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Fostering Transformative Learning in an Online ESL Professional Development Program for K-12 Teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines evidence of transformative learning surrounding sociocultural issues in the K-12 classroom of in-service teachers, while participating in an online English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development program. Using inductive data analysis, precursors and catalysts to transformative learning were identified to understand the ways in which 24 purposefully sampled participants experienced learning. Areas explored included ways in which the candidates participated in critical reflection of their own perspectives, ways in which this process affected their meaning making of their experiences, potential for action in changing their practice as ESL educators, and transformative learning features present throughout their learning experiences. Findings reveal evidence of perspective shifts in this context that complement the professional dispositions identified as important for K-12 teachers: the importance of carefully choosing resource materials in professional development, and the necessity to encourage critical reflection in course activities.

Keywords

Transformative Learning, Online Learning, Teacher Preparation, Sociocultural Issues, ESL

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Acknowledgements

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This qualitative study examines evidence of transformative learning surrounding sociocultural issues in the K-12 classroom of in-service teachers, while participating in an online English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development program. Using inductive data analysis, precursors and catalysts to transformative learning were identified to understand the ways in which 24 purposefully sampled participants experienced learning. Areas explored included ways in which the candidates participated in critical reflection of their own perspectives, ways in which this process affected their meaning making of their experiences, potential for action in changing their practice as ESL educators, and transformative learning features present throughout their learning experiences. Findings reveal evidence of perspective shifts in this context that complement the professional dispositions identified as important for K-12 teachers: the importance of carefully choosing resource materials in professional development, and the necessity to encourage critical reflection in course activities. Keywords: Transformative Learning, Online Learning, Teacher Preparation, Sociocultural Issues, ESL

The proportion of higher education students taking one or more online courses in higher education is steadily increasing, now at 32.0% (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Despite the initial resistance to leaving the physical classroom behind, as of 2013, 69.1% of chief academic leaders in the U.S. indicate that online learning is now a critical part of their long-term institution strategies. Not surprisingly, given the investment in time and resources into transitions to the online format, positive perceptions by chief academic officers regarding effectiveness and quality of online learning has risen to 77.0% (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

At the same time, institutions of higher education are also interested in maintaining their educational missions, including increasing students' understanding of the world through expanding their "habits of mind" (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 33). Faculty are often likewise interested in achieving similar effects, with the "ideals of transformation and social change and the importance of these constructs for the public" (Moore, 2005, p. 77) and community, indicating, explicitly and/or implicitly, interest in transformative learning and critical reflection (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor; 2007). Within teacher education programs, specifically, when moving courses online, the faculty and administrators are still responsible for and driven toward turning out high-quality, critically reflective teachers for the K-12 schools. These programs must overcome the challenges of teaching candidates how to teach as a leader and facilitator in a classroom without showing them how to do so physically in a face-to-face classroom. These goals are particularly salient in U.S. professional development programs for teachers of English language learners (ELs), given the intense focus on awareness and understanding of sociocultural issues (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Gay, 2010; Guy, 1999), including political, social, economic, psychological, and physical influences on learning, teaching, and educational policy.

American teachers often enter the classroom "culturally, racially, and ethnically incompetent" (Milner, Flowers, Moore, & Moore, 2003), while finding themselves tasked with the challenge of teaching an increasing number of ELs. The year 2000 showed only 14% of

teachers with ELs in their classrooms had completed eight or more hours of EL training. To illustrate this point further, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012) shows a 14.0% increase in the number of school districts across the U.S. offering services to ELs, and individual states are seeing much higher increases in their EL population. For example, in Pennsylvania, the increase in the number of ELs was 44.3%, from 2002 to 2011. Likewise, the number of students participating in these EL programs has increased 12.6% in the U.S., while Pennsylvania has seen an increase of 58.8% since 2002. It is estimated that by 2030, 40% of K-12 students in the U.S. will have varying levels of English language proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 2002). These escalating numbers have led to more enrollments in online professional development programs designed to fill the gaps in the teachers' knowledge and skills for working with ELs. The effectiveness of these programs, then, reveal themselves as significant.

