

Crisis in the Heartland: Addressing Unexpected Challenges in Rural Education

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This article describes (a) the emergent challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity in Midwestern rural education and educational policy and (b) a proactive institutional response to these challenges as grounded in responsive, yet responsible, program innovation. Some demographics of rapidly changing cultural and linguistic diversity among student populations in the rural Heartland are first documented, particularly those relating to English as a Second Language [ESL] education. Three key challenges confronting rural educators and policy planners in their efforts to address this increasing diversity are then summarized. Briefly, these three challenges of diversity involved geographic isolation, capacity building for diversity, and notable variance in professional development needs among staffs of the educational entities to be served by program delivery. This summarization is followed by a detailed discussion of the proactive response of one institution of higher education to each of these three challenges faced by rural educators in the Heartland.

The Heartland of rural Kansas is not an area one would typically associate with significant cultural and linguistic diversity. Yet, rapid demographic and social changes are in progress in the Midwest. These changes frequently demand radical adaptations of district approaches to education and educational policy, particularly those policies that relate to the education of English language learners. Essentially, three key challenges face these rural educators who are confronted with the new demands of diversity. These challenges may be summarized as challenges of: geographic isolation, capacity building, and professional development. The discussion which follows will explain each of these challenges as it details one institution's response to this crisis in the Heartland.

Demographic Background

Traditionally, student populations of the Midwest have been considered comparatively homogeneous. Yet, in the last 4 years, educational planners in rural Kansas have witnessed issues of cultural and linguistic diversity rise to the top of their planning and policy agendas. During the period 1994-1997, Kansas experienced a 76% increase in the number of identified, English Language Learning [ELL] students—from 6,990 students in the 1994/1995 school year to 12,335 students in the 1996/1997 school year.

Some district officials have estimated that the number of unidentified students eligible for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) instruction could add another 30% to the current, identified, figure for Kansas. These

estimates of the extent of under-identification in Kansas are consistent with recent analyses by Crawford (1997). His findings demonstrate that State Department of Education reported estimates of ELL student populations in Midwestern states such as Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, and Kansas consistently average 57% below United States Bureau of the Census estimates for the same states.

During the period 1994-1997, the number of languages spoken by students in Kansas schools also rose by a dramatic 103%—from 38 languages spoken in 1994 to 77 spoken in 1997. This dramatic increase encompasses a 79% increase in the number of students who speak Spanish (from 5,173 to 9,253 students) and a 450% increase in the number of students whose home language is Cantonese (from 14 to 77 students).

One particularly salient aspect of the changes in statewide student demographics has been the extent to which the burden of planning and policy making for appropriate changes in educational infrastructure has fallen upon rural districts (where student populations were often 100% English speaking as recently as 5 years past). For the 1996-1997 school year, almost 25% of the state's ELL students attended school in districts classified by the state as demographically rural.

Not surprisingly, these rapid and dramatic changes occurred during a period in which the Kansas began the 1994-1995 school year with only 25 endorsed bilingual teachers and fewer than 300 ESOL endorsed teachers. Although recent and often Herculean efforts by the Kansas State Department of Education have increased the number of ESOL endorsed educators 15% in the past 3 years, there are today fewer than three ESOL endorsed teachers per 100 ELL pupils in Kansas. Furthermore, most of these educators are concentrated in primarily urban areas of the state.

Challenges of Rural Diversity

Three key challenges have confronted district and university planners in their efforts to address these rapidly changing aspects of cultural and linguistic diversity in rural Kansas. First among these challenges has been the question of how best to address the geographic isolation of many of these rural school districts and their educators from major universities in Kansas (that is, universities which were also capable of addressing the endorsement challenge). A second and related challenge has been the question of how to rapidly, yet responsibly, increase the number of ESOL endorsed educators, especially in geographically isolated, rural districts across the state. The third and last of these interrelated challenges has surrounded the variance of ongoing professional development needs among educators within the primarily rural districts most concerned with these dramatic changes in the needs of diverse student populations.

