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A Participatory Action Research Project: Improving Teaching Practices Through Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Researcher Background

As a First Nations educator, I have worked in the Regina public school system for 14 years. I have served as a classroom teacher for eight years, and I have served as an Indigenous advocate teacher for six years. I completed my Bachelor of Education degree with SUNTEP (Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program). I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Indigenous Studies with First Nations University of Canada. I did a course-based master's degree with the University of Regina in curriculum and instruction. I am currently working on my PhD in education at the University of Regina. This McDowell funded project is my PhD research project.

Abstract

To practice culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2010, 2018) in their own classrooms, educators need the opportunity to learn from and with other educators. Using participatory action research methodology (McIntyre, 2008), the study gathered six Saskatchewan elementary educators (researcher included) over five sessions to learn about culturally responsive teaching practices. Each participant created personal goals for themselves and was able to enact the practices they were learning within their classrooms between each of the sessions together. Participants explored the following topics of culturally responsive teaching within each of the sessions: academic achievement, home and school connection, critical consciousness, and ethnic and culturally diverse curriculum which included learning from a local First Nations Elder. In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Education suggests educators use culturally responsive practices within curriculum. The study provided a professional development opportunity for each participant to learn more about this topic, so they could actualize it in their classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching is a well-known approach in K-12 education and has the potential to improve educational systems for racialized students in Saskatchewan classrooms and schools.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the experiences of elementary school teachers in a professional development group on culturally responsive teaching?
- 2) How do elementary school teachers perceive their engagement in this group in terms of influencing their teaching practice?

Methodology

This research study used participatory action research (PAR). PAR is used to help understand and improve the world by changing it (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Kemmis, 2006; Smith, 1997). The purpose of PAR is to enable action, pay attention to power dynamics, and involves those being researched (Baum et al., 2006). Participatory action research does not treat participants as passive subjects of research (Jacobs, 2016; Whyte, 1991). According to Smith (1997), "People are not 'objects' to be studied (as in conventional empirical or interpretive methods) but are full 'subjects' in the research process" (p. 178). Participatory action research focuses on change, democracy, and equity where the researcher and participants are equal partners throughout the research project (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Participatory action research connects to Indigenous research methodologies as it is an empowering method for Indigenous people in Canada to create change (Sinclair, 2007; Cidro & Anderson, 2020)..

Conceptual Framework

I used Margaret Kovach's (2009) Indigenous research (conceptual) framework with Nehiyaw epistemology to guide my research study. Kovach's framework includes the following: researcher preparation, research preparation, decolonizing and ethics, gathering knowledge, making meaning, and giving back. I will explain Kovach's framework and reflect on the ways it was used in my research study.

Regarding researcher preparation, my participation in ceremony and my experiences with dream were an integral part of my research. Ceremony and dream are a part of a Nehiyaw epistemology where attention to inward knowing is not optional (Kovach, 2009). I participated in smudging ceremonies throughout all stages of the research process. I actively listened to my dreams and implemented that knowledge into my research. I invited my participants to participate in a smudging ceremony before each of our research sessions together. I asked a local First Nations Elder to be a part of one of our research sessions.

In terms of research preparation and decolonization, this qualitative research study used participatory action research where participants served a key function in the collaborative problem-solving approach. In preparing for research, it is suggested within qualitative studies that research participants be chosen for what they can bring to the study as opposed to random sampling (Kovach, 2009). The participants were individuals that I shouldered-tapped for this project that are Indigenous and non-Indigenous and were willing to learn new ways of working with their diverse student population. The participants I approached had an interest in learning more about culturally responsive teaching. Kovach (2009) writes that there should be a focus on decolonizing relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler societies. This research project combined both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants as there is a need for decolonization in education for all teachers. I chose Saskatchewan educators because they were all familiar with the Saskatchewan curriculum, and so that participants could develop a network with other educators in their home province. The participants all work with elementary-aged students. Each participant either taught a large Indigenous population or a large racialized student population. We were a diverse group of participants that included new and veteran teachers, and teachers that come from a variety of teaching backgrounds. There were six participants including the researcher in the group. The group was a comfortable size where participants felt open and vulnerable to sharing with one another.

Regarding ethics, it was important for me as a researcher to build trust with the participants of the group especially with Indigenous members of the group as they were essential members. I understood the power I held as a researcher. Kovach (2009) states, "Simply because a researcher is Indigenous (or following an Indigenous framework) does not automatically

translate into community trust" (p. 147). Therefore, "Critically reflective self-reflection is a strategy to keep us aware of the power dynamic flowing back and forth between researcher and participant" (p. 110). This self-reflection was key to the ethics process. It was important in my research to first build rapport between participants through a variety of activities that built trust.

