

Diversity in secondary English classrooms: Conceptions and enactments

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ABSTRACT: Diversity is conceptualised in many different ways in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language and class. Much has been written about these conceptions of diversity in educational settings and how teacher education programs should prepare pre-service teachers to address diversity in their future classrooms. In this article, however, we take a different approach to diversity in the classroom by examining how two secondary English teachers conceptualise diversity once they are out of their English education program. Drawing on a case study, we present perspectives on diversity from Helen and Scott – two secondary English language arts teachers in the Midwestern United States. Although Helen and Scott both address diversity, the way they conceptualise and enact diversity in their classrooms is somewhat different. Based on interview and observation data, we show what diversity means for these two practising teachers and the ways in which they actually conceive of diversity in their classrooms. We explore these conceptions of diversity in order to show how they affect the instructional decisions that Helen and Scott make, as well as how they formulate their roles as teachers in diverse classrooms. Finally, we discuss the implications of their work and the preparation of secondary English teachers.

KEYWORDS: Diversity, secondary English teachers, English classroom, case study.

As the 21st Century moves forward, English-dominant nations – such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States – continue to become increasingly diverse. In the United States, for example, according to a report based on the 2010 census, the US Hispanic “population grew by 43 percent, which was four times the growth in the total population at 10 percent” (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas & Albert, 2011, p. 2). Another report focusing on Asian populations states that this population increased “by 46 percent from 11.9 million in 2000 to 17.3 million in 2010,” and “the Asian population grew at a faster rate than all race groups in the country” (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Ouk Kim & Shahid, 2012, pp. 3-4). With this growth and diversification in the general US population, it follows that there would be a similar growth in diverse student populations in US schools. Indeed, a recent report from the US National Centre For Education Statistics (NCES) (Snyder & Dillow, 2012) shows that, overall, student populations in US public schools have become more diverse since 1990. For example, the population distribution of Hispanic students has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2010 – rising from 9 percent to 16.4 percent (p. 44).

Another important, and much discussed, way that diversity is conceptualised is socio-economic status (SES). Rapid changes in SES have also been reported in the US. For example, according to a report issued by an American Psychological Association taskforce (2007), both poverty rates and rates of income inequality are increasing. This is of serious concern for educators, since there is a well-established correlation

between low SES and low educational achievement. The majority of educational facilities serving these students are also poorly funded – resulting in outdated materials, equipment and under-qualified teachers (Kozol, 1992). With these different ways of viewing diversity in mind, this article discusses factors that influence how two, Midwestern, secondary English teachers view diversity in their classroom, as well as how these views of diversity are enacted in their classroom spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Preparing English teachers for diversity

In the latter decades of the 20th Century, as US populations became more racially, ethnically and economically diverse, researchers also recognised that diversity encompassed factors such as learning styles (see Riechmann, 1974). It is within this context that teacher educators began to recognise the need for pre-service teachers to have instruction on diversity – both conceptually as well as how to address it through classroom instruction. Indeed, there are large bodies of research that emphasise the importance for teachers to have knowledge about teaching diverse learners such as English Language Learners (ELLs) and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007; Athanases & de Oliveira, 2008). Zeichner and Flessner (2009), for example, identify several ways that many teacher education programs attempt to prepare pre-service teachers to teach diverse student populations. They explicitly focus “on social justice issues and the development of teaching practices that promote equitable educational outcomes,” where “teacher educators exemplify and model the concepts and practices that they advocate to prospective teachers,” discussing issues such as “racism and white privilege,” and examining “who they are and their attitudes and beliefs about others,” and, finally, providing students with varied field experiences that focus on diversity and specific communities (pp. 29-31).

Although the importance of preparing teachers for diversity has been well established in the literature, it is often the case that in their programs, pre-service teachers receive a cursory amount of preparation for teaching towards diversity (Fuller, 1994). According to Hollins and Guzman (2005), “diversity issues are generally not well integrated into teacher preparation as a whole” (p. 480). There is also an issue with opportunities for pre-service teachers to have exposure to diverse students and classrooms during their pre-service preparation. With increasing standards being placed on schools, teachers and students – for instance, the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation, *Race to the Top*, and merit pay – fewer schools have the time or willingness to engage with teacher education programs (Hawthorne, Goodwyn, George, Reid & Shoffner, 2012). It is also well known that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught (Lortie, 1975), and that many teachers hold views and opinions similar to those who taught them. Therefore, for teacher educators, it is of great importance to discover the impact, if any, that instruction on diversity has on pre-service teachers as well as the teaching practices of in-service teachers.

