DIS/ABLING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: POSITIONING SHIFTS IN A TEACHER DEVELOPMENT COURSE

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Mots-clés

Keywords

Résumé

Cet article examine, à travers une étude de cas, l'influence d'un cours de perfectionnement professionnel ciblé sur les perceptions d'un enseignant de milieu rural à l'égard d'un apprenant de langue anglaise (ALA). Il a pour but de fournir une perspective analytique historique et culturelle sur l'effet d'une pédagogie du handicap sur la perception de la capacité d'un ALA. La discussion porte sur la construction sociale de la différence, du déficit et de l'(in)capacité. L'analyse montre comment un enseignant a repositionné un élève étiqueté comme ayant des troubles de l'apprentissage en tant qu'élève compétent. Les résultats suggèrent qu'une meilleure compréhension de l'enseignement de la langue seconde peut aider les enseignants à créer des contextes d'apprentissage qui mettent à jour des capacités non reconnues auparavant.

Abstract

This case study examines the influence of a targeted professional development (PD) course on a rural teacher's perceptions of an English Language Learner (ELL). The purpose of this article is to contribute a cultural-historical analytical perspective on the effect of dis/abling pedagogy on the perception of an ELL's ability. Discussion includes social construction of difference, deficit, and dis/ability. Findings highlight how one teacher repositioned a student labeled learning disabled (LD) as a capable student. Results suggest an increased understanding of second language instruction may assist teachers in creating learning contexts that reveal previously unrecognized capabilities.

Introduction

This article grapples with the pedagogical implications of identifying a student as first and foremost either a dis/abled student or an English learner. This study is a response to the problem that in the US, the percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) placed in Special Education settings is greater than their representation in schools as a whole (Artiles, 2011). Yet, teachers generally feel unprepared to teach their English Language Learner (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly & Callahan, 2003). The percentage of students speaking a language other than English at home is now at 25% nationwide (Williams, 2014). Yet, the opportunities for professional development (PD) learning for in-service teachers has declined dramatically in the last two decades (Reutzal & Clark, 2014). Current and future teachers of ELLs must be provided with PD opportunities that help them not only gain necessary understanding of their students but also learn appropriate second language acquisition (SLA) precepts and related instructional concepts grounded in them.

In the following sections, I share and analyze excerpts from Ellen's blog entries and conversations that took place during hour-long PD meetings to focus specifically on Ellen's developing understanding of the ways in which shifting the context of her student's learning environment revealed specific capabilities for which she was previously unaware. Originating from the data of a larger study addressing the over-representation of ELLs in special education (Black-Hults, 2015), this instrumental case study specifically explores the following research question: How does short-term explicit PD focused on second language instructional context and practices affect the discourse of teachers when characterizing ELLs? This article begins by explaining issues of disability and second-language learning in the US. Next, I discuss the pedagogical problem of the socially-constructed notion of the "ELL Disability," or the "English Language Learner Disability," and demonstrate how this notion causes difficulties for the participant-teachers and their students. The theoretical framework for the study is then described, followed by a description of the context and participants. The study's methods and findings are reported, and its implications are represented. Finally, I demonstrate how Ellen began to use new instructional methods based on her understanding of her student's developing language and linguistic needs. Literature reviewed are interwoven into the discussion of findings. All participant names, as well as that of the schools and school district, have been replaced by pseudonyms.

1. Disability, Dis/ability, Dis/able, and the Instruction of ELLs

In this article, I draw specifically on the terms "disability," "dis/ability," and "dis/able." I use "disability" to refer to "a condition or function judged to be significantly impaired relative to the usual standard [i.e. culturally constructed] of an individual or group" (disabled-world.com) in the particular societies in which that condition or function is relevant. I employ "dis/ability" to foreground the social response to disability that creates additional limits, restricts access to necessary resources, and denies a person with a disability human rights. Finally, I use "dis/able" to suggest the act of limiting the abilities of a person with or without a disability. The above definitions reflect my attempt to reconcile multiple voices in various disability communities in ways that make visible my own intentions. I do not deny the existence of very real disabilities—yet in this study I am foregrounding the discourse and actions that dis/able students who may or may not have disabilities.