While sociocultural issues are addressed in much of the education literature, and are prominent topics in transformative learning (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006; Taylor et al., 2009), the connections between educational goals, sociocultural awareness, and critical discussion is not clear in online spaces. Face-to-face settings allow for "interaction, dialogue, and reflection" (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006, p. 336) on sensitive topics that challenge underlying assumptions about beliefs and values, key components to the transformative process (Mezirow, 2000). Clarity is needed to determine the ways in which adult learners engage with one another in the online world. While studies have been completed about the potential for transformative learning in traditional settings (King, 2002; Taylor, 2007, 1997), research into transformative learning in online environments remains limited (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Given this gap in the research and knowledge about transformative learning in online spaces, this study examines evidence of learners' transformative experiences surrounding sociocultural issues, while participants were enrolled in an online professional development program for practicing PreK-12 teachers.

Literature Review

This study was constructed within both conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Conceptually, the research took place within a professional development program for ESL teachers in an online format. Their experiences in the program are viewed through a theoretical lens based in transformative learning.

Teacher Education, Professional Development, and Online Learning

It is clear and accepted that face-to-face instruction results in learning, both with an increase in knowledge and in skills. Despite its overwhelming acceptance in the higher education communities, online learning's effectiveness in communicating the same level and depth of knowledge as compared with face-to-face settings continues to be debated. Some studies have demonstrated that online learning can result in increased knowledge and skills (Ashby, Sadera, & McNary, 2011; Gerbic, 2011; Kokoc et al., 2011). Other studies demonstrate that given the right conditions, little to no difference exists in learning outcomes. For example, Fishman et al. (2013) determined that, in a professional development program for teachers, there were "no appreciable differences in learning outcomes" (p. 436). In a meta-analysis of online and blended learning research, Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013) found that online and blended learning "on average produces stronger student learning outcomes than learning solely through face-to-face instruction" (p. 29). Teacher education programs have slowly transitioned to the online format, perhaps due to the perceived need for face-to-face interaction, observations, and field placements. As noted, professional development in teacher education circles has taken the lead in bringing these programs to

teachers. In fact, teacher professional development is coming to be seen as more self-directed and immediately important and applicable to teachers' professional lives (Burns & Richards, 2009). With such motivated learners getting much-needed training, it is no surprise to report that Wesely (2013) found it possible to "successfully support learning" in an online teacher professional development program (p. 316). Her work utilized a constructive approach to learning that created a community of practice for the learners. These findings illustrate the importance of creating the right conditions for in-depth learning through encouraging reflection and dialogue with fellow learners (Avalos, 2011), two key components in transformative learning. But, as queried in previous sections, is the required depth of understanding and awareness needed to fully implement a culturally responsive pedagogy appropriate for ELs possible in the same or similar online setting?

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning originates from the field of adult education and indicates a change or shift in deeply held beliefs and/or perspectives, resulting in a more justified, pliable, and open worldview (Mezirow, 1978). Although not often applied in general education or higher education literature, use of this theory is applicable to professional development program models, since teachers are adults in higher education. It is also useful in the present research, due to its emphasis on sociocultural awareness and understanding, with an objective of personal growth and positive changes in society as a whole. In transformative learning, one of the goals is emancipatory knowledge, from Habermas' (1971) types of knowledge, in which an individual is self-determining in his or her awareness of the social and political contexts that influence the perception and understanding of knowledge and participates in critical self-reflection of these perceptions. Underlying these ideas are humanism and its Western-centric ideas of freedom, autonomy, growth, constructivism and its participatory view of learning and knowledge, and critical social theory and its understanding of the dominant ideology as a normalized guide to societal interactions.

Transformative learning, therefore, is one way to view the experiences and processes involved in learning and the way people make meaning of those experiences. This theory also offers the lens of a critical perspective (Brookfield, 2005; Giroux, 2003; Horton & Freire, 1990) through which to view the capacity of learners to transform their ways of knowing, learning, and understanding in the online setting. Specifically, the quality of the participants' experiences in the online ESL professional development program were viewed with attention to sociocultural issues associated with race, culture (Alfred, 2003; Tisdell, 2001) and critical reflection, that question existing beliefs and values leading to an expanded worldview and change in learners' ways of acting in the world. Further, Taylor (2007) noted, in his review of transformative learning literature, that there might be a need for more "research about the possibility and process of transformative learning occurring in a particular context" (p. 176), in this case, in the online setting for K-12 teacher of ELs.

