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CONTEXTUALIZING TEACHING PRACTICES IN A DIVERSIFIED CLASSROOM: AN ASSESSMENT

Abstract:

ABSTRACT

Managing diverse populations is one great challenge facing the Philippine society. Educators affirm that the classroom is diverse, but continue to treat all learners alike while paying lip service to the principle of diversity. This study looked into the extent by which teachers contextualize teaching and learning practices amidst diversity in cognitive preference modality and personal, academic status, demographic profile, and socio-economic condition. Teacher Education students from the six state universities and colleges in the Cordillera Administrative Region (n=715) were randomly selected to assess teachers regarding their level of effectiveness in managing diversity in various areas of pedagogical approaches while teachers (n=45) were purposively selected to validate data through a focused group discussion. Results show that teachers were competent but insufficiently observe students' preferred teaching practices (mean=3.29, SD=.37), management of diverse learning environment (mean=3.21; SD=.46), and accommodation of diversity (mean=3.24, SD=.47). Analysis of variance and t-test for independent means revealed significant differences ($p<.05$) in ratings according to the respondents' cognitive modality, gender, ethnicity, degree program, academic status, and socio-economic condition. These variables bring about diversity in the classroom. A model for improving instructional practices and classroom management efforts addressing areas in teaching diversified group of learners is devised.

Keywords:

classroom diversity, teaching practices, differentiated instruction

Background of the Study

The challenge of the 21st century in the field of Education is to maintain the distinctiveness of learning at the tertiary level and to enhance teaching to improve students' learning. Virtually all higher education institutions have mission statements that emphasize the importance of learning and teaching. Several programs in education evolved leading teachers to develop strategies in their teaching plans and establish classroom activities for this purpose. In pursuit of a national strategy of excellence, enhancement and promotion of learning and teaching must be a priority for all tertiary education.

Every nation's changing cultural demographics are playing a critical role in teacher preparation leading towards school success. The learners of the future will be even more socially, economically, and educationally diverse than ever before (Roberts, 1993); and more will have a cultural and ethnic membership. Promoting and managing diverse populations is the next great challenge facing the Philippine society and its schools.

Educators do not believe that all learners are the same,but too often educators continue to treat all learners alike while paying lip service to the principle of diversity. Most schools still function as if the students were the same. Teachers given the task of educating large numbers of people, efficiency justifies some consistency and uniformity in the process. Even more valid is the argument for general standards and equality across schools, districts and regions. This is a realistic perspective, but to better match beliefs about diversity with practice, we must address the imbalance between uniformity and diversity. Sameness is always easier to accommodate than difference, and education practices have been developed to consciously promote the same education for all students. There are a few teaching models that appropriately accommodate both consistent educational values and human diversity.

The need to address the balance between uniformity and diversity is urgent because the current imbalance is consistently damaging to many learners and teachers. The emphasis on uniformity is a serious disadvantage for students whose culture has taught them behaviors and beliefs that are different from the norms of majority culture most often emphasized in schools. All schools are into the trend of inclusivity in classrooms. It is unrealistic to expect that a particular approach will be successful for all learners. Teachers are held accountable for thoughtful planning using distinct approaches to teaching methods, content instruction, and curriculum organization for a specific group of learners.

It is along this premise that the research team is prompted to study the educational context for diversity in the College of Teacher Education. With this, the teaching style is one of the major parameters.

Conceptual Framework

The study hinges on the effect of cognitive preference modality and preferred pedagogical approaches, particularly in terms of classroom teaching practices, management of learning environment, and accommodation of diversity. Construed as the independent variable of the study included the cognitive learning strategies of education students which set a groundwork of identifying their learning preferences relative to the

teaching practices, management of a learning environment and accommodation of diversified classroom.Aside from cognitive preference modality, the framework posits that classroom diversity is affected by factors such as the personal, academic, demographic, and socio-economic conditions of students. Such factors draw the teaching strategies used by the teacher. Such variables under each major factorwere measured.

