An Action Research Case Study on Students' Diversity in the Classroom: Focus on Students' Diverse Learning Progress

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ABSTRACT

Students' diverse learning progress exists in every classroom. This study aimed to discover what strategies can be used to deal with students' diverse learning progress in classroom. The data gathering consisted of two structured interview and observations. Qualitative approach was utilised to analyse the data. The study reflected on the practices of addressing students' diverse learning progress and made an action plan for improving primary school teaching. The findings from this study have the potential to enrich the teaching approaches in both primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: Diversity, learning progress, strategies, action research, ADHD

INTRODUCTION

School education tends to provide society with uniform citizens. Students wear school uniforms, use the same text books, and are usually taught as a whole class by the same approach. However, individuals are never the same. There is a wide range of learning diversity in schools. In every classroom, it commonly occurs that students' learning progress is never at the same rate. The students with disabilities or learning difficulties especially need extra help. It would be very difficult for the teacher to give lessons to the whole class when students do not progress at the same level. Again, each individual has his/her own preferred learning style. It would also be very difficult for the teacher to cater for every student's preference. The Gladstone Web site (as cited in Inoue, 2005, p. 3) described diversity along the dimensions of "race, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies". As individuals are unique, the students' diversity in the classroom is inevitable. Consequently, an important issue faced by educators and teachers arises: how to provide students with a positive and supportive learning environment and "move beyond simple tolerance to embrace and celebrate the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual" (as cited in Inoue, 2005, p. 3).

This action research case study first provided the research aim and questions, and a literature review on students' diversity in the classroom. The study then utilized experiences to find out what had been occurring concerning students' diversity in a primary school and particularly in a Year One classroom.

Finally the study reflected on the practices of addressing students' diverse learning progress and made an action plan for improving primary school teaching.

BACKGROUND

This study was undertaken during four weeks' professional experience at a single-sex primary school in Hobart. It was a private school which consisted of thirty-five international students with ESL backgrounds, some gifted and talented students, and some students with learning difficulties such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Principal). In this school, the Early Learning Centre classes (from Kindergarten to Year Two) usually consisted of no more than twenty-four boys. The Year One class in which the major portion of this study took place consisted of twenty-one boys including three ESL background students, some gifted students and one student with ADHD. The diversity of the students' backgrounds made their learning progress even more diverse.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

This study aimed to examine how to provide students with a positive and supportive learning environment, regarding students' diversity in the classroom with a particular focus on students' diverse learning progress. In order to achieve this main aim, this study investigated how students' diverse learning progress had been addressed in a primary school, and particularly in a Year One classroom. This area of focus statement should be viewed as a priority sought after by teachers, in that students' diverse learning progress exists in every classroom. It will hinder students' learning if the teacher does not employ suitable strategies. Therefore, the teaching addressing this issue needs to be improved urgently.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In literature, there are a variety of studies addressing students' diversity. The review of the literature here falls into the following three categories: inclusive education, the role of diversity, and strategies on valuing diversity.

Inclusive education

Every child has the right to receive as equal education as others, regardless of disabilities, learning difficulties or ethnic minorities. This is the major idea of inclusive education which has been examined by a great number of researchers (Goslin, 1965; Knight, 1999; Ortiz & Phoads, 2000). Schwartz and Green (2001, p. 2) pointed out that in an inclusive school or an inclusive learning environment, "no child is omitted for the learning provision". To provide shared meaningful learning experiences for students with and without disabilities has been recognized as a major goal of inclusive education by the Tasmania Department of Education (2006). Forlin (2005) examined in detail which individuals diverse primary school populations should include. The Salamanca Statement (Unesco, 1994) also strongly focused on the value of every student. Therefore, schools in Australia are expected to provide students with inclusive school practices, and each student must be valued, respected and embraced fully into the classroom environment.

