

Effective Teaching Practices: Global Tools Used by Leaders in Early Childhood Education

Abstract

Three early childhood educators reflect on their distinct perspectives when providing professional development to early childhood education teachers in childcare centers, public schools and developing countries. This paper is a collaborative effort in which three professionals aggregate their experiences of working with teachers in various settings, South Texas Head Starts, public school early childhood centers and early childhood teachers in Zambia. These professionals, using the common characteristics defining, effective teaching, reflect on their teaching methods and strategies to consider how their approaches makes them effective teachers and leads to the professional development of their students. The purpose is to draw from these three perspectives and their teaching strategies, with the intention to impact teachers working with young children in South Texas and rural areas of Zambia.

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Introduction

Preschool teachers attend a variety of educational institutions for their professional development. Community colleges, four-year universities schools of education and non-profit teacher trainings are among them. Three early childhood educators, colleagues in the field, came together to discuss the professional development they provided as instructors to the present and future teachers of young children. Their discussion revealed that while the demographics of their students and the teaching environments were dissimilar, their goal was a common one. The three early childhood educators reflected on their distinct perspectives when providing professional development to early childhood education teachers in childcare centers, public schools and developing countries. As instructors, they are expected to be effective in their teachings and as role models for their students. Their hope is that their strategies would be effective in teaching knowledge, skills and personal experience with teaching.

Reflecting on the differences, these three professionals created a collaborative effort in which they collected their experiences of working with teachers in various settings: a university school of education, a community college early childhood education department and as trainers of early childhood teachers in Zambia. These professionals, using the common characteristics defining effective teaching principles, reflect on their teaching methods to consider how their strategies make them effective teachers and leads to the professional development of their students. Ramsden (1992) points out the assumption that student learning is possible when every teaching action is evaluated for the outcome of desired learning. This assumption “leads to an argument for reflective teaching and enquiring approach as a necessary condition for improved teaching”

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(Ramsden, 1992, p. 5). With this assumption in mind, these instructors agreed to consider Ramsden's six key principles of effective teaching in higher education. They consider these principles as they reflect on their own strategies as executed in their educational teaching environments.

- Interest and explanation
- Concern and respect for students
- Appropriate assessment and feedback
- Clear goals and intellectual challenge
- Independence, control and engagement
- Learning from students

Literature Review

Interest and explanation

With more attention being placed on the role of the teacher as it pertains to the success of young children, one key characteristic comes to mind, and that is how does a teacher become effective? The early childhood profession has changed and evolved from an occupation into a professional field and career (Goble, 2010). In this article, personal characteristics and the value of setting goals and a path to professional development links training and effective teaching. Ramsden (1992) describes how a teaching approach that used constructive engagement with learning activities leads to changes in understanding of the learner.

An example of this in a community college setting might be to review a specific concept as it pertains to the development of young children. This observation can occur in a student's classroom as they work with young children or to visit a center. Students are able to assess and provide feedback to each other regarding their observations. This interactive approach rather than a one-way communication teaching method helps students to make sense of their subject matter and enables them to see the relevance.

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An element of teaching is expressing interest in students while providing content explanations. Teachers realize that there is a strong connection between positive interaction with students and learning. Lumpkin (2007) states in her article, “Caring Teachers,” that a teacher’s belief in a student’s ability shapes the learning process. She concludes that students sense their teacher’s belief in them and they respond by “optimizing their commitment to learning” (p. 160).

Concern and Respect for Students

Effective teaching strategies included the goal of learning from students to benefit student learning. This includes an ongoing challenge for instructors to differentiate instruction for individual students. An effective instructor will adapt their instructions to meet the needs of their students. The instructor sets clear goals and plans good monitoring strategies (Stronge, 2002). The key to this process is to understand indivisible intellectual capacity of each student in order to develop new approaches and strategies in education. Shields (1999) states, “Furthermore, without better understanding, it is likely that problems will continue to be located within a student’s learning.” (p.127). It is significant to learn from students in class feedback and cues to better teach the necessary content.

Assessment

Ramsden (2003) believes the quality of teaching is learning from our student’s experiences. The learning is transferred from teacher to student and student to teacher. During this transfer, the learning begins with Rowntree’s (1997) theory that it is most critical to learn who your students are and not just how they learn. In other words,

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establish a relationship with your students to further learn their strengths and limitations as learners.

Moon and Nelson (as cited in Heafner, 2004) state that “assessment is a critical component of classroom instruction” (p. 14). During classroom instruction, students are acquiring new knowledge; there should be opportunities for students to reflect upon this new knowledge. It has been a common practice for the final grade to be the main objective instead of the “value of personal growth” which can be include of self-reflection (Heafner, 2004, p. 14), this value of personal growth is an example of an assessment.