When the word disability is attached to a child, the perceived fixed nature of the dis/ability trumps the dynamic potential of language development. In other words, when students experience problems the disability label—whether real or perceived—limits expectations of full participation (Collins, 2013). The students' possibilities become limited because disability is considered to be a thing that the students have, or that has the students (McDermott, 1993), and the students do not grow out of it.

Developing English language proficiency is not dis/abling in and of itself, although it is possible to dis/able ELLs through inappropriate pedagogical practices. Yet the very notion of disability is problematic because it associates difference with deficit. When disability, difference, and bilingual/biliteracy development are conflated, a new concept is developed—the idea that anything short of full proficiency in the second language is a deficit difference—and that it is thus reasonable for a teacher to expect from his or her ELL poor outcomes and an inability to meet the same learning objectives as his or her peers. The "ELL Disability" is a term I have invented here to represent the dis/abling notion that students who have less than a native-like fluency in the L2 of English have the equivalent of a cognitive disability—in other words, a kind of learning disorder.

Finally, I use the term English Language Learners because it is the most commonly used term in U.S. discussions of the education of children learning English as a second language.

2. Sociocultural Theory and Disability Studies in Education

This research project was grounded in sociocultural understanding of learning, development, mediation, and disability or dis/ability. To understand ways the study's PD intervention accomplished its goals requires consideration of sociocultural notions of learning and development.

Generally speaking, sociocultural theory (SCT) suggests that ability is fluid—contextualized and mediated by tools. Abilities that are evident in one cultural context may appear or disappear in others (Cole, 2005). Wertsch (2005) has observed that this may be a function of whether a given person is able to apply his or her knowledge to novel situations, a cognitive skill that formal schooling fills in myriad cultural contexts. Indeed, the role of education in developing various higher order thinking skills is a common theme in SCT scholarship. However, the extent to which schools actually perform this function varies, especially for students perceived by administrators and teachers as "different."

I also draw from scholars in the field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) whose work, while not explicitly socio-cultural, aligns with its precepts. In particular, this study draws from work by respected DSE scholars such as Nadeen Ruiz (1995), Alfredo Artiles (2011), and R. P. McDermott (1993), as well as scholars drawing specifically from sociocultural theory such as Dierdre Martin (2009). The emphasis in DSE on uncovering exactly what students can do at a given time, with the expectation that effective instruction will enable additional growth, meshes well with the SCT precept that all learning is developmental and all learners may develop cognitively (and otherwise) when provided with the right tools and social context.

According to DSE, teachers should build their lessons on these capabilities, with differentiation based on developing abilities of individual students and across all students. This understanding of instructional practices is thus inclusive: It presumes that all students in the class are continually developing new abilities that can be supported in various group and individual ways (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985).

3. Methods

This instrumental case study (Grandy, 2010; Stake, 1995) examined the influence of a targeted PD course on a rural teacher's perceptions (and thus

positioning) of an ELL. It was guided by the following research question: How does short-term explicit PD concerning second-language instructional context and practices affect the discourse of teachers when characterizing ELLs?

3.1 Study Design

An instrumental case study design was chosen in order to effectively analyze the pedagogical implications of one teacher's understanding of her student's learning disability and the impact of her developing understanding of second-language acquisition and instruction.

I used purposeful sampling to identify a rich case to facilitate a discussion of the intersection of the two primary themes emerging from the data: the positioning of students as capable or disabled, and the conflation of disability with a perception of underdevelopment of English language proficiency. The teacher-participant who was identified as the focus of the study was Ellen, an 8th-grade social studies teacher focusing on an ELL, Amos, who was identified as having a non-specified learning disability (LD).

This case study is bounded by the time and activities of the PD course described above. The case of Ellen's shift in discourse cannot be clearly separated from the time and context in which it occurred. Thus, I have called attention to small leaps in development suggested by the discourse of that moment within the context of the timeline of the course.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The participants were three full-time teachers and one school counselor from the rural Riverview School District—representing the elementary school, middle school, and high school of the New Destination schools of the city of Riverton. This district experienced ongoing budget difficulties over the previous four years, resulting in continuing cuts to their ESL program.