Teaching diverse students

Alongside efforts to increase pre-service teachers' conceptual understandings of diversity, teacher educators have suggested different ways to teach towards diversity in the classroom. In general, these suggestions relate to the disposition or attitude of the teacher, or actual methods and strategies used with students. One such example is the idea of a culturally responsive curriculum (Budd, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Students come to school with many different ways of knowing about the world. Their cultural backgrounds and experiences mean that every classroom possesses its own unique knowledge. Unfortunately, many standardised curricula take a one-size-fits-all approach to education that fails to take into account these multiple ways of knowing. In contrast, a culturally responsive curriculum honours the knowledges that students bring to school and seeks to incorporate such knowledges into the curriculum.

As Villegas and Lucas (2002) point out, culturally responsive teaching is more than just a set of techniques or a tailored curriculum. It requires that teachers “have a high degree of sociocultural consciousness, hold affirming views of students of diverse backgrounds, see themselves as agents of change, understand and embrace constructivist views of learning and teaching, and know the students in their classes” (pp. 27-28). Teachers in diverse classrooms must cultivate an “ethic of caring”, (Noddings, 1988; Perez, 2000) that shows students that they matter and their teacher is concerned for their well-being. Similar to the Villegas and Lucas (2002) assertion that teachers act as “agents of change,” it is necessary that teachers cultivate a high level of self-efficacy towards their diverse learners (Tucker et al., 2005). Other researchers have suggested various strategies for addressing diversity in the classroom, such as reading and vocabulary instruction (Barr, Eslami & Joshi, 2012), academic language and reading (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann, 2003; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer & Rivera, 2006), and language and writing in the content areas (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). It is important that these strategies are incorporated into the curriculum in a purposeful way that addresses the needs of the learners in a given classroom.

THE STUDY

For this case study, observations were conducted in two, secondary English classrooms at two public high schools in the Midwestern United States. The aim of the study was to discover – through observations and interviews – the specific instructional strategies that each teacher used with their diverse student populations. For a report on overall findings related to specific instructional strategies, see Shoffner, de Oliveira and Angus (2010).

The participants in this study were both secondary English teachers. Each teacher graduated from the same English education program at the same large Midwestern university. Scott Johnson's first semester courses included a 10th-grade English class that focused on communication and speech, and another that focused on World Literature. During the second semester, Scott taught a film course. Helen Lowry taught classes in both the 9th and 10th grades. Her 9th-grade class was an honours English course and her 10th-grade class was a basic English course.

Data collected consisted of field notes of classroom observations and interview transcripts. Observations began early in the fall of 2009 and were conducted every other week for 28 weeks, and interviews were conducted throughout the 2009-2010 year in November, February and May. During the observations, attention was given to each teacher's instructional decisions, and the context within which those decisions were made. The interviews were conducted to explore each teacher's understanding of instructional strategies and diversity, and to address what was observed during the classroom observations. In interviews, teachers discussed instructional strategies they used in their classrooms with diverse students, different assignments they selected to use, how and why they selected certain strategies for different students, and how they designed their assignments that focused on literacy.

We reviewed all field notes and interview transcripts and developed preliminary and emerging categories and themes. We found that teachers were using several 21st-century skills in their assignments and discussions about their practices. For the present study, we repeatedly reviewed and analysed teachers' conceptions and discussions of diversity.

Data analysis focused on qualitative content analysis, informed by Wilkinson's (2004) content and ethnographic analysis procedures. Through content analysis, we examined the data set as a whole and identified themes and categories (Patton, 1990). Following Wilkinson, we performed an ethnographic analysis by selecting specific categories for deeper and more detailed analysis. Specifically, we examined the data for demonstration of how Helen and Scott conceptualised and addressed diversity in their classrooms and interviews. To inform the ethnographic analysis, we also used the constant-comparative method (Merriam, 1998) to analyse teachers' practices. We portray patterns and illustrations by balancing summary and quotation (Morgan, 1988) and use teachers' language to illuminate themes.

RESULTS

Conceptions of diversity

Both Scott and Helen conceived of diversity in different ways throughout their interviews. However, each of them showed a tendency to emphasise one conception over others. Since, by its nature, diversity implies difference, what counts as diversity is very much context-dependent. For example, in a community or school where there are many different races and ethnicities, race and ethnicity will be readily seen as constituting diversity in that context. In a school that is racially homogenous, a factor such as socio-economic status (SES) may be seen most clearly as diversity. The following examples from Scott and Helen are no exception. In each of their interviews, they draw from their contextual knowledge of their local school and community in order to formulate their conceptions of diversity.

