenge to ensure that all students in education programs will have comparable experiences in ELA curricula with a diverse range of learners. Students who are assigned to a middle or high-school classroom as observers, tutors, or teaching assistants are guests in that teacher's classroom. The teacher's main concern is his or her own work and student achievement, and teachers vary in the amount of time or attention they have to spend with college students.

In addition, where administrators assign these placements, they may have their own reasons for placing students with a particular teacher that may have little to do with what the university wants for its students. Current anxieties caused by changes in teacher evaluation protocols linked to student achievement promise to make the needs of

preservice teachers even less of a priority in K-12 schools.

Preservice teachers in the Michigan State University secondary teacher education program have several opportunities to engage in field experiences aligned with their education coursework, but only the senior placement guarantees significant time—four hours per week over the year prior to their internship—in a classroom in their subject area. This placement is embedded in the fall and spring English-specific methods courses preservice teachers take that year.

In years past, a program coordinator in contact with middle and high school administrators has placed pairs or groups of English preservice teachers in area classrooms. While some senior placements provide good preparation for the internship, they vary in the opportunities preservice teachers have to work with students, participate in instruction, or have professional conversations with mentor teachers. Placements also vary in the extent to which preservice teachers have opportunities to experience teaching diverse learners, including struggling readers and writers and English language learners. As a result, some placements have the effect of making students feel less, rather than more, prepared for their internship.

Teaching Diverse Students: A Study of Teacher and Student Self-Efficacy is a pilot study designed to address these issues

facing ELA preservice teachers as well as several overlapping concerns at Michigan State: time to degree for groups of undergraduates who struggle with academic reading and writing; the difficulty college writing instructors have calling on the funds of knowledge their diverse students bring to the university; and problems in providing preservice teachers with substantial experience teaching struggling readers and writers before their internship. External, performance-based pressures on teachers make them increasingly more reluctant to provide placement opportunities for in-service teachers. In no small way, teachers can feel as though it is just too risky to have placement teachers in their classrooms, especially when the classrooms have many diverse learners.

In this article, we present a workable, and so far working, solution to this bundle of problems in finding sites for the placement of our preservice teacher-students. We focus here on our goals for the preservice teachers participating in this research project, offer initial findings, and suggest implications for future research.

The preservice teacher-training arm of this project seeks to address issues related to preparing future teachers to teach in racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classrooms, particularly in ways that are asset-based, or focusing on the cultural and linguistic strengths students bring to the classroom, rather

than casting non-Standard language and backgrounds as deficits. Around the nation, the need for preservice teachers to be trained in asset-based pedagogies (Ball, 2009; Gutierrez, 2008; Kinloch, 2011; Kirkland, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Morrell, 2011) that are also culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) has been well established. While introduction to this pedagogical research and theory is important and has been a key focus of the teacher education efforts at our university, it has been more difficult to find middle and high school field placements that offer our pre-service teachers the chance to apply this research in a diverse setting.

Working from the assumption that introducing preservice teachers to culturally sustaining, asset-based, socially just pedagogical research needs to be coupled with ample opportunity to apply the best ideas, findings, and practices associated with this research, we sought field placements in classrooms wherein diverse learners are being taught using a shared curricular focus on asset-based reading and writing assignments. Our university's Preparation for College Writing classes (PCW) provide such a context.

The PCW placement provides a semester in a diverse college writing classroom to complement a semester in a middle or high school classroom. Ideally, such a placement provides an opportunity for preservice teachers to

observe a seasoned professional over time; to discuss with that teacher the purposes for particular practices; to be scaffolded into ever more responsibility in that classroom; and to enter the internship with experience using asset-based pedagogies, rather than relying on course readings or practice lessons in the methods classroom. We hypothesized that our preservice teachers would

self-efficacy not experienced by preservice teachers placed solely in secondary schools. We argue that such an alternative placement is one way to ensure a robust preservice teacher training that—in guaranteeing a range of students, English Language Arts content, and activities—should increase preservice teachers' sense of self-efficacy prior to their internship.

Photograph by Mark Coggins

report more self-efficacy on a range of pedagogical content areas and methods related to culturally sustaining pedagogies given their placements in PCW classrooms. We found that PCW is not necessarily a better or replacement option for placement in schools, but that it does provide preservice teachers who have had it a significant measure of

Project Design

Preservice teachers taking part in our pilot study act as teaching assistants for one semester of their senior year in PCW classes intended for those students who did not test into Freshman Composition, and spend the other semester in a secondary English classroom. The PCW students have just completed high school, but lack the writing and reading skills necessary for college-level work, or they are international students or first-generation immigrants who struggle with academic English.