As Mezirow and his associates (1978, 2000) developed the theory of transformative learning, he acknowledged that it is the individual perspective that determines whether or not a transformative experience has occurred. Researchers, however, have tried to operationalize or functionalize the ten precursors of a transformation set out by Mezirow (Brock, 2010; Snyder, 2008). Presence of the precursors cannot guarantee that a transformation has been experienced, but rather indicates that some shift in perspective has taken or will take place if the individual continues the process of reflecting on and revising his or her assumptions. The precursors for transformative learning are identified as:

- Disorienting dilemma
- Critical reflection on assumptions
- Recognized discontent shared through dialogue
- Explored new roles
- Self-examination of assumptions with feelings of guilt or shame
- Tried on new role
- Planned course of action
- Acquired knowledge/skills to implement plan
- Built competence/confidence
- Reintegrated to life. (Brock, 2010; Snyder, 2008)

Connecting these precursors to online learning, as mentioned, is limited in the research, and is not at all addressed in ESL professional development programs for K-12 teachers. Understanding the relationship between online professional development programs for teachers and their potential to engage learners in the critical reflections necessary to possibly transform their thinking about learning and teaching, is the core of this study and led to the formation of the following research questions:

1. Which of the transformative learning precursors identified in face-to-face settings exist in the online setting?
2. How is transformative learning fostered in the online setting?
3. What positive and transformative perspective changes related to ELs take place in an online professional development program for K-12 teachers?

The impetus for this study and the development of the research questions was the context in which the two researchers worked, teacher educators in the online professional development program described above and below. We approach our work from a constructivist philosophical perspective focused on the positive potential of education to improve the world through exposing learners to a broad worldview, including critical reflection on their world. The theoretical perspective of transformative learning, then, fits perfectly within our beliefs about education. Evidence of transformative learning in the work products of our learners would not only validate our work as teacher educators, but also encourage us to look for additional ways to foster these kinds of learning experiences, add to our understanding of how the learners are interpreting those experiences, and inform us about how the learners are using this new knowledge in their lives as teachers and as people.

Method

The choice of qualitative inquiry to answer the research questions was obvious to us, as this type of data allowed us to determine how our learners "interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, [and] what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 98). Because transformative learning is an experience that takes place internally, it is only through examination of individuals' interpretations of their learning that allowed us to determine the presence of transformative experiences.

Setting

The study took place in a Mid-Atlantic, mid-sized, branch campus of a major research institution. Funded by a 5-year, $1.37 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education,

Office of English Language Acquisition, and the National Professional Development Program. The participants were all scholarship recipients and members of an ESL certificate or endorsement program for practicing, in-service K-12 teachers. The program consisted of five, online, graduate-level courses fulfilling the state's requirements for the ESL Program Specialist Certificate. The five courses were ESL Foundations, Linguistics, Language Acquisition, Methods and Assessments, and Leadership, Research, and Advocacy. With the exception of the final course, which was optional until 2012, this course selection is typical for ESL endorsement programs.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that transformative learning in the online professional development program could be observed in its setting (Patton, 2005). Participation in the research was voluntary and not related to the funding awarded or received. In addition, nothing outside of the regular coursework was required by study participants. Twenty-four teachers were in the participant cohort, all of whom completed the five courses with a grade of C or above, and agreed to allow us access to their documents for this purpose. Due to the online format, participants came from all parts of the state, including from rural, urban, and suburban schools. Their educational background, age, teaching location and grade level varied, as well. The large majority was female (91.7%) and White (75.0%). They were all certified teachers in the state and teaching at the time they were enrolled in the ESL program.

Data Collection

The five courses in the ESL program are divided into content modules and include a variety of activities and assignments. One type of assignment used repeatedly throughout the modules is a reflective journal, in which participants are encouraged to engage in reflective practice and incorporate their knowledge from the course content and interactions with colleagues, instructors, cohort members, and ELs. The participants complete 6 to 8 reflective journals per semester. Each journal is approximately two to three pages in length, plus references. Below are some examples of reflective journal questions:

- What were the most significant insights and ideas you gained from this module?
- How will you apply this knowledge to your practice as an ESL educator?
- Describe *one* relationship between language (e.g., dialect, variety, style) and society (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and class). Your answer should include a discussion of how this relationship impacts ESL students specifically and education in general.