For Scott, diversity was typically conceived of in terms of SES. When asked to discuss the diverse learners in his classroom Scott said: "there is not a lot of racial or ethnic diversity at all...the biggest diversity in the school is socio-economic by and large." Given that Scott's school is in a rural, Midwestern US community – where racial and ethnic homogeneity is likely – such a conception of diversity makes sense.

His school was mostly white, but he did mention that there were a few German, Indian and Spanish-speaking students there. Despite the presence of some different ethnicities at his school, for Scott, SES was always the most salient form of diversity. For example, Scott told a story about the poverty faced by some of his students, and how this poverty affected their ability to be academically successful:

There are also some very, very badly off people who live in trailers, or in their cars, or with certain family members. The majority of the kids come from broken homes. Um, might live with a brother, might live with a sister, might live in a different place every night, sleep in a different place every night. So, the greatest amount of diversity is socio-economic. Um, and at the bottom it is, it is very much the bottom. Um, I had several students who literally get in a truck with their brothers, um, or sisters after school and drive around till about ten or eleven at night, and that's all they do. They'll get in a car and just drive around town for six or seven hours and then go home and, uh, and go to bed. And then wake up the next day. Those students obviously have a hard time just functioning in class, um, behaviourally they've been problems with other teachers in the past.

In this passage, Scott emphasises his view that SES is the most salient form of diversity through his language choices. For example, Scott does not just say that there are “people” who live in trailers. Instead, he expands the noun “people” into a large noun group “very, very badly off people”. In the next sentence Scott expands his description of the people to include the “majority” of students and he makes the generic “people” of the previous sentence more specific by changing them into “kids”. Each of these changes in the text make the situation at the school seem more significant – the problem affects a majority of students, rather than just some or a few, and it affects the more vulnerable group “kids”. Scott then uses the adjective “broken” to describe their “homes”. The phrase “broken homes” typically refers to a family that has experienced divorce. In this case, rather than simply saying something like “divorced families,” Scott uses the word “broken” to help support his case that SES is the most significant diversity type at his school. He then adds more emphasis by saying that those at the lower SES levels are “very much the bottom,” before providing the example of students who spend most of their day out of school in a vehicle instead of going home. According to Scott, the harsh economic realities faced by these students negatively impact them both academically and behaviourally. In fact, he suggests that SES is the most controlling factor in these students’ lives. It is the cause that makes it difficult for them to function in class and makes them a behaviour problem.

It seems that Scott is not alone in viewing SES as important at his school. When discussing a course that incorporated literature from various times and cultures, Scott pointed out that the students responded most positively to stories that included some aspect of classism:

We read Mansfield’s “A Doll’s House” and we read some more class-oriented texts and the kids love that stuff. They love...I mean cross culturally, they love the idea of poor versus rich, because that’s their struggle. Yeah, that’s their reality: classism, stereotypes, prejudice associated with wealth. That’s what they do. That’s what they know.

Here Scott aligns his students with himself in viewing diversity at his school primarily in terms of SES. He mentions that the “kids love” the “class oriented texts” because they are a reflection of “their reality”. These sorts of texts, according to Scott, reflect both what the students “do”, and “know”. So although both Scott and his students are aware of other types of diversity, SES dominates their thinking when they conceive of it.

For Helen, whose school was located in a predominately white, middle class community, diversity was typically conceived of in terms of ability. Ability here refers to a student’s ability to be a successful student. So, it encompasses cognitive ability as well as things such as behaviour and whether a student can perform classroom work. Helen talked about her diverse students saying:

It’s really just the most basic of basic in that class with me, and they’re the kids that struggle, and I have everything in there from...I mean, they cross the spectrum – the kids who are perfectly capable of doing the work and choose not to in general classes and aren’t...the classes aren’t structured enough for them to get their work in, so they fail, so they get put in basic. All the way to behavioural disorders and kids with learning disabilities, and I have a lot of students with IEPs [Individualized Education Program¹] in my 10th grade class.

Like Scott, Helen identified other types of diversity at her school, such as her “two students with LEPs [Limited English Proficiency], who speak Spanish at home,” but she still focused on ability as the most salient type of diversity in her school. This is evident in the above passage when her diverse students are named in her text as “the most basic of basic”. Helen further expands this description of “the most basic of basic”, by saying they are “the kids that struggle”. Unlike Scott’s students, who struggle mostly with SES issues, Helen’s students struggle with various issues related to ability. This is made clear when she identifies students who are “capable of doing the work and choose not to in general classes”, as well as students with “behavioural disorders”, “learning disabilities” and “IEPs”.

As these data excerpts show, Scott and Helen’s conceptions of diversity are context-dependent. Scott and Helen discuss their conceptions of diversity by drawing from their contextual knowledge of their local school and community. In the next section, we describe how these conceptions were enacted in Scott’s and Helen’s classrooms.