In addition to their placement, preservice teachers are also taking

an English methods course in the College of Education, and either a course in literacy or composition offered by the College of Arts and Letters. The curricula in the Arts and Letters course and that of the PCW course are aligned, and are centered around translanguaging, or an orientation to the language abilities students bring to class consistent with culturally sustaining reading and writing

pedagogy (Fraiberg, 2010; Horner et al., 2010, 2011; Paris, 2012). Therefore, not only do preservice teachers placed in PCW classes as teaching assistants work closely with readers and writers who struggle with academic English and with English language learners, but they also work within a curriculum that enables them to practice culturally sustaining literacy pedagogies. Because the PCW instructors work with the faculty who also work with the preservice teachers, it is possible to achieve a consistency of expectations regarding what the preservice teachers are there to do, assuring them opportunities to work closely with student reading and writing.

Our study asks the following research questions in relation to the preservice teachers:

1. Are there changes in ELA teacher self-efficacy and pedagogical knowledge of culturally sustaining reading and writing pedagogy (CSRWP) related to field experiences in PCW placement?
2. Is there a relation between efficacy and (CSRWP) pedagogical knowledge?
3. Do preservice teachers placed in PCW classes perceive the field experience as being pertinent to their change in efficacy and course content knowledge?

Following Bandura (2001), we define self-efficacy as *one's belief in the ability to regulate one's own activity and have an influence on the surrounding environment*. We reason that having confidence, a sense of efficaciousness, in their abilities to work with diverse learners and enact culturally-sustaining pedagogy is a necessary condition for novice teachers to be able to enter the internship or early-career classroom and put such pedagogies in place (Bandura, 2001; Martin, 2010; Siwatu, 2009). We hypothesize

that preservice teachers who are placed in PCW classes for part of their senior field placement will feel more confident in their abilities to enact such pedagogies than those who only experience traditional placements in middle and high school classrooms (Pajares et al., 2007).

Our preservice teaching cohort of 50-60 students is divided into two sections in fall and spring each. Preservice teachers enrolled in Ellen's sections were placed in PCW classes, while students enrolled in the other section were placed in middle and high schools as usual. Our teachers are predominately white, working and middle class females from rural and suburban areas of the state. While they all have taken foreign language classes, most feel ill-equipped to teach growing populations of first generation students and English language learners.

Preservice teachers in both classes received pre- and post-semester self-efficacy surveys (see Appendix A). MANOVA was used to calculate the variance in mean between each question of the pre- and post- surveys. Regardless of placement location, the preservice teachers also kept weekly activity logs of their observations and reflections on these.

Our curricular materials, developed for both the preservice teachers and college PCW instructors, include several types of activities that build upon best practices for teaching English Language arts, and that also integrate students' knowledge, first languages, and cultural resources into the activities. Through the Center for Applied Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Arts and Humanities, Ellen developed a series of workshops that trained the PCW instructors using the same types of pedagogical research and activities she uses in her preservice teacher classes. These

culturally sustaining workshops built upon the shared curricular focus across all of the preparation for college writing classes that our preservice teachers were placed within (see <http://caitlah.cal.msu.edu/links/idw/> for materials associated with these workshops).

All of the workshops include several activities and classroom lessons built along a model of scaffolded learning that involved frontloading, constructing, and extending the target knowledge and skills. They also include resources and adaptations to these activities that our preservice teachers and instructors suggested during the course of the class that Ellen teaches and the instructors' workshops.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary findings from the first semester of our pilot study suggest that this placement has the potential to achieve several of our goals for our English preservice teachers. A comparison of the surveys on self-efficacy and pedagogical content knowledge taken by preservice teachers placed in PCW classrooms and those placed in traditional high school placements show that the PCW placements resulted in greater self-efficacy on the part of preservice teachers' ability to help struggling readers and writers and English language learners with academic reading and writing, at a level of greater than a standard deviation.

In addition to the survey analysis, we also coded preservice teacher activity logs on a range of aspects, including orientation to pedagogical activity (observation, identification, application, evaluation) and self-efficacy (strong, qualified strong, qualified weak, and weak). A preliminary look at their weekly activity logs reveals that, even in their first

semester of placement, many in the PCW placements had the opportunity to work with individual students and small groups on reading and writing assignments and to teach lessons to the entire class. All of our seniors create lesson and unit plans over the year, but these preservice teachers actually get to see how their lessons work with real students, as this excerpt from one of our preservice teacher's activity log suggests:

Students seemed very receptive to my Cultural Artifact activity this week. My hope was to engage students with the PowerPoint presentation, YouTube clips and elaboration on my own cultural artifact—my keychain. . . . I'm glad we began with my activity, as I was able to use the keychain example when students had questions or concerns about their own artifact. . .