Instruction and preparation that are egregious are most beneficial for assessment strategies. However, it is more than just introducing the assessment strategies, the students need to practice the assessment experience. Dewey (1938) states that teachers will identify assessment as a component of their own individual experience. It is more how teachers view their attitudes and beliefs about assessment that will result in their implementation (Campbell & Evans, 2000).

Clear Goals and Intelligence

Effective teaching, states Ramsden (2003), results from ongoing high academic expectations resulting in outstanding student performance. In Octacioglu’s (2008) study, self confidence should be presented in all various educational programs with the end result of sustained academic success. The teacher’s level of self-confidence is a contributing factor to student’s academic success.

A teacher’s self confidence can be demonstrated during the instruction of problem solving methods that actively engages students. The purpose is to lead students to think in

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a scientific mindset while utilizing problem solving skills. This idea is supported by Bingham's (1998) research that problem solving skills can be implemented by communicating contextual information; ideas and feelings of a global issue or conflict. "People not only gain understanding through reflection, they evaluate and alter their own thinking (Bandura, 1986, p. 21). People not only gain understanding through reflection, they evaluate and alter their own thinking (p. 21).

Ozda (1977) further elaborates that implementing problem based solving methods such as problem based learning reinforces imagination and scientific thinking skills. During this reinforcement of presenting the results in problem based learning, self confidence begins to develop and "is seen as a necessity for successful teaching" (Otacioglu, 2008, p. 97).

Intellect challenging is also indicative of successful teaching, it occurs as students are learning and engaging in problem based experiences that identify student's practices and beliefs (Moore, 2008). In the student's learning, "the ideas, understandings and attitudes that students acquire will be inspirational in their teaching" (Gunning & Mensa, 2011, p. 183). The instructor should present a teaching approach that cultivates ideas and understandings that will inspire the spark of student's learning. Lederman (2004) states that students, "actively construct their understandings of the world and these constructions are significantly influenced by prior knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and experiences" (p. 40). Students would benefit in their self-confidence from discussing their prior knowledge and experiences from current world events. The instructor should construct the learning environment in knowledge that is conceptual and experiential to scaffold the student's learning (Krajcik, 1999). The instructor's teaching attitudes are to

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involve “self esteem, interest, past experience and self efficacy” (Kobally & Glynn, 2007, p. 174) which will mirror student self confidence because the students will observe that effectiveness of the teacher’s attitude. Bandura (1997) suggests that teacher self efficacy can stem from self confidence; instructors that demonstrate self efficacy are reflecting to students that they can be successful in the course and as a teacher through their own self efficacy. Acquiring the confidence at the beginning of the course can induce the foundation for student’s sustained academic success. In summation, the instructor’s self confidence can be presented in meaningful learning experiences that will result in student’s academic success and self efficacy.

Independence, control and active engagement

Setting the classroom environment for independence and active engagement are methods used by instructors. Some of the goals designed to meet the needs of the independent student are: personal autonomy, the ability to manage one’s learning and independent learning in a non-formal environment (George, 2004). The goal is to develop students as researchers so that they continue to construct their own knowledge of various topics. As students develop more responsibilities for their own learning, the teaching role evolves into that of a facilitator and guide. Some examples of methods used by instructors: group projects, case-base learning and projects (George, 2004).

Learning from Students

An ongoing challenge for instructors is how to differentiate instruction for individual students; the key to this process is to understand the indivisible intellectual capacity of each student. An effective instructor will adapt her instruction to meet the needs of her students. The instructor sets clear goals and plans good monitoring

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strategies (Stronge, 2002). The use of pre-assessment to support the teaching strategies and provide feedback to support and encourage students is key. The information/concept is present to challenge and help students be successful.

Educational Environments of These Instructors

Preschool Teacher Training in a Developing Country, Zambia

Since January of 2005, Lisa has worked with Women's Global Connection, WGC, as the coordinator of the Children under Seven project in Zambia. WGC is a non-profit organization committed to building bridges of connection to promote the learning and leadership of women locally and around the world. The WGC Preschool Teacher Training Institute is a project that evolved after an investigative trip in June 2003 where we learned of the desperate needs of young children in Zambia.

Teaching Students in Community College

Ana teaches at a community college, in the department of Early Childhood Studies. The college is a Hispanic-Serving Institution and the largest of five colleges within the district. Ana works to develop a relationship with the students. The first few classes are spent getting to know each other and building a class community of learners. An example of concern and respect for students and student learning, Ana is intentional in modeling with the students tips on note taking, setting up a calendar to remind them of when assignment are due and teaching methods are implemented to meet a variety of the adult learning styles. Building interest and connection for the course is instrumental. By asking students to provide examples on how the course material is relevant to them, or how they see themselves using the information in their current work place. Setting clear goals from the first day of class, having the students share with what they expect from

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Ana as an instructor also builds clear goals for the semester. Creating a learning environment that challenges students and class discussion that lead students to ponder on the topic and reflect is an intellectual challenge.