Responding Proactively: Challenge by Challenge

To effect a proactive institutional response to these key challenges of diversity, we began a process of new program design in 1996. This was done in conjunction with various campus departments and rural districts throughout Kansas. These efforts, undertaken through the College of Education at Kansas State University (KSU), were begun as a response to the changing teacher education and professional development arenas of district educators in the Heartland. In the beginning of the process, an extensive review of theories and basic research appropriate to these challenges of diversity suggested a paucity of formal models for program design. Nonetheless, this review did indicate the need for an incrementally implemented, adaptive approach to ongoing program development and refinement. Ultimately, this approach to program design was purposefully grounded in five touchstones of effectual professional development, each targeting one or more of the key challenges of diversity facing district and university educators. To assure the systematic collection of the data essential to ongoing program refinement, course instructors were also prompted to collect periodic, reflective progress reports from participants throughout each semester. Additionally, participants in the various courses of the program were asked to maintain weekly reflection journals. Lastly, district coordinators and administrators were periodically surveyed concerning the district's perspective on the progress of participants both in the program and in their settings of professional practice.

The Challenge of Geographic Isolation

As previously noted, the first of these key challenges concerned the question of how best to address the geographic isolation of many of these rural school districts and their educators from ESOL endorsing universities in Kansas. Preliminary research conducted by one of the authors surveyed 203 educators from 25 interested school districts across Kansas. More than 55% of surveyed educators taught in districts located in excess of 50 miles from a major Kansas university. Thirty percent of these educators practiced in districts located in excess of 150 miles from such an institution. Among these same educators, the average distance from KSU was in excess of 165 miles.

This key challenge of diversity was addressed through the touchstone of needs-based distance education. More specifically, video-based distance education supported by appropriate instructor-participant contact and feedback loops was utilized. Although a distance education format was employed to meet the nontraditional challenge, the appropriate reinforcement of this format through provisions for meaningful instructor-participant contact was a response to a different sort of challenge. Indeed, emergent research on technology-based, distance education formats, had suggested that models of distance education were often less grounded in the learning needs of clients than in frameworks of teacher-centered instructional delivery (Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Grosse & Wagner, 1994).

Accordingly, instructor support for this format was incorporated into a program design that emphasized two elements. First, program courses for ESOL endorsement were initiated and closed via sessions involving direct and extended instructor-participant contact. In the interim, students, arranged in site-based, collaborative groups viewed, discussed, and completed activities related to a series of instructional videos containing the primary course content. Second, collaborative group learning was further supported by various feedback channels through which course participants could gain information, answers to their questions, and auxiliary resources. These feedback channels included a dedicated, toll-free telephone line; a fax number; a listserver; and e-mail.

Consistent with a self-directed learning perspective, district educators were free to set their own pace for course progression. However, among important implications for district educators of this touchstone in program design were the sometimes difficult adjustments to both the self-paced and collaborative group aspects of the approach. Nonetheless, these initial adjustments were sometimes less arduous than they were enlightening. In fact, several groups taking their first course in the program reported video-grounded study sessions lasting in excess of 5 hours because the teachers of the collaborative group had never before experienced the opportunity for such focused and

directed interaction concerning their mutual interests in professional practice.

The Challenge of Capacity Building for Diversity

A second challenge of diversity also influenced needs-based program design. This challenge involved the question of how to increase the number of ESOL-endorsed educators across the state in ways that adequately prepared them for rapidly changing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. From the standpoint of program development, one approach to this key challenge of diversity was that of site specificity. The goal of site specificity was an intentional one—one accounting for the fact that reductionistic, recipe approaches to instructional delivery would prove ineffectual to the challenge, given the variance of student and staff needs. Responsively, then, approaches to program development were grounded in Hargreaves' (1992) theoretical work on the notion of collaborative cultures in order to maximize site-specific collaboration among course participants.

This grounded approach emphasized collaborative groups as the basis for learning and the impetus for site-specific adaptations of curriculum and instruction. These site-specific adaptations were then intentionally focused to address the unique needs of a particular district's (or single site's) culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student population.