The role of diversity

In literature, there are many studies investigating the role of diversity (Eimer, 2001; Garmon, 2004; Inman & Pascarella, 1998). Diversity experiences can enhance students' learning, and positively affect critical thinking skill which is "one of the most important aims of education" (McMillan, 1987). This is supported by Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, and Pierson (as cited in Inoue, 2005, p. 3) who revealed that

"students' involvement in diversity experiences during college had statistically significant positive effects on standardized measures of critical thinking skill". Also according to Lynn's (1998, p. 123) observation, "One of the richest vehicles for enhancing student learning in the classroom is the diversity of students themselves". Inoue (2005) indicated that students' sensitivity and awareness of self can be developed through diversity experiences. Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, and Parente (2001, p. 528) found "a small link between the level of racial/ethnic diversity in a classroom and students' reports of increases in their problem-solving and group skills". They therefore indicated that "classroom diversity has positive, educational effects on student learning". Given that students' diversity can make an important contribution to their effective learning, critical academic skills, and ultimately critical thinking, the teachers need to adopt many strategies of valuing diversity to enhance their learning.

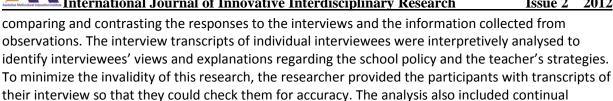## Strategies on valuing diversity

How to value students' diversity has been examined from a wide range of perspectives, including what makes a good teacher and what make effective strategies (Malekzadeh, 1998; Ward, 2002). Davis (1993) recommended that teachers should recognize students' diverse backgrounds and special interests when giving assignments and exams. Sommer (2001) held that effective strategies should encourage students to discuss, debate, and disagree. Nieto (2000) suggested that the teaching activities, strategies and approaches need to echo students' diverse concerns. Davis (as cited in Inoue, 2005, p. 9) even valued opposing strategies. He stated, "Ongoing contact outside the classroom provides strong motivation for students to perform well in class, and students who come to office hours can get benefit from the one-to-one conversation and attention".

In this literature review, we have discussed students' diversity from the aspects of inclusive education, the role of diversity, and strategies on valuing diversity. Although these studies are various and plenty, they still cannot answer every problem arising during educational practices. It appears that a variety of studies for solving specific problems in the classroom need to be examined later on.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative method which enabled the researcher to gain an insider's view of the field through close association with both participants and activities within the setting (Burns, 1994). The data in this study was collected through two structured interviews and observations of classroom practices and students. Observations took place in the school, with a particular focus on a Year One classroom. The researcher took notes on the important information related to students' diverse learning progress and how this diversity had been addressed in the school and the Year One classroom. Observations of the classroom practices and students allowed the collection of broad information on students' diversity. Observations were the first step of the data collection and helped to conceptualise the interview questions for a more in-depth investigation. The interviewees involved a senior principal of the student diversity system and a Year One classroom teacher. Interviews were conducted through everyday conversation between the researcher and the interviewees. The researcher then made notes after the conversation. Interviews collected supplementary and explanatory information which permitted a deep understanding on how the school and the Year One classroom teacher addressed students' diverse learning progress.

Data analysis is "the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your understanding of them [the participants] and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 153). The data analysis in this study employed a qualitative approach which included the procedure of identifying patterns, labeling themes, and developing category systems. The data analysis also involved

comparing and contrasting the responses to the interviews and the information collected from observations. The interview transcripts of individual interviewees were interpretively analysed to identify interviewees' views and explanations regarding the school policy and the teacher's strategies. To minimize the invalidity of this research, the researcher provided the participants with transcripts of their interview so that they could check them for accuracy. The analysis also included continual revisiting of the data, particularly in the context of reviewed literature.

FINDINGS AND PRESENTATION

This section provides the school policies on addressing students' diversity and some strategies in dealing with students' diverse learning progress used by the Year One classroom teacher.

Policies on addressing students' diversity in this school

The policies made in this school intended to provide students with an inclusive learning and teaching environment. According to the school principal, "The school has a policy of taking anybody to this open entry school". The school addressed students' diversity in the document entitled *About the school: School Mission Statement*. The principal pointed out, "This document has determined the schools' culture in developing international relationships and bringing the world to every student".