The reflective journals provide a view into the learning process and into what the participants were experiencing in the program, along with how they were interpreting what they were learning. Data for this study came from these journals. This data functioned in the online classroom to provide the learners with the space in which to express how they made "sense of themselves and their experiences" (Cranton & Hoggan, 2012, p. 524). In order to limit the data to that which was truly reflective in nature, and to best reflect the development of learning through each course, the first and last reflective journals for each of the five semesters was selected, along with one additional journal that encouraged reflection and was approximately in the middle of each course. For each of the 24 study participants, then, 15

reflective journals were determined to be of use for this study, for a total of 360 separate reflective journal documents.

The reflective journals were downloaded from the online course management system used at the university, and then uploaded to Dedoose, an online qualitative research data analysis tool (www.dedoose.com). Content analysis of the qualitative data was used to systematically code the data in the reflective journals for features of critical reflection and transformative learning (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998), utilizing the transformative learning precursor measurement instrument in the search for themes (Brock, 2010). As noted previously, use of this tool as a measure of transformative learning experiences assumes that transformative learning theory (Mezirow and Associates, 2000) can be functionalized (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006; Snyder, 2008). The data was coded initially for the precursors of transformative learning:

- Disorienting dilemma
- Critical reflection on assumptions
- Recognized discontent shared through dialogue
- Explored new roles
- Self-examination of assumptions with feelings of guilt or shame
- Tried on new role
- Planned course of action
- Acquired knowledge/skills to implement plan
- Built competence/confidence
- Reintegrated to life

In addition, coding included pinpointing, when possible, the catalysts that were indicated by the participants as being important factors in their shifts of perspective. Catalyst codes included:

- Assignment or activity
- Classroom experience (in K-12 setting)
- Critical reflection
- Dialogue with colleagues (classmates or professional colleagues)
- Discussion forum
- Videos
- Interaction with EL student families
- PowerPoint presentations (by course instructors)
- Textbook or other assigned reading

Journals demonstrating evidence of transformative experiences were then coded for recurrent themes, trends, and patterns by constant comparison (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2003). Further, analysis was conducted of the timing of assignments, content, and transformative learning evidence to identify the temporal environment in which the evidence appeared.

Data Analysis

As noted above, a qualitative data analysis software tool, Dedoose, was used for data coding and the inductive analysis, which enabled us to determine which themes emerged in order to understand the patterns in the data (Patton, 2005). Once coding was completed using the data analysis tools within the software, frequency of occurrence of each of the precursors was identified. Catalysts were similarly identified. To address Research Question #1 ("Which

of the transformative learning precursors identified in face-to-face settings exist in the online setting?"), we used content analysis and frequency data for the presence of precursor code. Evidence for answering Research Question #2 ("How is transformative learning fostered in the online setting?") came from the catalyst code frequencies. Data to answer Research Question #3 ("What positive and transformative perspective changes related to ELs take place in anonline professional development program for K-12 teachers?") was found in the co-occurrence analysis of the precursors and catalysts and in the thematic and trend content analysis, with particular attention given to the codes related to planning a course of action and integrating the new assumptions into participants' practice and new roles as educators and people.

Findings

Data analysis demonstrates that evidence was present to answer all three of the research questions.

Research Question #1: "Which of the transformative learning precursors identified in face-to-face settings exist in the online setting?" Findings demonstrate that all ten precursors for transformative learning are present in the qualitative data. Each precursor is discussed below.

Disorienting Dilemma

The disorienting dilemma is seen in transformative learning as one of the key factors in initializing critical reflection. Evidence can be found in one participant's confusion about regulations for ELs:

> I learned that a child may not be retained in a grade level due to their lacking English proficiency. This seems wrong to me. While I respect what this law is attempting to do, I am unsure of how this will help an EL become proficient in the English language. If a student is unable to master the language and concepts being taught, then they should be retained for reinforcement, not pushed along to struggle with additionally challenging concepts that should build upon what they are expected to have learned in the previous grade level.