Certainly the most notable implication of this touchstone has been the reported change in participant's attitudes toward classroom diversity. Administrators in participating districts frequently report that teachers and other school staff in their buildings are beginning to openly discuss cross-cultural dilemmas of practice, instructional issues particular to CLD students, and new ways of addressing variances in student learning style. Prior to program implementation, discussions among educators in participating districts tended toward a preoccupation with defeatism and the futility of dealing with diversity. Following program implementation, school officials began to report that such discussions rapidly evolved toward topics noticeably more relevant to the educational needs of CLD students. These discussions now encompass such topics as appropriate placement and assessment strategies for ELL students, what teachers can do to overcome the language barriers involved in increasing CLD parent involvement, and the efficacy of ESOL pullout programs as compared with content-based approaches.

As program design evolved, an additional approach focused on the many intercultural miscommunications that may be associated with diversity (Herrera, 1996) and the demands for cross-cultural sensitivity and competence among educators. Accordingly, the touchstone of cross-cultural competence among course participants became a

critical, target outcome for program development. From the beginning, this goal was explicitly targeted in the cross-cultural dynamics course of the program's design, the curriculum of which was grounded in the culture-general model of cross-cultural interaction (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 1992). This theoretical framework emphasizes three stages of intercultural development necessary to cross-cultural competence: (a) the emotional adjustments inherent in cross-cultural interactions; (b) the adaptations necessary to understand unfamiliar, intercultural behavior; and (c) the individual adjustments required for personal and professional growth amidst diversity. Perhaps most beneficial is the model's capacity to illustrate ways in which teachers may address diversity without concluding that they must tailor instruction for every culture and language represented in the classroom.

This touchstone of program design has also impacted district approaches to ELL student education. It has done so by prompting district educators to reevaluate district infrastructures necessary to address multifaceted student diversity in culturally sensitive and interculturally competent ways. Some educators found no consistent program for the language assessment of incoming CLD students. Other participant educators found that district models for instructional delivery to, and evaluation of, CLD students were inconsistent with current research on second language acquisition and/or contemporary models of culturally-sensitive classroom assessment. Consequently, district participants came to realize the cross-cultural implications of appropriate district infrastructures necessary to support professional practice in settings of increasing student diversity.

The Challenge of Variance in Professional Development Needs

The third challenge of diversity facing Heartland districts prompted two additional touchstones of program design. This key challenge of diversity surrounded the variance of ongoing professional development needs among rural educators in Kansas. Those districts most geographically isolated from major universities sought to enroll educators who consistently reported from 8-15 years experience in the classroom but fewer than 3 hours of post-baccalaureate course study taken in the prior 5 years. Districts located closer to major institutions of higher education more often employed first-, second-, or third-year teachers, many of whom were interested in, or currently pursuing, a masters degree in their area or a related field of study (e.g., educational administration). Many of the educators in each of these districts, although genuinely interested in better meeting the needs of their CLD students, had not participated in undergraduate programs that included courses in cross-cultural dynamics or multiculturalism. Virtually none

of these educators had taken postsecondary classes in either bilingual education or courses designed to prepare teachers for ESOL instruction.

Recent research by Mezirow (1991) and Murry (1996) had previously suggested that the touchstone of effectual professional development, variously referred to as a lifelong/self-directed learning perspective, was uniquely applicable to this challenge of diversity. This touchstone of program design appropriately recognized that professionals in practice exhibit the capacity for lifelong, self-directed learning as an ongoing element of their personal and professional development. Hence, Mezirow's (1991) transformation theory of adult learning became the primary foundation of program design, particularly regarding the distance education format for instructional delivery. Transformation theory argues that significant and meaningful development in terms of learning and cognition does not cease with adulthood. Rather, it is the capacity for reflection (validity testing) on personal and professional goals and outcomes that differentiates the adult learner from the adolescent. In a similar vein, Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) noted that professional opportunities for practicing educators constitutes professional *development* only insofar as these educators are given the opportunities and responsibility for self-directed, personal, and professional growth. Accordingly, each of these substantive frameworks pointed to the importance of philosophy and climate in the design of a program which maximized the capacity of professionals for lifelong/self-directed learning.