Seven senior staff members were directly responsible for students with diverse backgrounds (Principal). The detail is shown in the table below (Table 1):

Table 1: Seven senior staff members

Roles in the school	Number	Main responsibility
Head of the Boarding School	1	Organizing the Boarding school and offering rural and international students relevant support.
Principals of the Center for Excellence	3	Catering for ESL students, gifted and talented students and the students with special needs and organizing remedial classes.
Head of international students	1	Looking after all the international students.
Director of student leadership	1	Directing students' community services.
Head of marketing	1	Attracting students to the school and directing exchange students.

According to the principal, "Both group support programs and individual assistance have been used in supporting students with diverse needs to fit into the mainstream classrooms". The Centre for Excellence provided programs for students who needed additional support in all areas of the Curriculum. These programs included remedial language classes for ESL students, remedial classes for students with learning difficulties such as ADHD, and one-to-one individual lessons on the arts, such as visual art, choir and instruments, for gifted and talented students. During school time, there was a particular period of time of one hour allotted for any student to attend those programs once a week. Students could choose the program either by choice or by the suggestions from the classroom teacher.

145

The regular remedial classes were free for students to attend; however, there was a charge for one-to-one lessons.

The school also provided intensive one-to-one tuition to the students who had special needs, e.g., ESL students and students with learning difficulties. Specialists in areas such as ESL and psychology were invited from outside the school to come and help the student one to one. They would also go into the classroom, observe the student and talk to the mainstream class teacher. These one-to-one tuitions were organised twice a week and basically focused on English writing skills and finding out students' special needs. There was also a charge for these one-to-one tuitions. Students primarily made the decision by their own choice on whether or not they would like to use the tuition.

Strategies used to deal with students' diverse learning progress in the Year One classroom

To provide students with a positive and supportive learning environment, the Year One classroom teacher involved in this study employed many strategies to deal with students' diverse learning progress. These strategies included using free choices, giving several tasks at the same time, as well as inviting parent-teacher help and recommending the school supporting programs and tuitions.

Using free-choices

The strategy of using free-choices included conditional and unconditional free-choices. The conditional free-choices referred to are those the students could make to do whatever they liked after they had finished five tasks in a day. These free choices could be anything including reading picture books, drawing pictures, or playing with toy bricks. This strategy of conditional free-choices was viewed as an award to students who finished class work earlier than others, and it would also stimulate students to finish those tasks set up by the teacher as quickly as they could in order to play freely.

Students could also make free choices unconditionally to do whatever they liked during the time for free-choices without any condition. Every afternoon during school time, there was a period of time of about half an hour set up by the teacher for students to freely choose work to do. Students were thus able to choose their favourite tasks according to their own interests during this period of time. As Nieto (2000, p. 370) pointed out, "The teaching activities, strategies and approaches need to echo students' own concerns in order to prepare them for productive and critical participation in a democratic and pluralistic society". This strategy of using free-choices not only satisfied students' diverse interests, but also effectively dealt with students' diverse learning progress.

Giving several tasks at the same time

Giving several tasks to the students to work on at the same time was another effective strategy that the teacher used to deal with students' diverse learning progress. This strategy allowed the students who had finished one task to choose to do the other tasks themselves without asking the teacher about what to do next. These tasks might or might not be required to be worked in order. These tasks also did not have to be finished during the class time in which the tasks were given. Students could keep working on these tasks during the time for free-choices. As the teacher (The Year One Classroom Teacher, 2007) stated:

> Students never finish their tasks at the same time. Some students do English fast, while the other students may do mathematics or visual art fast. So, what I usually do is to give them several tasks at the same time. The students who have finished one task would thus know what other tasks they should do next without asking me.

This strategy catered for the needs of students who worked fast so that they did not have to waste time waiting for the other students to finish and then did the other tasks.

Inviting parent-teacher help and recommending the school supporting programs and tuitions

Students' learning progress is never at the same rate. The students with other cultural backgrounds or with disabilities or learning difficulties especially need extra help. However, it is impossible for the teacher to look after every student, giving extra help to the students who were lagging behind, and at the same time challenging the students who learned faster. This Year One classroom teacher, on the other hand, invited parent-teacher help for those students who needed extra help. Almost every morning during school time, there was a parent-teacher help spending about one hour in a special room next to the class to help students individually. The length of time was very flexible which depended heavily on the parent-teacher help's free time. These parent-teacher helpers voluntarily came to help students at the acceptance of the teacher's invitation. This involved helping students with working on mathematics, writing journals and listening to the student reading picture books aloud. They were extremely helpful for those students who needed extra help to catch up with the class.