The author of this excerpt confronts a disorienting dilemma when learning about a regulation that does not pass his or her common sense test. While the author indicates some level of understanding of the intention of the rule, he or she cannot agree with the result of the rule out of concern for the ELs. A second example comes from a participant who has just finished reading an article about culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002):

> She discussed communal communication styles. I have one little girl that frequently shouts out. I never thought of it as a cultural thing. I viewed it as a new to school behavior. All kindergarteners need to be taught about raising their hands before they speak. Now I realize that with this child it is a cultural difference. I am wondering how I enforce the rule of raising your hand before you speak for 24 students and allow one to call out.

The author of this excerpt demonstrates a disorienting dilemma when learning about a new possible cultural cause of a common classroom behavior problem. Realizing that the problematic behavior may be rooted in the student's culture, the author struggles to find ways

to include the student in the classroom activities in a culturally responsive way while maintaining control of the classroom.

Critical Reflection on Assumptions

Critical reflection or assessment of one's own assumptions is difficult work, often requiring a degree of discomfort. One participant showed evidence of this process in the statement, "I thought I believed that proper English proved intelligence and poise. However, I am beginning to find that my belief of language is unfounded." This excerpt shows a contrast between the author's prior beliefs and current beliefs, indicating that an assessment of assumptions has taken place.

Recognized Discontent Shared Through Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the hallmarks of transformative learning, indicating the social constructive nature of learning through this lens. Participants showed discontent and dialogued with peers about their concerns. "I will share the mandate and suggest that the complacency which currently exists is unacceptable, and that it is not 'good enough' that these students 'at least get some services,' which is a sentiment often related to me."

The statement shows a general discontent with the attitude of others, and the resulting programming for ELs. From this discontent, the author indicates a desire and intention to share some information from the required readings with others. Another example comes from a conversation with a spouse about one of the foundational concepts in any ESL program—respecting others' languages and, therefore, their identities.

> I actually tried to defend it to my husband based on my recent readings and he would have none of it. Could there be a better example of linguicism than right there? The biggest insight I have gained from this week's activities is that meeting the needs of ESL students goes beyond that of students that speak Spanish, or Chinese, etc… it also means we must meet the needs of students that speak AAVE and other non standard vernaculars. Does this mean we teach them that their "home" language is wrong? Absolutely not. We teach them about where Standard English is "right."

In dialogue with a spouse, the author attempts be persuasive about the point of view represented in some of the required readings. Although the author's sentiments are not entirely in line with those presented in the course material, they show some level of discontent with the way students' home languages are perceived.

Explored New Roles

Keeping in mind that transformative learning is not necessarily a linear process, but more of a circular process of revisiting and revising continuously, it seems logical that following critical reflection and sharing of new ideas, an individual might begin to think about the new role he or she will take on with the new assumptions. Evidence of participants' considering—not planning, yet—but considering how they might act is present.

> I believe this information will enhance their knowledge and permit them to be more tolerable of the changes that exist within our school regarding the various languages. I think I now have valid information that I can share, along with a

different respect. I think this will give my students some background knowledge. For example, I can draw the chart on p. 24 in the text and show my students languages that have derived from Latin. This chart will display the information in a way that they can understand it on their level.

In this excerpt, the author indicates a variety of new activities or behaviors that have resulted from a change in attitude toward students' home languages, or less-accepted varieties of English. The participant is thinking about how he or she will communicate these new ideas to her students in the classroom.

Self-Examination of Assumptions with Feelings of Guilt or Shame

The discomfort mentioned previously is most evident in the examination of assumptions with accompanying feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or shame at previous thoughts or actions. Some participants showed evidence of this precursor.

> I concluded that I unfortunately am guilty of making unfounded judgments about people based upon their spoken language. As a teacher this is something that I need to change and adjust in order to be a more culturally aware teacher.

The participant's guilt is clearly stated. Another participant expressed similar feelings on a similar topic:

> I have gained a lot of insight through this week's readings and through discussion forums. For one, I never realized or admitted more so, that I judged people on their speech patterns and dialects…even people I grew up with in the city. I have never admitted that I feel superior for abandoning the way of speaking double negatives, etc… It also forced me to wonder whether I would still be using the same dialect as they are, if I still lived in the city. Before the class and the readings, I think I expected greater strides from my ESL kiddos than was feasible. After reading that it takes 5-7 years to become fluent in a new language, I have reassessed my approach to instructing them. My expectations are more reasonable. I now also accept that sometimes the growth may appear slow but as long as there is growth, we are making progress. I am feeling like a better teacher to my ESL students. I am hoping it's the truth and not just a feeling.