Objectives of the Study

This study draws on analysis of current learning and teaching strategy documentation to examine how teachers use learning and teaching strategies. It also examined the perceived purpose of these strategies. Specifically, this study aimed todetermine students' cognitive preference modality for learning; identify the level of adequacy and competency of teachers along classroom teaching practices, management of learning environment, and accommodation of diversity in the classroom; ascertain differences in level of adequacy and competency among teachers as perceived by students grouped according to cognitive preference modality; and determine differences in level of adequacy and competency among teachers as perceived by students grouped according to personal profile (age, gender), academic profile (degree, academic status), demographic profile (ethnicity), and socio-economic condition (parents' jobs, family monthly income, and family size).

Methodology

Causal-comparative (*ex-post facto*) research design was employed. The study was conducted in the Cordillera Administrative Region and participated by six state colleges and universities (tagged as SUC A-F). Institutions were selected on the basis that their Teacher Education programs are similar, thereby ensuring objective based on the context of teaching in a diversified classroom.Respondents were randomly selected third year students (n=715) enrolled during the second semester of school year 2013-2014 in either Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) or Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) programs. Data were gathered using a survey questionnaire, which consisted of *four* parts: profile,cognitive preference modality, teachers' pedagogical approaches; and open-ended questions on students' preferred teaching strategies. The instrument was pilot tested and was found to have acceptable reliability coefficient ($\alpha > 0.90$). Validation of data was conducted through a focused group discussion with at least 10 teachers from each of the six SUCs. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency count, percent, mean, and standard deviation). Hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance using t-test and analysis of variance with post-hoc analysis (Tukey's HSD) when appropriate.

Results and Discussions

Analysis was done based on the respondents' scores in the Perceptual Learning Skills questionnaire. Scores ranging from 33 to 40 in a particular cognitive modality is considered a major learning style of the respondent; 20 to 32, minor; and 5 to 20, negligible. Among the nine learning styles, visual-numerical was found to be dominant among the respondents (f=348, 48.67%). Following in decreasing order of frequency

(f=185, 25.87); visual language (f=173, 24.20); auditory-numerical (f=146, 20.42); expressiveness oral (f=103, 18.46%); expressiveness-written (f=103, 14.41%), and auditory-language (f=74, 10.35%). The same trend was observed among the different institutions, except for SUC B whose students are mostly kinesthetic-tactile.Results suggest that students in the different teacher education institutions in the Cordilleras learn best by *vision*, especially when numbers are involved. This finding specifically indicates that visual aids are requisites in teaching lessons that contain numerical figures, which may be in the form of mathematical calculations, formula derivations, and statistical facts. Mathematics is *abstract* by nature (Wilson &Latterell, n.d.). As such, students feel that numbers should be *concretized* by teaching mathematical concepts with visual materials.On the other hand, auditory language was found to be the *least* dominant learning style. This finding implies that only a few students learn best by hearing words. Results indicate that conventional teaching methods, such as lecture, may actually be effective but *only* to a small number of students in a class.

Students rated their teachers in terms of adequacy and competency of use of pedagogical approaches. In this study, pedagogical approaches were classified into three aspects, namely *Classroom Teaching Practices, Learning Environment, and Accommodation of Diversity in the Classroom.*Generally, respondents regarded their teachers to be highly adequate and competent (HAd) in terms of *classroom teaching practices* (mean=3.29), while adequate but insufficient (Ad) in terms of *management of learning environment* (mean=3.19) and *accommodation of diversity in the classroom* (mean=3.24). Results indicate that students regard teachers as being capable in terms of content and execution of teaching strategies; however, students feel that teachers do not perform the good practices as much, especially as regards supervision of learning environment and adaptation of diversity in the classroom.