Except for inviting parent-teacher help, the teacher also recommended these students attend the school programs and intensive one-to-one tuitions according to their individual needs. In doing so, this teacher effectively helped those students who had special needs to fit into the class.

REFLECTIONS AND AN ACTION PLAN

Teachers need to frequently reflect on their practices so that they can find the strengths and weaknesses of their practices in order to improve their teaching. At the beginning of my professional experience in this class, I failed to effectively deal with students' diverse learning progress in giving students an English task. Many students who finished it earlier came to me for what to do next when I was helping other students with this task. The classroom then appeared very noisy and was in chaos. I thus felt frustrated by this situation and was determined to seek solutions to deal with students' diverse learning progress.

Through undertaking this study, I have learned many strategies in dealing with students' diverse learning progress in a primary classroom. The process and the findings of this study have helped me in making an action plan for the future to improve primary school teaching. This action plan includes the following three suggestions: doing research to find strategies, discussing suggestions with colleague teachers and peers, and using the framework of planning, practising, and reflecting to improve primary school teaching.

Doing research to find strategies

Theory provides teachers with many effective strategies for problem solving. For example, by reading articles on students' diversity, teachers can learn many strategies on valuing students' diversity in their classroom. Therefore, it is important for teachers to learn from theory and master many different strategies, so that they can flexibly use the most effective strategy to solve students' diverse problems.

Discussing suggestions with colleague teachers and peers

Teachers need to be open to learning from others in order to improve their teaching. Experienced colleague teachers especially have many good ideas and strategies by which to approach students, since already they have many years experience. Peers can also make many good suggestions in approaching

students, based on their own experiences. Therefore, discussing suggestions with colleague teachers and peers will help the teacher in solving problems which emerge from practices.

Planning, practising, and reflecting

Applying the framework of planning, practising, and reflecting to teaching can ensure the success of a teacher. Careful planning helps the teacher to be clear about specific procedures towards students' learning outcomes. The plan needs to be applied to empirical practice in order to achieve its worthiness. Frequently reflecting on practices enables the teacher to find out what strategies have worked well and what areas still need to improve. Therefore, to improve primary school teaching, the framework of planning, practising, and reflecting should be involved.

CONCLUSION

This action research case study investigated students' diversity in the classroom with a particular focus on students' diverse learning progress. This study examined literature on the research of students' diversity in order to seek a theoretical support for conducting this research. It also examined school policies and supporting systems in assisting diverse students in a single-sex primary school in Hobart. This study particularly focused on how the Year One classroom teacher dealt with students' diverse learning progress in her classroom. The study also reflected the researcher's own experience on addressing students' diverse learning progress and made an action plan for improving primary school teaching in the future.

On the whole, a sound supporting system in addressing students' diversity had been developed in this school, and the Year One classroom teacher also effectively dealt with students' diverse learning progress in her classroom by using certain strategies. Through reflecting on practices and the process of this study, an action plan was made to improve primary school teaching in the future. A potential value of this study would be to add to information available on the strategies in dealing with students' diverse learning progress in a primary classroom, which would promote knowledge on the teaching of students' diversity on a multicultural campus within the Australian education system.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions with the school principal

1. How are diverse students like in this school? E.g., how many ESL students? How many students with ADHD? How many gifted and talented students?

2. How is diversity addressed in the school policies and curriculum?

3. What programs are available in this school in addressing student diversity? And what other supporting programs?

4. How are the remedial programs connected with students' regular classes?

APPENDIX B

Interview questions with the Year One classroom teacher

1. How many ESL students do we have in this class?

2. How many students with ADHD do we have in this class?

3. How many gifted and talented students?

4. What strategies do you use to deal with students' diverse learning progress?

5. Do the ESL students need extra support as they have non-English speaking backgrounds? If they need, what strategies do you usually use to support them?

6. What strategies do you use to support students with ADHD?

7. What strategies do you use to support gifted and talented students?