Riverview School District experienced relatively stable enrollment over the previous 20 years, with a decrease of fewer than 300 students over the period. However, over the same period, particularly during the last decade, the district shifted from one student identified as Hispanic or Latino/a to 142 students thus classified, with

64 of its 3 092 students enrolled in the ESL program. A large majority of these students had immigrated from North America's southern regions and Central America.

3.3 Context

The context of this case study is a PD course created to increase the effectiveness of the participants' pedagogical practices by providing new knowledge about ELLs. Throughout the course, I acted as researcher and PD designer as well as instructor, mediating the teachers' developing understanding of second-language instruction and development and supporting their relationships with their ELLs.

3.4 Procedures

The following procedures were followed in the development and implementation of the study:

1. Solicited volunteers who wanted to better understand and teach their English Language Learners.
2. Gathered participant questions and concerns in self-reported case studies of their focus student.
3. Matched these questions and concerns to essential knowledge that teachers of English Language Learners need to have (Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).
4. Created a syllabus from this list of matches and shared it with the participants so they could see how the information in the PD course addressed their specific questions and concerns. (See appendix for a list of the assigned readings.) These readings were supplemented with explanations of Cummins' work on academic vocabulary and Krashen's theory of comprehensible input.
5. Met as a Professional Learning Community, with the researcher as mediator, using reading materials, discussion, videos, and other tools to mediate teacher learning.
6. Teachers implemented their learning in their classrooms.
7. Teachers reflected and discussed their thinking in the meetings and in private blogs.

3.5 Data Sources

The data for this study consisted primarily of participants' spoken and written discourse, as collected over 20 hours spent on site with participants. Data collection for this instrumental case study included 406 minutes of audio-recorded and professionally transcribed discussion that occurred during my weekly meetings with the participants; ethnographic field notes written within 15 minutes of the conclusion of individual and group interviews based on notes taken during five unrecorded interviews; and reflective writing by the teacher-participants in their individual password-protected blogs.

3.6 Analysis

This study employed a thematic analysis of discursive data. As I analyzed the data I made inferences about its meaning—both at the surface level and in light of underlying assumptions revealed about the subject of the discourse and the other participants in the conversation—as well as the intent and/or objectives of the discursive acts (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006).

I began my analysis with an initial reading of all the written data. In a second close reading, I coded the text noting connections to course content, teacher concerns, and other spoken or written selections that related meaningfully to teaching, teachers, learning, and/or students. From this analysis, I identified themes using axial coding, with each theme being named and defined.

I then created a timeline (see Figure 1) to show the location in the data where each reference occurred. The timeline made visible the emergence of specific thematic discourse at their points of entry in the case study and the multiple points of intersection for the themes of deficit, capability, positioning, and emerging English language proficiency. For the purpose of providing a visual representation of Ellen's development during the course, I conclude this section with the following timeline:

Timeline: Participants' Development of the Connection of Context to Capability
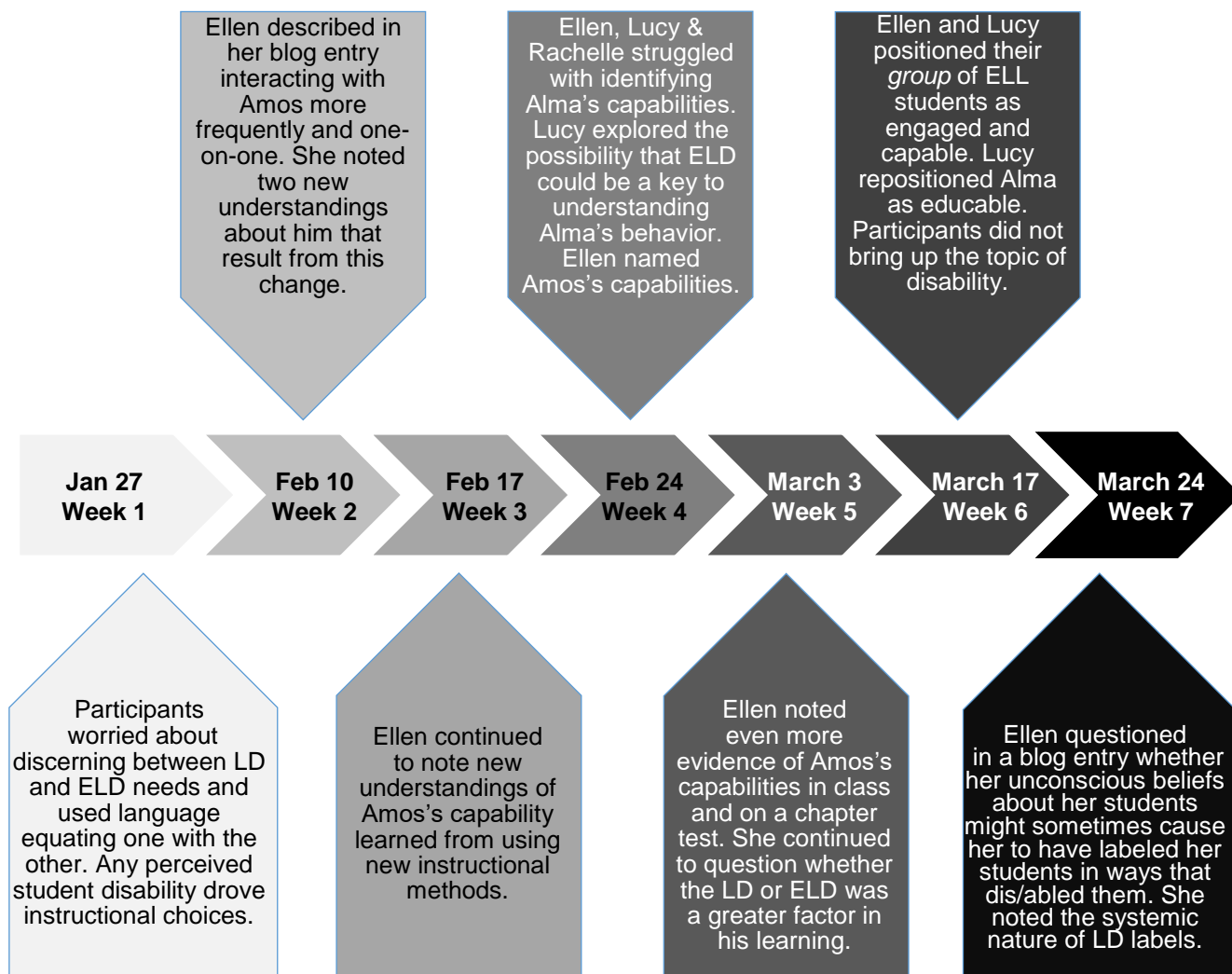
ELD: English language development

Figure 1. Timeline: Participants' Development of the Connection of Context to Capability

4. The Pedagogical Problem of the "ELL Disability": Ellen and Amos

In this first section, I begin by showing how teachers voice their confusion over the two notions and then discuss pedagogical decisions that are made as a result of the lack of clarity. References to related literature and discussion are interwoven into the analysis. In this first excerpt from the first week, Ellen had just begun to describe Amos to the group. Ellen attempted to answer my question about what instructional strategies were effective for him.

Excerpt 1: Week 1, Jan. 27

Ellen: Well, with Amos, there's language issues I think, and there's learning issues. So, I give him a page number and paragraphs to access information from the book.