Interestingly, in this excerpt, the author has put himself or herself in the role of the students, thinking about how it feels to be in their position.

Tried on New Role, Provisionally

This precursor, similar to "exploring new roles," has a trial-and-error feel to it, making the participants test the new assumptions before committing completely to them.

> These are just a few areas of the regulations that I was not entirely aware of. I now can better advocate for the length of time and the time at which they are pulled. I will need to discuss and try to make arrangements with the leadership and ESL team to try to ensure the needs of our EL students are being met.

The author of this excerpt is thinking about what he or she will "need to" do in order to try out implementing the new knowledge and understanding of the EL regulations, which means changing the teacher's role.

Planned Course of Action

Actual planning of action to make changes in one's life due to the perspective shift is significant to the participants and to the transformative learning process.

> With this newly acquired knowledge of language, I believe in the future I will become more understanding of those individual students who are struggling with the communication chain. I believe I will celebrate their success at conveying meaning and be less critical if their verb tenses or pronouns are not used properly. When my students struggle with writing, I will work with them to make the connection between oral and written language. Perhaps, creating a picture first or writing a familiar story will help my students with their written language.

The author of this excerpt outlines a plan to help students make connections between oral and written language. Although the idea of "drawing a picture" for a lesson is somewhat unclear, the author is clear in his or her intent to help students with their written language. Another participant made the process even more personal.

> This was of major concern for me and I lacked a sense-of-self necessary to take risks and try new things. As a teacher, I would find ways for students to practice language acquisition in a non-threatening environment and create differentiated assignments that account for affective factors as well and cognitive factors.

The author of this excerpt indicates a previous lack of self-confidence that kept him or her from taking risks and trying new things in the classroom. The conditional statement "I would find ways for students to practice language...," indicates a plan the future.

Acquired Knowledge/Skills to Implement Plan

Recognition of the need to obtain additional skills and/or knowledge to properly implement the new plan that includes the new, revised assumptions is another of the precursors to transformative learning.

> I do think that when I teach ELs in the future, it will benefit me in understanding how language develops, how one makes the physical formation for sounds, and respecting change in our culture. It will give me the ability to help students learn English in a sensitive manner, but also have some additional skills that will help me in practical ways.

This response, written by a participant who is not currently working with ELs, demonstrates an acquisition of knowledge that the author plans to make use of in the future. Although the acquisition of knowledge is not contemporaneously accompanied by a meaningful, corresponding work environment, the author's comments indicate an acquisition of new knowledge that may influence future teaching behaviors.

> With each chapter and new readings every week, I am learning and putting everything I know into place. Some things I teach already, but didn't really understand the ins and outs as to why we speak the way we do. I can socialize with my students at recess or after school using their slang, but in the classroom, I know that it is my [j]ob to educate them with the appropriate English that they will need to use in order to be successful in their life.

The acquisition of knowledge here includes the organization of existing behaviors or knowledge into new, more meaningful frameworks. This excerpt also shows the development of a more nuanced understanding of the course content and what the teacher can do in the future to best help his or her learners.

Built Competence/Confidence

Confidence with the new and revised assumptions and the new role the individual has to play is another key feature of transformative learning. One participant expressed the supports that have been built to better prepare him or her for being a practicing educator of ELs:

> The information I learned about different dialects makes me more equipped to be the "expert" in my schools and provide information to teachers about different languages. I have also gained the skills to analyze a language in order to help students overcome differences and obstacles in moving from L1 to L2.

The building of self-confidence is demonstrated in this excerpt though the inclusion of the comparative adjective *more*. While the author may have had some experience with the course content in the past, it is clear from the excerpt, that the addition of new information resulted in a change in the students' self-perception.

Reintegrated to Life

The presence of revised assumptions demonstrates a completion of the students' process of revision, at least until the next event that forces another assessment of them, once the individual has made the new assumptions a part of his or her belief system.

> The more I realize that in my attempt to correct I may have also been implying that the way they spoke was incorrect. I have since been trying to explain that what they said was correct, however if they were in a professional setting like school it should be said this way. I have been trying to find new ways to enforce this idea in my third grade classroom.