I think some students benefited from me showing the *Jingle All the Way* trailer and iPhone-Verizon commercial to show how I made the connection between my keychain artifact (specifically, the shopper savings cards) and ideas of American consumerism. One student asked how the connection was relevant, which I think is important as sometimes the connections we make may seem vague to others.

The larger goal of the cultural artifact assignment is to help PCW students see the objects in their everyday lives as imbued with cultural and social meanings. This preservice teacher modeled for the diverse learners ways in which a keychain could be considered, analyzed, and discussed as a cultural artifact. Importantly, this preservice teacher also learned the importance of making relevant connections to the popular culture clips used to make explicit why this

cultural artifact has the relevancy it does. Working from her own assets (cultural knowledge of this artifact and these clips) she demonstrated how diverse students could make the same types of analytical moves to inform their writing.

Placement in these classes also provides preservice teachers with opportunities to see how some pedagogical techniques they have read about in university classes actually function in the classroom:

On Tuesday of Week 6 we did conferencing. . . . I thought it was a great opportunity for me to see first-hand how a conference might work, and get feedback from a student about what he understood (or not) about assignment 2. This inspired me to suggest the activity I presented on Friday (Week 6) for making the distinction between academic and informal writing (more on that in sec. 2). It was wonderful to read in the weekly feedback that both the conference and the activity I presented actually helped the students!

Preservice teachers had been reading Donald Murray's piece, "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," in which he describes ways that the individual writing conference helps students develop their own abilities to be their own audiences. Here, the preservice teacher received feedback from the students that helped her recognize the ways in which the writing conference impacted the writer's work.

In addition, these preservice teachers have more opportunities to engage with students whose experience has been different from theirs, and think of the implications of learning as a second language learner, for example. One preservice teacher, after talking with one of her Chinese students, reported:

This really made me realize that many of the students we are working with have to put a ton of extra effort into more than just communicating with their teachers and peers. Even doing a simple task like reading an assignment can be more challenging, and as a result, these students are required to put more effort in. This really makes me wonder how I, as a future teacher, can ensure that all my students are being asked to do a fair amount of work, even if for some the assignments don't come as easily.

Actually interacting with second-language learners helped this preservice teacher to rethink concepts of "fairness" in considering how one might differentiate for students who face different challenges with English language arts assignments.

Implications

Because our "Teaching Diverse Learners" has been a one-year pilot, we are now in the process of developing a larger, long-term study of the impact of this training on the work of our preservice teachers. We intend to increase the percentage of preservice teachers who have the opportunity to work with PCW instructors and students and find a way to track our current cohort of preservice teachers into their internship year and first two years as professional teachers.

We hope that eventually every senior in our program has a semester in PCW and a semester of experience in a high school classroom as part of their placement opportunities. In addition, the focus on translingualism and culturally sustaining pedagogy will be thoroughly integrated into courses for English majors in both Arts and Letters and Education.

We have been pleased with the overall increase in self-efficacy of the preservice teachers who were placed in diverse college writing classes when compared to those who were not. Our current hypothesis is that this increase in self-efficacy will translate into a continued feeling of being able to apply asset-based pedagogical practices in diverse classrooms and to be able to reach all students equally well. Future studies will help us demonstrate the extent to which this might be so, but in the meantime, the stronger self-efficacy for our preservice teachers placed in college writing classrooms suggests we're on the right path toward actualizing a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

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Appendix A. Pre-service Teacher Survey, *Teaching Diverse Students: A Study of Teacher and Student Self-Efficacy*. Example questions from fall pilot study.

Culturally Sustaining Reading and Writing Pedagogy Self-Efficacy Scale										
English 408 Fall 2012										
Directions: This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of the kinds of things that create difficulties for teachers in their school activities. Please indicate your opinion about each of the statements below. Your answers are confidential.	To what extent?									
	Not at all		Very little		Some		Quite a bit		A great deal	
When you teach reading, to what extent do you feel able to:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
1. Get students to believe they can do well in reading?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
2. Model genre-specific reading strategies to enhance all students' understanding?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
3. Improve the understanding of a student who is confused by a text?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
4. Assess students' reading abilities?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
5. Ensure all of your students have appropriately challenging readings?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
6. Identify your students' reading preferences and build upon them?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
7. Provide alternative explanations when students are confused about reading?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
8. Develop a community of learners when your class consists of students from different backgrounds?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
9. Help your students maintain their heritage language(s)?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
10. Help your students value sharing their different cultures?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
11. Help your students value sharing their different languages?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
12. Support your students' multilingualism with readings?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
13. Support your students' multiculturalism with readings?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
14. Adjust your reading lessons to the cultural understandings of your individual students?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
15. Adjust your reading lessons to the linguistic knowledge of your individual students?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)