Respondents were asked regarding the teaching strategies that they prefer. Answers to the question were developed into six themes, namely *lecture*, *demonstration*, *eclectic*, *interactive-cooperative learning*, *technology-assisted instruction*, and *Socratic*.*Lecture*was preferred by most respondents (f=296, 41.40%) over other teaching methods. Lecture is considered a classic teaching method, which means that it is one of the strategies whose effectiveness has been tested by time. However, profound preference for lecture signifies that students tend to take the role of the *passive receiver* inside the classroom. This finding is a clear manifestation that students favor teaching strategies that “feed” them up with information but require none or little participation from them. Lecture is liked among most students because it demands lesser or no effort at all. The conventional definition of teaching might also be contributory to the partiality of students for lecture. For them, teaching is equivalent to lecturing, which involves a teacher who “gives” out information and students who “receive” such information. It is also likely that students were taught traditionally using the lecture method in their earlier years in school, such that they have been used to it and regarded it as an inevitable and essential part of the learning process.Students’ preference for lecture could be traced from students’ cultural attributes. It is considered second-nature for Cordillerans to “listen” as this is their way of showing respect to the elders of the tribe who are looked up upon as source of wisdom, knowledge, and admonition to the younger generation.Teaching methods that followed in descending order of frequency are *demonstration*or show-and-tell (f=139, 19.44%), *eclectic* or varied (f=102, 14.27%), *interactive-cooperative*or activity-based (f=100, 13.99%), *technology-aided instruction* (f=72, 10.07%), and *Socratic*or question-and-answer (f=47, 6.57%).

Ratings differed according to the cognitive modality of students. For all the nine cognitive preference modalities, it was found that a student who has a well-defined learning style gives a comparatively higher rating for teachers' classroom teaching practices, management of learning environment, and accommodation of diversity. Analysis of variance confirmed that there is a significant difference among students of varying levels of cognitive preference modality in terms of ratings they give to teachers' pedagogical approaches ($p < .05$).The more defined the learning style of a student is, the higher the rating he/she gives to teachers' pedagogical practices. The finding implies that a student whose learning style is well defined recognizes teachers' pedagogical approaches better. The student tends to be more satisfied with the way a teacher teaches only if his/her (the student) cognitive preference modality is well-defined. Such result suggests that determining students' cognitive preference modality is vital in designing appropriate strategies for the teaching-learning process to be more effective.

Competency of teachers and their adequacy of practicing pedagogical approaches were rated depending on students' personal profile (age and gender), academic profile (degree and academic status), demographic profile (ethnicity), and socio-economic conditions (parents' occupations, family income, and family size). No differences were found as regards the ratings given by the respondents grouped according to age group ($p > .05$), though younger learners (< 18 y/o) gave relatively higher ratings in the three aspects of teaching, implying that older learners tend to demand more from their learning experiences. Female respondents comparatively gave higher rating to teachers than their male counterparts.In the study of Devlin (2009), he found that females are more flexible and are more likely to adapt their behavior to circumstances (Devlin, 2009). It is easier for females to adjust to various teaching strategies and eventually utilize them.Difference between gender groups was found to be significant between gender groups in terms of classroom practices ($t = 1.979$, $p < .05$); not significant in terms of management of learning environment ($t = 1.752$, $p > .05$) and accommodation of diversity in the classroom ($t = 1.582$; $p > .05$).

Respondents taking up BEEdgave higher ratings compared to those taking up BSEd. Respondents with irregular academic status also gave higher ratings compared to those whose academic status is irregular.Generally, higher ratings were also noted among BEEd students compared to BSEdrespondents. Differences were found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$), which imply that students in the elementary education program have less demands as regards pedagogy, whereas students enrolled in the secondary education program expect more from their teachers. Meanwhile, irregular students rated their teachers as highly adequate (3.25 – 4.00) in all three areas of teaching;regular students, only in terms of classroom practices. Differences between groups were found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$) as regards management of learning environment and accommodation of diversity. Results may be attributed to the varied exposure and experience of students with irregular academic status. Thus, they are more open and appreciative of the efforts exerted by their teachers.