Ellen said that Amos had two issues—a language issue and a learning issue. The strategy that she described, however, was one that the school had determined would be applied to all students who were diagnosed with the latter of the two issues, a learning disability. In Blog Excerpts 1 & 2 (below), Ellen explained that the primary "symptoms" of Amos's disability were a lack of attention and problems with reading comprehension. This placed Amos in the majority of ELLs identified with a disability, "as the majority have [learning disability] with reading difficulties as the core problem (56%)" (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006, p. 109). Ellen did not have strategies to address the former of Amos's issues, his "language issues." Although she separated out the two issues, the one that was addressed was the learning disability. Amos was not receiving language support in Ellen's classroom or with the ESL specialist. When considering ELLs who have been identified as having disabilities, it is *common* for language supports to be removed and strategies designed for learners with disabilities to take their place (Klingner, *et al.* 2006, p. 109). However, this practice is both illegal and pedagogically oppressive. In Amos's case, he was receiving some time each day in a learning support room. His disability label determined the kind of instruction he received.

To return to Excerpt 1, Ellen's implicit question was: Is Amos the dis/abled student type or the ELL type? At this point, Ellen was unable to discern the difference,

so the notion of "ELL Disability" guided her instructional decisions, making the notion of difference as deficit (dis/abled) dominant.

A belief that instruction for students with disabilities and emergent language learners is interchangeable puts both the student and the teacher in a situation where they are set up to fail. Since the teacher believes that the accommodations across her or his groups of students with various learning differences will be equally successful, s/he attributes failure on the part of the ELL to a problem in the student rather than in the pedagogical approach taken. This is an example of what Collins (2013) calls ability profiling—using perceived differences in the child to draw conclusions about the potential abilities of the person. In the case of the ELL, this ability profiling is embedded in the concepts of the "ELL Disability" and is used to determine appropriate accommodations or scaffolds. A pedagogical mismatch dis/ables the student and teacher and may result in an inaccurate "diagnosis" of disability.

In the following excerpt from week four, Ellen and Lucy discuss Lucy's student, Alma. Alma has had 4,5 years of formal schooling and instruction in English. She is in 10th grade, and this is her second year in Lucy's 9th-grade science class. Alma has not been identified as disabled, but Lucy questions whether Alma may have unidentified disabilities.

Excerpt 2: Week 4, Feb. 24

Ellen: It sounds a lot like working with a learning support student, although [Alma] has a capacity to move to a certain level where some learning support students are just as a certain level, but where you have to minimalize it in such a way that they're still participating, but at a much different level than—

When Ellen talked about learning support students as being "just at a certain level," she was referring to the level as a fixed characteristic. In other words, Ellen unconsciously engaged ability profiling with students identified as "learning support" as always being at a certain level—having less learning ability—regardless of context. However, Ellen suggested that Alma, as an ELL, "has a capacity to move to a certain level," which implied room for further development.

In her comment, Ellen is limited by the belief she had acquired from the dominant educational understanding of learning disabilities and therefore the belief that when she saw this symptom, disability should be suspected. When the problem is considered to reside in the child, the teacher feels disempowered to address it. She or he is bound by the belief that a change in instructional pedagogy that would be appropriate for an ELL will not make a difference because the disability will limit the effectiveness of the instructional method. In other words, because disability is viewed as a static, fixed characteristic that cannot be changed, yet the process of language learning is viewed as potentially transient, the notion of disability bound up in the "ELL Disability" becomes the defeating obstacle.

5. Unbinding Students and Teachers Trapped by "ELL Disability"

Because of the commonplace quality of the "ELL Disability," finding new ways to think about learning differences in children developing bilingual and biliteracy skills must be purposeful. In this study, only in seeing the effects of appropriate instruction on their ELLs did the participants begin to trouble the "ELL Disability" notion. However, the developing ideas of capability and the significance of the language-learning needs were still new enough as to be unstable and inconsistently applied.

The next excerpt is taken from Ellen's blog entry immediately following our initial discussion.