One particularly salient implication of this touchstone in program development has been a shift in administrative thinking about the appropriate nature of teachers' professional development. Specifically, attitudes have tended to shift from a preoccupation with one shot, one-size-fits-all models of staff training, toward more long term, interactive, collaborative, and capacity-building models of professional development. As a result, district funding of teachers' and administrators' participation in the program for endorsement has consistently increased since the program began. Today, over 80% of enrolling districts fund the participation of their educators in the program. Over 300 district educators were enrolled in the program for spring 1998—an increase of 35% over the prior semester. Participant attrition rates in the ESOL endorsement program at KSU have averaged less than 17% over the past 2 years as participant numbers have grown from 213 students in fall 1996 to 325 participants in spring 1998.

Moreover, districts have begun encouraging their educators to extend their self-directed, professional development by also enrolling in master's degree programs. In fact, the program for ESOL endorsement has, to date, added over 30 students to master's degree programs at KSU.

A final touchstone of effectual professional development that targeted the third challenge of diversity is one

which is frequently discussed in the literature but rarely realized in practice. Of the five touchstones of program design utilized by these authors in response to the challenges of Heartland diversity, none has proven more valuable and purposive than that of critically reflective practice. Originating in the theoretical work of Argyris and Schon (1974) and expanded upon by the work of Mezirow (1991), Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), and Murry (1996), the notion of critically reflective, professional practice encompasses three critical skills. The first is the practitioner's capacity to engage in process thinking about the many challenges and dilemmas of postmodern education. The second is the capacity for assumption checking and validity testing about one's philosophies, theories, frameworks, and approaches of professional practice. The last and perhaps most important of these skills is the capacity for critical thinking about the influence of one's prior socialization and learning on perspectives toward professionalism, diversity, and outcomes.

For district-level educational practitioners who have participated in the program to date, adjustment to the notion of critically reflective practice has been what Chamot and O'Malley (1994) refer to as a procedural knowledge building process. Consistent with this model of capacity building, district educators in this program have found it necessary to first understand and then rehearse the various subprocesses of critically reflective practice. Particularly useful in this approach has been reflective journaling. Specifically, the format in which participants journal their experiences with diversity prompts them to reflectively separate their various responses to critical incidents in practice, according to categories such as behaviors, thoughts, learnings, and applications.

Not surprisingly, this approach has for many program participants prompted personally and professionally transformative shifts in their viewpoint on important questions. For example, to what extent does the teacher's attitude toward diversity influence his or her actions in educational practice with CLD students? How much more effective are educators who adopt collaborative, information-sharing approaches toward appropriate curricular and instructional adaptations for CLD students? As a result, in only the third semester of program implementation, district participants across the state were already collaborating with their administrators and other district officials to adapt (in site-specific ways): student identification policies and procedures, language assessment practices and instruments, curricular and instructional models of ESOL education, and assessment tools towards ones which are more culturally sensitive and indicative of CLD student progress.

Today the capacity for critically reflective practice demonstrated by program participants has, in many districts, prompted new attitudes toward appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators.

State service providers increasingly report district requests for dedicated institutes and conferences focusing on such themes as alternative assessment and ESOL instructional frameworks which target academic language abilities. Additionally, the authors' are frequently asked to recommend consultants who offer extended, multi-day, seminars on key topics in ESOL education, including ELL student identification and appropriate instruments for language testing of the ESOL student. District officials are now especially interested in consultants who offer follow-up support visits to reinforce seminar-based instruction.

Conclusion

At least two conclusions are indicated by our analysis. First, the rapidly changing, complex character of cultural and linguistic diversity in the Heartland presents rural educators with formidable challenges to responsive educational policy and capacity building. Second, an incremental approach to program design grounded in ongoing applied research on planning and implementation can yield responsive, yet responsible institutional innovation. These conclusions suggest notable policy implications for both institutions of higher education and rural school districts. For institutions of higher education, these conclusions submit that the changing needs of districts demand risk-taking, nontraditional approaches to faculty utilization, needs-based program development, and collaborative arrangements with primary clients. For rural school districts, these conclusions indicate that culturally sensitive adaptations of instruction for the increasingly complex challenges of diversity are purposively accomplished through collaborative commitments to long-term, site specific, professional development.

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