This participant has tried implementing his or her course of action and is actively trying to "find new ways" to integrate the action into the regular classroom.

> Before this course, I often attributed my students' failures to a lack of motivation or personal choice. Now, after gaining language knowledge in this course, I can better identify when my students' are struggling due to lingual challenges. Additionally, I have learned that I need to be a positive model in the way I use my language. My pace of speaking when I teach has slowed and I try to be direct and simple in my directions.

This author is also integrating the new perceptions of her students and his or her role as a teacher into her practice with ELs.

Of the ten precursors, the most commonly occurring precursors in the reflective journals were the (a) critical assessment of assumptions; (b) the exploration of new roles, relationships, and action; (c) the acquisition knowledge and skills to implement plans.

Research Question #2: "How is transformative learning fostered in the online setting?" To determine the ways in which transformative learning was happening, evidence of the catalysts cited by participants as significant were recorded and analyzed. By far, the most commonly cited point of departure for changing perspectives appeared to be the readings, either in a textbook or article assigned during the ESL program. The second most commonly cited catalyst was an assignment or activity from the coursework. The catalysts are listed below, in order of citation frequency by the participants:

- Textbook or journal article reading
- Assignment or activity
- Critical reflection
- Class experience (in K-12 setting)
- Videos
- Interaction with EL student families
- Dialogue with colleagues (classmates or professional colleagues)
- Discussion forum
- PowerPoint presentations (by course instructors)

Surprisingly, the least cited possible catalyst in the coding was the PowerPoint presentations prepared by the instructors and provided in nearly every learning module throughout the program. Also interesting to note is the low frequency with which the participants cited their classmates from the discussion forums, a site of online interaction.

Research Question #3: "What positive and transformative perspective changes related to ELs take place in an online professional development program for K-12 teachers?" Evidence for determining what positive and transformative perspective changes are present was found in two separate parts of the data.

The first is in an exploration of the co-occurrence of the precursors and catalyst codes. As noted previously, the textbook and other assigned readings and assignments and activities were the most frequently mentioned catalysts. Any precursor associated with those two catalysts, then, would be direct outcomes that could potentially have a positive affect on ELs. Occurring together with the textbook and readings, for example, were the critical assessment of assumptions, acquiring knowledge and skills to implement plans, and self-examination and feelings of shame, fear, guilt, or anger. With the assignments or activities were disorienting dilemmas, planning a course of action, and provisional trying of new roles. Building self-confidence, discontent, sharing with colleagues, and reintegrating into one's life were all evenly dispersed across the different catalysts.

The second way of answering research question #3 is by isolating the precursors that have to do with taking action and ELs. For example, a participant details how he or she is using a teaching model in class, which is increasing the teacher's self-confidence:

> Since reading [the textbook] my lessons have included language objectives that were planned prior to the delivery of the lesson. I feel like I am accomplishing more with each lesson. I also have found that my students as a whole are retaining more of the words that I focus on in a lesson. In addition, I am seeing the words in their writing as well as in connections during readers' workshop.

In this excerpt, the author makes a direct connection between the required course readings and the perceived effectiveness of their lessons. The greater sense of accomplishment that the author attributes to the readings demonstrates a clear development of self-confidence. Another participant made a similar statement, but this time, indicates a plan to change the role he or she has previously held in the classroom:

> The [reading] will begin to influence my teaching immediately. When planning my activities for next week, I will integrate some of these strategies. I am planning to use a seven-step process to introduce new vocabulary words next week. Also, I will differentiate instruction with the [reading]. I have some students who are very good readers, but have some difficulty with meaning (in English). I will be trying some of the activities using the polysemous words to try to target this weakness.

In this excerpt, the author indicates a direct change in his or her own teaching behaviors. The intention to try new activities, and include new teaching strategies shows that the author may be considering a new role as a different kind of teacher.

Discussion

Findings from the use of the transformative learning theoretical framework to explore perspective shifts occurring in an online ESL professional development program reveal positive changes that will benefit English language learners in the classroom. The data analysis described above indicates the presence of evidence of shifts in perspectives of program participants on sociocultural issues, something significant not only for the children, but also for teacher preparation programs, as evidenced by the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE). Specifically, these changes are highlighted in NCATE's expectations, wherein institutions "assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings" (Professional dispositions, n.d.). NCATE further defines these professional dispositions as "fairness and the belief that all students can learn" (Professional dispositions, n.d.).

