

**Strategies for teaching an increasingly diverse population of students:
Do we really know what works?**

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Abstract

In this article, the literature on strategies for teaching a diverse population of students is analysed. Using broad descriptors, “teacher education” and “diverse population”, a search in the ERIC and Academic Search Elite (1985-2003) was conducted to locate relevant literature. The search rendered 100 manuscripts and 13 on this topic. Each source was evaluated on the basis of the following criteria: (a) demographic data of participants, (b) intervention strategies, (c) purpose and significance of the research, and (d) quality of outcomes. Results show that students rarely were adequately described, available research tends to be descriptive and exploratory, and the strategies reported appeared to produce weak efforts and many appear impractical. In all, too few reports have explicitly addressed the specific teaching strategies that work with diverse populations.

Introduction

In 2001, with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the U.S. Department of Education put the spotlight on evidence-based practices to improve classroom intervention and, in turn, student academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The enormity of that challenge is complicated by the rapidly changing demographics of the school age population. Indeed, current figures suggest that certain ethnic groups (i.e., African American, Asian Americans, and Latinos) comprise a large segment of the student population. For that reason, teachers face the challenge of instructing an increasingly diverse student population and relying on strategies and procedures that may not be substantiated.

Briscoe (1991) argued that for those students in the dominant culture, traditional classroom practices largely reflect common sense assumptions about what is best, right, and good. A related assumption is that students from culturally diverse backgrounds must constantly redefine themselves according to what is acceptable to the dominant culture of schools. Unfortunately, as Obiakor, Enwefa, Utley, Obi, Gwalla-Pgisi, and Enwefa (2004) point out, many current classroom practices fail to provide diverse students with the tools and skills they need to be successful in school and the infrastructure of schools is often at odds with the multicultural values of an emerging population of students.

A diverse population is defined as students from the non-dominant social system. By most accounts, when it comes to students from diverse backgrounds there traditionally has been a dearth of quality research (Henderson, 1998). These groups include immigrant children, children with disabilities, and children from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Many of these same students have been marginalized as at-risk, performed poorly according to standards of the dominant culture and, in turn, prone to dropping out of school. With the rapidly growing diversity among students, there is a tremendous need to infuse multicultural education into the curriculum of teacher education and in-service professional development. Evidence-based teaching strategies for students from diverse backgrounds are still being left behind. Whitehurst (2003) reports the current state of classroom instruction as 90 percent professional wisdom based on experience and 10 percent empirical research. Not surprisingly,

former Secretary of Education Paige called for increased accountability and “doing what works” to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities, a significant percentage of whom are from diverse backgrounds. Given that, it is useful to conduct an analysis of the literature on teaching an increasingly diverse population of students. In what follows, I summarize the major findings of research on teaching strategies that work for student diversity. Drawing upon a review, there is a conclusion with a series of recommendations on possible ways to increase evidence-based research on diverse populations of students.

Literature on Instructional Practices

Research on instructional strategies and students from a culturally and linguistically background has followed several pathways. Early work focused on the use of modeling strategies to promote academic skills of diverse learners. For example, Sileo and Prater (1998) demonstrated the worth of various forms of modeling to promote skill acquisition of students in the content areas of arithmetic, spelling, reading, expressive language, and handwriting. Additional work by Briscoe (1991), Gable and colleagues (1992, 1993, 1997), and Forsten and Hollas (2002) dealt with a range of topics including: skills generalization, academic, problem-solving, social skills instruction and cognitive behavior change techniques.

Among the popular themes of the current literature on teaching students from diverse backgrounds are the benefits that stem from differentiated instruction. However, closer examination reveals that few authorities have addressed discrete aspects of multicultural classroom intervention. While various authors have addressed the reasons for differential instruction, I found only a modest number of empirical investigations that have focused on differentiated instruction. For instance, Tomlinson (1995) examined the experience of a middle school faculty who were mandated to provide differentiated instruction to academically diverse learners, including students identified as gifted. Her results suggest that educators can give students with varying abilities equal but not necessarily identical opportunity for growth.

A review of the literature uncovered a substantial body of expert opinion on how to implement differentiated instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. Forsten and Hollas (2002) provided a set of “classroom-tested” strategies for different students in grades K-8. The authors gave specific ideas and materials to support the major strategies including curriculum compacting, tiered activities, learning centers, flexible grouping, and mentoring. The authors assert that a differentiated classroom can reach many more students by responding to their individual abilities, disabilities, and cultural and linguistically backgrounds. The literature also included discussion on the characteristics of students that distinguish those who are learning English as a second language (Sheppard, 2001). Descriptions of evidence based best practices including cooperative learning, self-determination, explicit instruction, curriculum-based assessment, pre-corrective instructional management, and peer support (King-Sears, 1997). Furthermore, various authors have discussed ways to facilitate maintenance and generalization of academic skills (Gable, 1992); ways to overlap social and academic teaching/learning (Gunter, Denny, & Venn, 2000); and alternative grading, practices for students with diverse learning needs (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). Finally, several discussions emphasized recent strategies for teachers to coordinate classrooms to include linguistically and culturally diverse students (Heydon, 2003).

Studies on Teaching Strategies for Student Diversity

According to Gollnick (1995), most teacher preparation efforts to address multicultural education occur in a rather superficial fashion (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For instance, existing studies focused on primarily race rather than cultural/linguistic diversity (Grant & Secada, 1990). In 1996, Artiles conducted a systematic analysis of empirical literature on multicultural education. There has not been enough discussion on teaching strategies for a diverse population of students. This dearth of information is disappointing in that in many schools children from diverse backgrounds constitute the majority population.