For gathering knowledge, the data collection method used was culturally responsive focus groups (Rodriguez et al., 2011). This aligned with the research topic of culturally responsive teaching. The participants were from a variety of backgrounds including those that self-identified as Indigenous. Rodriguez et al. (2011) offer, "A shared experience and identity with the focus group facilitator can provide additional opportunity for authentic sharing among focus group participants" (p. 403). I know in my own personal experiences, as a participant in focus groups, I felt I shared the most authentically when I was with other Indigenous educators. I feel like many of the Indigenous participants and women participants were more open to sharing because of my identity in the role of facilitator.

Kovach's Indigenous research (conceptual) framework with Nehiyaw epistemology impacts the meaning making of the data. For making meaning, Kovach (2009) states, "I believe that where we are, and the daily influences of our lives, shape how we think and write" (p. 52). Doing my research in my home community of Regina and my daily life working in an elementary school helped with the meaning-making process. My own schooling experiences in the Saskatchewan public school system influenced this meaning making as I disseminated the data. I used focus groups to collect data about the experiences of the participants and pulled themes from the data in terms of meaning making.

Last in Kovach's framework is giving back. Kovach (2009) writes about her own research, "Efforts were made to keep the language of this research as accessible as possible, so that it is not mystifying but rather useful to a range of individuals who compose the Indigenous community" (p. 53). I use accessible language in my research project so that it is accessible to my own Indigenous community as well as to other educators wanting to engage in this work. In terms of giving back, it was important to me that my research has a positive impact on the educators/participants that chose to come on this research journey with me as well as the students in the classrooms of those educators.

Brief Literature Review

Professional Learning Communities/Communities of Practice

One opportunity for high-impact professional learning is professional learning communities or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stoll et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2010; Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). Professional learning communities can exist within a school or between schools. Burke and Collier (2017) describe a community of practice as a group of shared interest, information sharing, and teacher inquiry. Networking with other educators allows for the exchange of good practices and ways to address issues (Keay & Lloyd, 2011). One benefit

of collaboration between teachers is a shift from individualism to collaborative learning (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Keay & Lloyd, 2011; Stoll et. al, 2012). One benefit of

organizing collectively is disrupting the fragmented ways that schools are typically organized (Zepeda, 2008).

Some professional learning communities implement teacher-driven professional development by having teachers trained in a specialization to train other teachers in this same area. Short and Hirsh (2020) argue that some teachers are skeptical of PD from experts and outsiders from the classroom. Some individual schools and divisions design professional learning without the need for consultants or vendors (DeMonte, 2013). Providing educators with literature is an effective form of PD (Stoll et al., 2012). Teacher-led PD provides teacher authority and leadership to those running the sessions (Murray, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008). It is important for participants in professional learning communities to feel their contributions are valued by other members (Keay & Lloyd, 2011).

Professional learning communities provide a shift from passive PD to teachers actively involved in their own PD (Hoffman & Dahlman, 2013; Murray, 2014; Stewart, 2014). Most educators can likely cite a PD experience where they sat passively and listened for hours to a presenter and were expected to walk away and implement their new learning in their classroom. When designing PD for teachers, it is important to respect teachers for their knowledge (Wilson & Sztajn, 2019). According to DeMonte (2013), "One of my many challenges facing teachers is the lack of opportunity to learn from colleagues, particularly in a setting where there is a structure and protocol for revealing excellent teaching practices" (p. 8).

There are several benefits to professional learning communities within schools and with colleagues outside of schools. Research by Speck & Knipe (2005) state that professional learning communities create collegiality with peers. In general, the current way schools are organized does not allow for much collaboration or teamwork amongst colleagues. Another benefit of professional learning communities is the opportunity for teachers to analyze student work collaboratively (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A third benefit of a professional learning community is to move from PD to collaborative learning. Language really matters when speaking about learning opportunities for educators. A fourth benefit is specifically for school divisions that save professional funds since they do not have to hire outside experts and instead utilize talent within their workforce (Kedzior & Fifield, 2013). Professional learning communities as PD acknowledges the skill sets that already exist within a school or school division.

As one can see, there is a variety of research on the potential and benefits of professional learning communities, but there are other considerations to reflect on with this type of PD. There are issues of time, isolation of teaching, and differing viewpoints amongst educators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lujan & Day, 2010; Murray, 2014).

Findings

The following results are preliminary findings as the researcher continues to work through the data analysis process.