Enactments of diversity

Scott taught toward diversity in his classroom predominately through the creation and maintenance of relationships. When talking about the semester he spent working in his school’s in-school suspension room (ISS), Scott said: “Most of those students I already have a rapport with, I’ve known for a year in a disciplinary capacity and we get along.” Additionally, Scott credited his rapport with these students to the fact that he has “never had a behaviour problem, ever”, from those students. Scott saw this relationship building as a way to overcome obstacles to teaching towards diversity presented by his school. He reported that at his school, “a lot of students can barely read. They function on a very low literacy level – first, second grade...those are not

¹ In the United States, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

on our IEPs,” and he credited this knowledge as something that he “found from most of my [his] students”.

In general, Scott seemed to have little faith in the ability of systems to help him teach his students effectively. The school had many systems in place that differentiate students based on, typically, ability – for example, ISS, IEPs and tracking. If this system failed a student, the school was obliged to make some excuse for that failure. Regarding one of his English Language Learners, a Puerto Rican student, Scott said that, “the school uses the fact that he’s Puerto Rican as a way to justify his laziness.” In other words, from the perspective of the school, their systems did not fail to change the student. He wasn’t lazy because of “ability” – that which the school’s systems were set up to address; instead, the school explained his laziness by attributing it to his Puerto Rican identity, which was something that the school’s various systems could not change.

For Scott, then, relationships were a way to remedy his school’s systematic shortcomings. He saw his role as an instructor to know his students and to use this level of intimacy to meet their instructional needs. For example, something as benign as body language became, for Scott, hugely important – almost like a text that can be read:

Body language is a huge thing for me. You, as a teacher, have to be aware of your students’ body language. You just have to. You have to be able to look at a student and say this person is engaged...and if they’re not engaged you need to be able to adapt.

Scott echoed this idea later when he said that a teacher must have “constant awareness of the non-quantifiable indicators of engagement”. Although conventional wisdom says that teachers should keep some professional distance from their students, Scott viewed his rapport with students as a strength:

I’ve always tried to make a distinction between my personal life and my school life. I don’t want to let them in too far, but every now and then when you let them in and you show a bit of your humanity and that you’re a real person those connections can be made.

Scott viewed his students as people. He refused to see them in terms of educational categories in the way that Helen did. This relates to Scott’s SES-based conception of diversity in his classrooms. When he looked at the diversity of his student body, he first saw their humanity and their struggles as humans, before seeing them in any other way.

Helen taught towards diversity in her classroom primarily through differentiating her instruction towards her 9th-grade honors course and her 10th-grade basic course. Early in Helen’s first interview, she mentioned that she was the only English teacher that had those particular students during the semester, and that allowed her to “cater my curriculum for the kids as opposed to having to cater my curriculum to what every other teacher teaching that same curriculum is doing.” Helen relied on various sources to decide on how to differentiate her instruction. For example, with her students with learning disabilities, she reported that her “modifications tend to stick pretty closely to their IEPs, but the IEPs vary fairly widely as to what they specify what their

modifications should be.” When Helen was asked how she made instructional decisions for the different language backgrounds in her classroom, she related: “I was never taught how to do that. I wasn’t given hardly any background on English as a second language learners...I would make linguistic alterations if I knew how to, but I was never taught how to.” In order to address the needs of these learners, Helen relied on her stores of pedagogical knowledge and her experiential knowledge of what worked well in the classroom for all learners. She noted that her ELLs struggled with writing in English and they read fairly well, and so one strategy she had for them was “reading things out loud to them – so they can hear it.” Helen identified working with ELLs as an area of focus that should be explicitly discussed in an English education program.

Compared to Scott, Helen placed more value on the systems and resources put in place by the school. She spoke very positively about the assistance she received from a paraprofessional in her 10th-grade basic course and the structure that this woman provided in the classroom:

she’s very good at keeping the kids organised and caught up and helping the with things....we have a system and a routine and a rapport with those kids, and a lot of times disrupting that schedule or that dynamic can sort of disrupt them for a few days. So I try not to be gone mostly for them; not so much for my honours students, I’m not worried about them.

