



Enhancing Educator Professional Development through the Child and Community Context Study

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Abstract

In the rapidly evolving educational arena, the contemporary English language educator is being challenged to focus on rich hybrid and online experiences. Professional development and graduate programs for educators often address the more traditional aspects of integrating technology and course design. This study adds an innovative dimension beyond the classroom and online coursework by providing the opportunity to observe and study the community, parents and families of the students being taught. The Child and Community Context Study focuses on delving deeper into the lives of the students, their families, and the community in which they reside. Carefully designed activities are presented to strengthen all of these relationships and engage educators in significant accomplishments interacting with students and families.

Keywords: Community, Family, Parent involvement, Professional development,

1. Introduction

This presentation and study address the components of the Child and Community Context Study and discusses the results and experiences of 150 graduate students enrolled in the Rural Endorsement and Development Opportunities (REDO) Project at Boise State University. The Child and Community Context Study encourages educators to get to know the neighborhood in which they teach by observing and studying the community and interviewing community members. Educators select two English language students in their class, observe these students and engage in informal conversations with them. The highlight of this study is to conduct a home visit to learn about the student's experience as an English language learner. Educators gather all the information and prepare a context study report addressing each component of the study. Project activities are aligned with course readings and completed during the semester with intermediate deadlines and deliverables. Educators who participate will be well positioned to contribute to the learning community and develop a growing understanding of diverse people and contexts, reflecting on what they have learned about school-community-family-partnerships, as well as language, and literacy. It is the goal of these activities to respond to the need for transforming education throughout the world particularly for diverse English language learners and their families who face multiple challenges and will benefit from proactive educational strategies.

2. Review of the literature

Researchers have found that the key to making the family-community-school relationship a success is by considering it a partnership of equals, and positive school-family partnerships also help cultivate students' social and emotional well-being [1]. In a previous study that addressed teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent involvement in an ethnically concentrated elementary school in a culturally diverse community, analyses revealed that teachers and parents both claim that firm partnerships between them are essential to children's learning [2]. There are numerous studies on how teachers come to understand families and Caspe [3] has developed further research to point out the link between teacher outreach, family educational involvement, and student outcomes. Caspe identifies two key processes whereby teachers come to understand families: gathering information and meaning making. Communication and observation were the two most common methods employed by teachers to collect information about families. As teachers collected information about families, they also made meaning of what they collected. Henderson and Mapp [4] point out that there is strong and steadily growing evidence that families can improve their children's academic performance in school and have a major impact on attendance and behavior. Moll and Gonzales address outreach and conclude that the study of children's family life may lead teachers to better know



the cultures from which their students emerge, allowing them to integrate these family “funds of knowledge” into their curricula [5].

3. Overview and Components of the Child and Community Context Study

In this study, graduate level educators will have the opportunity to observe and study the community and get to know the neighborhood including interviews with community members. Two English learner students will be selected, and they will closely observe these students and their learning, and also engage in informal conversations with them. A highlight of the study will be a home visit in order to discover as much as possible about the student’s experience as an English language learner. Once educators gather all the information and consider what they have learned, they will prepare a context study report addressing each component of the study and the ways that this assignment has informed them about school-community-family partnerships. On successful completion of this project, educators will be able to:

- Discuss and provide examples about the pre-conditions for equitable and democratic language practices in classrooms and communities.
- Recognize the interrelatedness of language, culture, and schooling.
- Understand their own teaching and/or behavior as social, cultural, and political practices with possibilities for transformative action through an understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Recognize and advocate the importance and benefits of family and community involvement in the academic, social and linguistic success of students.

Teachers identify two English language learners who they will get to know out of the classroom as well as in the classroom and inform the appropriate school/district staff of the students they have selected for their study. Next, they will have an opportunity to make observations in the community to understand the environment in which the student lives and the impact that it has on the school and individual’s education. They will spend time walking around and observing in the neighborhood where their students live and record their observations including comments regarding the ways these observations impact the student and school. Then teachers have an opportunity to interview members of the community in order to learn more about their students’ environment and culture. Next, teachers will begin recording focus student school and classroom observations and continue their observations weekly until they submit a description of their findings and experiences. In these observations of focus students’ daily behaviors, teachers consider their interactions, experiences, physical, social, emotional, and intellectual environment as appropriate. What contexts do they believe have a significant impact on an English learner’s development/learning/social integration/self concept etc. at school?

Within the context of classroom activities, teachers are encouraged to observe the interaction of the children with teachers as well as with peers and note the language(s) used by the children to communicate. Educators determine when the children voluntarily participate in instructional activities and when the children are invited to participate. With whom and where do the focus children socialize during recess and in the cafeteria? What language(s) do they use in these contexts? Additional factors to consider are their involvement in specific English Learner programs, the types of support systems available for the student/family regarding language acquisition, the forms of evaluation used for placement decisions, the parent involvement component in the school and classroom and academic language abilities in content areas. As part of this study, educators will have an informal chat with the students that they are focusing on and write up their experiences.

The culminating activity is to conduct the home visit. Teachers will contact the parent/family to agree on an appropriate time convenient for everyone. It is important to be sure that the parent understands the positive purpose of this visit and assignment and does not think that his or her child did anything wrong or unusual. Teachers will have the opportunity to describe the home visit. What insights did they gain into their focus students’ home literacy? How did they relate to the family and how did they respond to the visit? What is the teacher more aware of now about the student than they were before the visit and how does this inform their practice? After gathering all the information, teachers will consider what they have learned and will prepare a context study report addressing each component of the study and the ways that this assignment has informed them about school-community-family partnerships.



4. Outcomes for Educators

The strengths and accomplishments of the Child and Community Context Study are clearly evident in feedback received from students. It is a key component of educator professional development that was carefully designed to engage teachers in developing cultural awareness [6], [7] and intercultural competence [8]. Moreover, the professional development designed approaches for incorporating family and community funds of knowledge gained from home visits, neighborhood walks and community visits. Much of the professional development activities involve teachers' active participation through active learning strategies [9] and working with student data based on a review of professional development programs [10] (Risko et al., 2008) which highlighted that programs that emphasize "learning by doing" can produce better teacher knowledge, beliefs and practices than programs that only address knowledge and beliefs. This Child and Community Context Study was incorporated into the coursework for the *Rural Endorsement Development and Opportunities (REDO)* grant program. Data gathered from graduate students who are teaching in Idaho schools found that *REDO* participants reported increases in their knowledge, confidence, and use of 49 of 50 instructional practices and competencies focused on English learners. Nearly all participants (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that *REDO* was effective in preparing participants to serve English learners. Nearly all participants (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that *REDO* increased participant knowledge and skills related to parent, family, and community engagement [11]. The Child and Community Context Study in conjunction with other rigorous coursework is credited for being a major contributor to these accomplishments.

5. Conclusions and future recommendations

The Child and Community Context Study is a valuable asset that will make English learning come alive and become more relevant as educators experience a firsthand look into the lives of their students. Furthermore, the findings addressing the Child and Community Context Study incorporated into the coursework suggest that *REDO* has met its goals to increase the pool of highly qualified, culturally responsive teachers in Idaho and increase their use and knowledge of evidence-based practices to improve culturally and linguistically diverse students' academic progress, and engagement with parents, families, and communities. As educators expand collaborative educational endeavors, this will empower them to relate to students and impact instruction. Increasing the achievement of English learners is essential and preparing educators to provide quality educational experiences by engaging beyond the classroom is valuable and essential. The innovative strengths of the Child and Community Context Study significantly reinforces transformative action through an understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.

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