Opportunity to Connect

Participants appreciated the opportunity to learn, discuss, and share with other educators as they learned about culturally responsive teaching. Participants met over five afternoons for this research project. The participants looked forward to upcoming sessions and stated they would miss meeting after the project was complete. The six participants within the project now have a network of educators within their school division they can reach out to.

Personalized Goal Setting

Each participant, including the researcher, engaged in their own personal goal setting around an area of culturally responsive teaching. Each participant had the autonomy to choose an area that they felt they needed to work on or increase capacity within. Participants made their personal goals in the first session together. There was one check-in on goals at a following session and a wrap-up check-in at the last session together. The check-ins helped with accountability as well as a celebration of changes whether that was a small or big change.

Power of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Participants spoke of the power of culturally responsive teaching for students in Saskatchewan. Culturally responsive teaching includes such areas as academic achievement, ethnic and culturally diverse curriculum, home and school connection, and critical consciousness. One participant shared the power of using culturally diverse curriculum with her students that are primarily Indigenous. Another participant spent time having one-on-one conferences with their students and shared the power of the relationship building that occurred through that process. Another participant worked on building stronger relationships with the parents and guardians of her students and found that a powerful connection to make. Two participants worked with their school's Elder or Knowledge Keeper to support the area of ethnic and culturally diverse curriculum opportunities for their students.

Systemic Barriers to Change

One area discussed by participants was systemic barriers to change. One chapter from the book we read called *Standing Together: American Indian Education as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* shared how a school banded together with community to superintendents for collective change. Participants in our research study shared that this type of thinking outside the box was required for systemic change within our schools. One participant shared how there was only six of us within the research study and how more educators trained in culturally responsive teaching could have deeper impacts. Participants also spoke about budget restraints within our current education system and recognized budget as a key role in professional learning.

Implications

Culturally Responsive Teaching May Benefit Saskatchewan Students

Students in Saskatchewan are diverse, and the province continues to grow in diversity. Culturally responsive teaching was created out of better meeting the needs of diverse students in the classroom.

There is a strong focus on improving the literacy and numeracy skills of self-declared Indigenous students as well as increasing grad rates. Culturally responsive teaching may be a focus to help with Indigenous student achievement.

Research has suggested the importance of relationship building in the classroom. Building relationships with students is at the core of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers reading this report may be interested in looking at Teacher Caring-in-Action to see how researchers have taken up the work of relationship building within the framework of culturally responsive teaching.

Saskatchewan Educators May Benefit From Critical Consciousness Activities

One area of focus within this research study was building a critical consciousness within participants. Participants completed a wheel of power and privilege, and discussions were had within the group about where they landed on the wheel. Some participants had more power and privilege than others within the group. Discussions included leveraging power and privilege in terms of equitable opportunities for students. We also used a reflection activity from the work of Zaretta Hammond from her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* that has educators reflect on implicit bias and navigate questions on shallow, surface, and deep levels of culture. Saskatchewan teachers could access professional learning through the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation growth opportunities such as anti-racism training.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are for educators, school leadership, and government based on the preliminary findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study.

Teacher Choice in Professional Development

Teachers may benefit from participating in a practice/professional learning community of their choice. For teacher professional learning, it gives teachers the autonomy to participate in an area or topic where they require support or would like to further their learning. A community of practice does not require schools or school divisions to bring in experts and instead leverages the knowledge and leadership of educators within a school or school division to lead the initiatives.

Saskatchewan Educators May Benefit From Professional Learning in Culturally Responsive Teaching

Schools and school divisions often provide professional learning budgets for educators. Saskatchewan educators could be encouraged to participate in professional learning opportunities linked to culturally responsive teaching. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is one place for teachers to look for professional growth opportunities in this subject area. Saskatchewan teachers could be encouraged to initiate a community of practice that has a focus on this area as well.

Using Literature to Guide Professional Learning

The participants in this research study used a variety of literature to help guide discussions around culturally responsive teaching. This literature demonstrated the research on culturally responsive teaching to participants and how it has been used in other schools throughout the world. A community of practice, or other types of professional learning, may benefit from including literature as a type of pre-learning to help guide learning and discussion in a specific area.

Conclusions

This study captured several insights from six Saskatchewan educators on what meaningful professional development looks like. These six educators engaged in personal and collective goal setting that allowed them to try culturally responsive teaching approaches in each of their classrooms and schools. Each participant was in a different stage in their teaching career, and this was a benefit to the collective in terms of knowledge sharing with one another. There was a theme of hope and optimism amongst the educators in the group on the impacts their learning in culturally responsive teaching would have for themselves as educators as well as for their diverse student populations.

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