The perspective shifts appear to occur most often during periods of time when racial and social class awareness and understanding are the focus of the content, and when the course instructors attempt to foster critical reflection through questions designed to encourage in-depth analysis of one's own beliefs. As noted by Cranton and Taylor (2012), it is possible that the teaching practices in the professional development program fostered transformative learning, but without question, the learner has to be ready for a change, the context has to be right, and outside factors play a role in any transformation. One of the limitations of this study is the purposeful sampling, which does not readily allow for generalizability to other populations. The participants consisted mainly of self-directed learners, often the kind of students who are drawn to online education. All of the study participants were employed teachers who were seeking to further their professional skills. While some of them may have been motivated to participate in the course by pay increases or issues of job security, the group as a whole consisted of self-selected learners with an intrinsic motivation to learn more about teaching English to ELs. This motivation may indicate a readiness for change on the part of the participants, making them more likely to be open to perspective shifts.

Another limitation is the stated objectives of the program in which the participants were enrolled, which include topics that are designed to encourage critical reflection, as well as the educational philosophy of the researchers, who in this case, helped write the curriculum. The data used in the study were excerpts taken directly from reflective journal assignments that

often explicitly requested students to reflect on their personal and professional experiences in light of the readings and coursework. This act of overt and required reflection might be one of the reasons for the amount of reflection noted. Online courses that do not make explicit requests for reflection, or design readings and coursework in a way that elicits reflection, may not show evidence of TL precursors.

The excerpts taken from the assignments in the program indicate that textbook readings and other assigned readings appeared to be the single most important factor in stimulating critical reflection. Although the finding is not surprising, it may contrast with the activities that are traditionally believed to stimulate critical reflection in face-to-face classes. The significance of readings in an online program can be attributed to several different factors, including learner motivation, the quality of the texts, and the structure and content of the readings and assignments. Each of the texts in this sequence of courses was carefully chosen for its immediate applicability in the classrooms of in-service teachers, as well as for its ability to challenge commonly held beliefs in the K-12 teacher population. The texts themselves often spoke directly to teachers' experiences in the classroom, providing both positive and negative examples of teacher behaviors. The textbooks in particular often included reflective questions suitable only for in-service teachers. Teachers who were looking for ways to meet the challenge of educating ELs in their schools could find the most current and most sound answers to their questions in a careful reading of these texts. Surprisingly, the discussion forums were not noted as significant catalysts for transformative learning precursors. Given the online setting, building a community of learners to encourage dialogue would seem to be an essential piece in the process of transformative learning (Boyd & Meyers, 1998).

From a theoretical perspective, additional analysis of the data should be undertaken to enhance the accuracy of interpretation of the transformative features. The precursor tool (Brock, 2010; Snyder 2008), while useful for uncovering insights and revealing possible transformation, does not provide adequate nuanced analysis of the types of belief transformations that are taking place. Further exploration can be done using Mezirow's (2000, 2012) concept of "meaning schemes," which are the beliefs that make up a person's meaning perspective or frame of reference through which the world is viewed. A meaning schemes analysis of the data would allow for a more thorough understanding of how much development of the transformative features is taking place.

In light of the findings and despite the limitations of the study, several recommendations can be made to online instructors and course designers who are seeking to increase the frequency of transformative learning precursors demonstrated by program participants. Because of the power of textbook and course readings to elicit transformative learning precursors, special attention should be given to the selection of texts to encourage "development and of both insight and knowledge…to educate the whole person" (Smith, 2012, p. 413). Such texts for online programs should be selected carefully to address the specific needs of the candidates and help them build on their existing skill set and knowledge base. Additionally, meaningful and focused readings should be paired with assignments that explicitly request the participants to reflect on their experiences and include references to the assigned readings and activities. These findings indicate that the transformative spaces created online are also dependent on the learners themselves. Motivated and self-directed learners appear to be one of the most important factors in fostering transformative learning, particularly when the perspective shifts take place around sociocultural issues. We suggest that researchers move forward in applying transformative learning theory to the process of teacher preparation and professional development.

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