Research Methodology and Studies on Evidenced-Based Practices

One reason to review the empirical literature on best practices for teaching a diverse population of students is to provide evidence that can be used in future studies and policy decision making. Articles were selected for this review if they met the following criteria:

1. Reflected empirically investigation- either quantitative or qualitative designs.
2. The independent variable was teaching strategies and the dependent variable was a diverse student population, and
3. The student population included culturally and/or linguistically diverse students, at risk youths, low SES, and students with special needs.

A search in ERIC and Academic Search Elite (1985-2003) was conducted. Using broad descriptors to locate more entries, using the descriptors “teacher education” and “diverse population”. The report summarizes the result of the search engine using these descriptors. The search produced 100 articles, 44 articles of which focused on a diverse student population. In applying the aforementioned selection criteria, the number of empirical articles was reduced to 13 publications. It contains of themes, trends, and focuses on empirical research in teacher education and diverse population.

An analysis of a stepwise literature yielded a modest body of empirical evidence relating specifically to a culturally and linguistically diverse population of students. An examination of these studies (N= 13), rendered mixed effects. There are 10 articles from 1994-2003 (n1=10), 3 articles from 1983-1993, (n2=3), a total of 13 empirical studies (n3=13) on teaching strategies to diverse population. More than half (62.5%) of these studies were descriptive and exploratory in nature, while 37.5% are experimental studies with a control group.

Each of the studies was evaluated against the following criterion: demographic data of participants, strategies studied, purposes and significance of the research, data measurement method and what works, the results of which are summarized in Table 1.

There were several themes that emerged from the analyses of this research:

1. Teaching strategies: web-based lesson templates to integrate general and special education (Murry & Murry, 2000); use of a story-based creative art curriculum derived from a variety of cultural and ethnic traditions (Fowler, 2000); choice-based approaches to service learning for a diverse racial secondary population (Mayhew, 2000); reflective strategies (Stough, 2000); case study methodology to include diverse learners (Andrews, 1997); and cooperative learning and high-risk group (Iloa, 1991).
2. The impact of cultural training: 3-part cultural competency training (Langelier, 1996); program evaluation and fair grading practices (Oliver, 1995); and programming for non-English speaking students (Blau, 1993).
3. Competencies for working with diverse population (Luckner & Carter, 2001).

The results of the review suggest a lack of clear purpose for many of the studies, as well as ambiguous outcomes, both of which leave many questions unanswered. Regarding what works with diverse students, some recommended teaching strategies (e.g., whole language instruction, co-operative learning, etc.) appear to be overshadowed by unanswered question concerns regarding their universal applicability (Hitton, 1999). Many suggested strategies appeared weak and impractical for applied settings, it follows that teacher involvement in the formulation of research questions that are relevant to classroom instruction is desperately needed.

The bulk of the available literature on teaching a diverse student population reflects a lack of sound research methodology. That is, more than 50% of the studies I reviewed failed to describe adequately the demographics of the target population. The interventions cited tended to focus on mainstream populations of children who are white, middle class, urban, and regular education students. The studies had an average sample size of 30, one study had 233 educators and one had a sample of 6000 students. Surprisingly, the demographic data of the participants from the largest study were not specified. Viewed together, evidence suggests that researchers have largely failed to target diverse student's population and to adhere to scientific methodology. Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that some authors have extrapolated too much information from too few studies with a strong scientific basis.

Discussion

Notwithstanding an increasingly diverse student population, it is yet to be determined whether available evidence based procedures are equally effective for all students. The modest number of studies that have focused on culturally and linguistically diverse aspects of instruction lack enough specificity regarding the relevant dimensions of classroom instruction. Few reports have explicitly addressed teaching strategies that has been proven to work. Finally, many of the available studies have relied on quantitative approaches in which questionnaires and surveys were used. Given this modest empirical basis, classroom personnel must rely on a pool of strategies/procedures that may not fit the diverse needs of today's students, practice which is at odds with mandates contained in No Child Left Behind Act.

The review of the literature suggests that most research on teaching to a diverse population has relied on descriptive measures on "what works" (see example 2). In order to capture a better understanding of teaching an increasingly diverse student population, studies that integrate both quantitative and qualitative methods, in a culturally sensitive manner, might be helpful. This combined investigative approach should allow us to better determine teaching efficacy, evaluate student performance, and determine what works best for an increasingly more diverse population of students.

In an age of mounting pressure for educational accountability, punctuated by emphasis on high-stakes testing, we must redouble efforts, to document the effectiveness of classroom instruction and make timely changes, as needed. A disproportionate number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are at-risk for school failure (Goldstein, 1995). Unless or until we establish a pool of proven effective strategies, that align with relevant factors that singly or collectively define two positive learning experiences, we will struggle to improve their opportunities for success in school and beyond.

There are several limitations to the present review. First, there are more and most studies being conducted, in turn, which should produce a larger number of strategies that hold

potential for positively impacting pupil performance and promising strategies. Accordingly, any conclusions drawn must be viewed as tentative. Even so, the review of available research suggests the following:

1. The bulk of empirical research on teaching diverse population lacks methodological soundness.
2. Most of the available research tends to be descriptive and exploratory.
3. Many of the strategies studied appear weak and/or impractical; few authors explicitly addressed the underlying teaching strategy that works for a specific population of students.
4. Much of the existing research failed to adequately describe the characteristics of population under investigation.

In sum, teacher educators, staff development specialists, special and general educators must be “critical consumers” of the best practices literature as it relates to a diverse student population. If school personnel are to achieve latter goal, researchers and practitioners must collaborate to assure that so-called “evidence-based practice” apply equally to all students. Across time, then simple expectation to provide children educational opportunities has been supplanted by the more demanding expectation of successful teaching and learning.

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