Blog Excerpt 1

> *I interacted with [Amos] more and helped more one on one than I have before. [Amos] and his partner both have IEPs [individualized education plans] and received time in resource to read the material with each other as well. I realized how very little [Amos] understands. He was able to answer questions I asked him after I read a paragraph to him. (Blog Entry, January 31)*

Ellen revealed that she was empowered by this meeting to set aside the question of how to teach Amos, her student with an "ELL Disability," and instead adopt a new strategy that worked for him. In doing so, she learned for herself something that she had heretofore depended on the Special Education specialist to provide for her—an understanding of her student's ability to comprehend grade-level text. She noticed how this changed for him when she saw progress four weeks later:

Blog Excerpt 2

> *I have seen a huge difference in [Amos] since I have been trying different strategies in class. He is more verbal than ever before—interacting with others and asking questions. He can be easily distracted (part of the learning support identification), but he is easily brought back on task. I give this student page numbers and paragraphs on his assignments and this helps him find answers, but he is not always correct with his answers…a symptom of language comprehension or learning problems? (Blog Entry, February 27)*

The second post demonstrated a slight shift in her thinking. While she was still pondering the source of a problem—language-learning or learning in general—she now worded her inquiry differently. At this point, Ellen used the broader phrase "language" instead of "reading." This shift was important because for Ellen, difficulties with language-learning were difficulties she could address through one of her new reading strategies: the use of graphic organizers, paired and cooperative learning arrangements, or more time spent talking directly and one-on-one to the student about the questions he or she had generated.

Ellen had also begun to develop a counter-story to the disability label. The belief that Amos could be "easily brought back on task" was in opposition to Amos's dis/ability. Ellen was unconsciously gathering data on Amos's capabilities that contradict the learning disability label. Ellen demonstrated in the next excerpt that she recognized changes in Amos as a result of the alterations she had made to his learning context:

Blog Excerpt 3

> *In the past weeks, I have seen the result of spending more time on vocabulary and partner reading. Most of my students seem to have improved in their understanding of the content material. The students also worked on an Internet search packet and [Amos] showed a level of persistence in completing the packet that I have not previously witnessed. While this student persisted in getting his work done, I did find out that he has trouble using a timeline for information. Knowledge of his challenges will help me in the future to offer more help. Also, I have tried being more specific with my directions and expectations. I have also been trying to integrate questions throughout my lessons to gauge comprehension of the material we are working on. (Blog Entry, March 14)*

Ellen recognized here concrete ways in which improved accessibility translated into increased engagement and persistence on Amos's part. As she described his work on

the Internet research project, she was able to name some of the specific changes she had made to her instruction in order to elicit this change. In doing so, she created a counter-narrative to that of Amos as a student deficient in attention; she also effectively undercut her earlier assertion that Amos "would be hard to impact." Kliewer et al. (2004) describe their use of the term literacies as "observable, tactile, or otherwise graphically knowable semiotic systems used as social tools to bring forth and give literate shape to narrative' (387). By adding new literacies (digital content) to the classroom, Ellen provided Amos with another way to access texts. His behavior in this context countered the "easily distracted" label.

As Ellen achieved a better perspective on Amos's abilities, she realized she is capable of directly addressing difficulties that previously seemed unresolvable. In this way, she freed herself from the power of the word disability and came to see Amos as a student whose learning is dynamic and responsive.

Conclusion

An important result of this study is that it illustrates the crucial role of conceptually based PD courses. Although teachers were provided with individual activities illustrating specific concepts—for example, how to provide comprehensible input—the primary focus of the PLC was to explore how this specific concept could be put in dialogue with the pedagogy of supporting ELLs in acquiring academic language skills. It is unreasonable and potentially dangerous to stop seeking to discover actual learning disability in ELLs. Students with learning disabilites have a legal right to having those needs met. Yet teachers cannot identify learning disability accurately without an attendant robust understanding of second-language acquisition and related instructional design. SCT posits that transformative learning cannot take place if the learner does not understand both the conceptual and experiential levels of a given skill or idea. In order for teacher-participants of this study to experience the ideas as meaningful, they needed support from each other as well as from me to help them recognize how they could effect change in the learning contexts of their ELLs, as well as how their own and their students' capabilities reflected those changes.

Education professionals at each school must consciously make the decision to discard deficit discourses about ELLs, with the support of PD that provides new ways of talking about the excitement and the frustration of teaching so that the latter does

not become the discourse. The focus should remain on designing robust lessons that provide multiple points of entry and multiple ways for students to show their developing knowledge and skills.

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Appendix : Course Readings

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