Respondents belonging to Isneg, Kalinga, and non-cordilleran ethnic groups other than Ilocano rated teachers highly. Statistical analysis results indicate that differences among ethnic groups were significant in terms of classroom practices ($F = 6.457$, $p < .05$), management of learning environment ($F = 4.294$, $p < .05$), and accommodation of diversity ($F = 4.214$, $p < .05$).Tukey's HSD confirm that Isneg, Kalinga, and Ilocano ethnic groups are grouped homogeneously. Finding suggests that students belonging to these

ethnic groups are less demanding and have relatively simple expectations from teachers as compared to other Cordilleran groups.

Respondents whose parents are unemployed gave higher ratings compared to respondents whose parents are working, either as government or private employee or self-employed. Differences were found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$) in terms of classroom practices, management of learning environment, and accommodation of diversity. The finding is a clear indication that standards setting may be passed on from the parents to their children. Hence, children of parents who are working in private institutions tend to have higher expectations as regards the classroom practices of their teachers.Respondents with monthly family income within or below the poverty threshold of PhP 9,734.00 (NSCB, 2013) provided higher ratings to their teachers in terms of classroom practices, accommodation of diversity than do respondents with monthly income that is higher than the poverty threshold. Respondents, regardless of monthly family income, gave an *adequate* rating to teachers in terms of management of learning environment. Differences were *significant* in terms of management of learning environment ($t = 3.054$, $p < .05$) and accommodation of diversity in the classroom ($t = 3.926$, $p < .05$) while *not significant* for the difference in terms of classroom management practices ($t = 1.794$, $p > .05$). Results suggest that students who belong to families with income that is below or within the poverty threshold tend to be satisfied easily with their teachers practices, while students who belong to families with income that is above the poverty threshold tend to have higher expectations from teachers. It is worth noting, however, that monthly family income does *not* cause difference in teachers' ratings as regards classroom teaching practices. Thus, students' satisfaction is *not* caused by their monthly family income.

Ratings of teachers *vary* according to the family size of students. Particularly for *classroom teaching practices* and *management of learning environment*, students who come from bigger families rated their teachers highly compared to those who come from smaller families, though differences were found to be insignificant ($p > .05$). As for accommodation of diversity in the classroom, students who belong to small and big families recorded a *highly adequate and sufficient* (HAd) rating for their teachers; students who come from average-sized families gave a rating of *highly adequate but insufficient* (Ad) rating only. T-test confirmed the differences among groups ($F=3.059$, $p < .05$). Results denote that students belonging to small families tend to expect more from teachers. They anticipate the same attention and care that they receive from their parents.

Conclusions

Findings of the study reveal that the dominant cognitive preference modalities among students are *visual-numerical* and *kinesthetic-tactile*.Teachers are rated *highly adequate* in terms of practicing students' preferred classroom teaching practices; *adequate* in terms of managing the learning environment and accommodation of diversity in the classroom.There is a difference in the level of adequacy and competency among teachers as perceived by students grouped according to level of cognitive preference modality.Students whose cognitive preference modality is well defined rate teachers highlyas regards level of adequacy and competency along classroom management, learning environment, and accommodation of diversity in the classroom.Data also support

by students grouped according to gender, degree, academic status,ethnicity, and socio-economic condition.

Recommendations

Teachers are encouraged to conduct a learning styles inventory at the onset of each semester in order for them to effectively design instruction according to the individual needs and interests of students.Differentiated instruction is encouraged among teachers. Teachers are encouraged to explore and use different teaching strategies to address the learning needs of students. Specifically, teachers may consider the use of visual materials, especially when citing numerical information. Numbers may be written on the *board* or presented in a *chart* to help students visualize the information. Teachers are also encouraged to design instruction that calls for active participation of students, such as *role plays*, *interpretative movements*, and *rhythmic activities*. Administrators and teachers may strive to structure the learning environment in such a way that students' diversified needs be accommodated. If at all possible, it is recommended that classrooms be structured to include activity and/or learning areas. Otherwise, classrooms may be made flexible to allow varied activities.Teachers may consider the personal, demographic, academic and socio-economic background of students in designing instructional activities. To do this, teachers may obtain information from the institution's student affairs office. Otherwise, teachers may or conduct leveling of expectations as part of the learning contract at the start of classes.

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