Although at times Helen did rely on the information found in a student’s IEP, she did not strictly limit herself to what was there. Like Scott, Helen exhibited a willingness to get to know her students and meet their individual needs. For example, she talked about making an exception for a student who only liked to write on his typewriter at home, and the positive result that came from this allowance (he completed the assignment). She found that it was necessary to be flexible with all of her students; however, this flexibility was different for her honours and basics students:

When I think about the basics, each of them has a different way of approaching what we do in class and so I have a different way of approaching what we do in class, so I have a different way of approaching each one of them, and it’s not quite like that with my other classes, with my honours classes...I make allowances for them obviously, but because their requirements are so much more stringent in their curriculum...it’s not the same as with my basic students...I have two different personalities in my day. I have the honours kids in the morning, and then I have basics. One of my sets of basics comes in and I’m a completely different person. I flip a switch when two different groups walk in.

This passage shows that although, like Scott, Helen views her students with some level of humanity, she tends to default towards a view of student diversity centred around educational categories based on ability. She identifies and contrasts two groups of students: “the basics”, and “the honours kids”. It is reasonable to assume that the students that belong to each of these groups are diverse in many ways – they certainly have different interests, talents and come from various home and SES backgrounds. However, in this passage, Helen shows that in her conception of diverse students, they become part of one of those two groups and in her dealings with them she becomes “a completely different person”. This shows that there are several ways

to conceive of diversity in the classroom and Scott and Helen are different in their conceptions.

These excerpts show that Scott enacts diversity in his classroom by building relationships and getting to know his students in order to meet their instructional needs. Helen enacts diversity by making sure she is differentiating her instruction in her two courses based on various sources of information about the students in her classes. Following are some recommendations for secondary English education programs, based on what was discussed in this article.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All teacher education programs must prepare pre-service teachers to teach towards diversity in their future classrooms. The examples provided from Helen and Scott's classrooms show that all teachers would benefit from a process of self-examination that seeks to understand one's conceptions of diversity. Additionally, teachers must understand how their school conceptualises and addresses diversity. Does the school's conception of diversity differ from that of the teacher's? Are the goals of the teacher for teaching towards diversity in her classroom in any way hindered by the school? These questions can be addressed in the context of secondary teacher education programs in which pre-service English teachers are challenged to continuously reflect on their conceptions of diversity in methods courses, for example, and examine their enactments of diversity during student teaching. Reflection offers ways to consider new ideas about diversity as they relate to previous insights. Teacher educators preparing English teachers to work in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms learn from pre-service teachers to understand how they conceptualise and enact diversity in their classrooms. These reflections can function as ways to further address misunderstandings and discover new possibilities for working with diverse students. As Helen's and Scott's experiences show, teachers can incorporate the varied strengths of students into the English classroom. This is especially important when working with ELLs since their home language and experiences must be understood as assets rather than deficits (Valdes, 2001).

Effective teaching towards diversity must include a consideration of the cultural backgrounds of students and the local contexts in which they live. In addition, effective teaching must also be informed by sound, well-researched pedagogy. Since pre-service teachers do not typically know the nature of their future classrooms, it is necessary that they learn to conceive of and recognise diversity in its multiformity. A toolkit approach (Coffin et al., 2003) to diversity would be one way to help pre-service teachers achieve such a goal. This toolkit for diversity would include an examination of the continuing influence of different forms of diversity, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, class, SES, special needs, language proficiency levels, on English teachers' beliefs and behaviour, so they better comprehend how and why their students succeed or struggle. English teacher educators can incorporate surveys that examine commonly-held beliefs of teachers towards teaching diverse students and explore these beliefs in the context of research and other resources to challenge those beliefs and how they relate to classroom instruction. Teachers, who are able to examine their own beliefs and the nature and

beliefs of the contexts they work within, are then empowered to make purposeful, strategic decisions about teaching towards diversity in their own classrooms.

A toolkit for teaching diverse students would include different practical ideas for addressing diversity in the classroom. Often, teacher education programs teach pre-service teachers about diversity divorced from considerations of praxis. Conversely, pre-service teachers also often learn about praxis apart from considerations about the most useful contexts for those methods. A toolkit approach seeks to strike a balance between these extremes by providing pre-service teachers with multiple “tools” for teaching towards diversity and addressing the needs of their diverse students as well as practice in deciding which contexts they would be most effective within. For example, some practical ideas, based on Scott’s and Helen’s experiences, would include:

- Getting to know their individual needs and strengths;
- Understanding students’ backgrounds and experiences to better comprehend their actions in and out of the classroom;
- Utilising students’ backgrounds and experiences to enrich learning;
- Learning more about building on students’ interests and linguistic resources;
- Differentiating instruction by carefully recognising and drawing on students’ knowledge and skills;
- Developing specific background and strategies for working with ELLs.

These practical ideas are just some considerations for English teacher educators based on the results of this study and not an exhaustive “list.” We hope to continue to explore the preparation of English teachers for diversity and maintain the conversation as we engage in the work of secondary English teachers in today’s classrooms.

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