Teaching Pre-Service Teachers in 4 Year University

Lynda teaches at a four year public university in the department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching for students who are seeking an EC-6 (Early Childhood through 6th grade) Generalist degree or an EC-6 Bilingual Generalist Certification. Her teaching promotes academic and pedagogical knowledge and research, engagement in reflective practice, a value for diversity, caring about the students and their profession, and advocacy for educational change. The curriculum is an interactive approach that involves technology, integration, lesson planning and field placements that require teaching lessons and engagement with the elementary students.

Educational Environments and Effective Teaching Strategies

The central aim of the three instructors is to review their teaching strategies and to create a connectedness that demonstrates how the professional development training has a common characteristic when teaching, in spite of the different educational environments. The purpose is to draw from this triad of perspectives and their teaching strategies, with the intention to impact teachers working with young children in South Texas and rural areas of Zambia.

Preschool Teacher Training in a Developing Country

Interest and explanation. In the Zambia setting there was great interest to learn more about child growth and development, as well as methods and strategies to teach young children. The formal education curriculums at the local teacher's college addressed teaching children from elementary years (seven years old) to secondary school (17 years). Even preschool teachers that had an education past secondary school did not

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have experience with early childhood education. This meant that the teaching strategies used in the preschool classroom were didactic and passive.

Student Learning. Because the students' culture and experiences were a new and different reality for the instructors, there was a significant amount of time spent speaking individually to students before class and during breaks. One of these cultural differences was language. While formal school settings teach in English, English is a second language for everyone. Zambia has seven local tribal languages, depending on the region, that are used in homes and communities on a daily basis.

Assessment. The instructors used the information during their daily debriefings to make modifications or changes to the session for the following day. By the third day of the week long training students expected and waited for the feedback form to give their assessment of the session. This showed the instructors that the students found their feedback to be immediately useful.

Clear goals and Intelligence. In the first hour of the session, students were asked to pose their questions related to the topics of the week. These questions were then used to set clear goals and referred to often by the instructors. As students were presented with new methods and strategies they were instructed to adapt the new information into activities they would present in their classroom for their age group of children. Together, new activities and resources were discovered, such as using local clay found along the banks of the river to form shapes for tactile learning. Students immediately decided to make alphabet letters for creating words and simple sentences.

Independence and Active Engagement. Students were gradually encouraged to take initiative with the information they gained by engaging them in guided practice. With each week of the institute, students were given more control to share information and develop activities. The final training sessions of the WGC Preschool Teacher Training Institute were sessions in which the students took initiative to use all four weeks of the institute modules and create parent information and activities for families to use at home related to the activities in their classroom. This allowed students to exert their control to transfer their cumulative knowledge in their own reality.

Learning from students. The daily feedback evaluations were useful in the task of learning from the students immediately. Instructors debriefed after each session to review their learning and use it in the following sessions. This was a major component of the instructors' experience. The different reality of presenting early childhood education method and strategies in a developing country was a new experience to all the instructors.

Community College Department of Early Childhood Studies

Interest and Explanation. Students are able to link class lectures and concepts learned as they observed teachers in various early childhood settings. Coming together as a class to reflect on observations allows for a dialogue about the best teaching practices in the field. A key tool used by Ana is "coaching and mentoring" during the observation process and discussion.

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Student Learning. Student learning is twofold, observation and demonstration. As students observe teachers in various early childhood settings, they are able to use class notes and various checklists to observe.

Assessment. Student assessment is based on their own reflection and the process of change to their own teacher's actions or classroom environment. Using before and after pictures of their classrooms provide them with documentation used to share with other peers.

Clear Goals and Intelligence. Conceptual learning provides the avenue for clear goals and intelligence. Students "aha-moments" as they reflect on their class and new concepts learned from class lectures and class activities.

Independence and Active Engagement. Learning in these two areas is essential for student's reflection practice. Student develops skills and understandings of their own need to be active in their reflection practice and to transfer skills learned to their own teaching strategies.

Learning from Students. As an educator learning from students is essential to the development of the class environment. Students provide, provoke and can challenge us to reach key teaching strategies that provide both the learner and instructor with rich experiences.

Four Year University, School of Education

Interest and Explanation. Students will permeate a learning connection if the explanation is contextual and of interest. Lynda's students create a math pack that consists of two math activities that are reinforced with the guidance from a parent, caregiver or older sibling in the home. The math pack assignment is bridging the family and school connection, the math activities serve as an enrichment of the math content objectives.

Student Learning. Teachers are natural risk takers, as they are always trying novel teaching methods and strategies that are innovative. When teachers are trying new learning methods and strategies, they are challenging themselves as professionals and modeling the art of risk taking to their students. Risk taking may not be outlined in a textbook, but is a real life experience that comes with practice.

Assessment. The assessment strategy is identified in three types of reflection: internal, parallel and external. Students individually prepare a lesson plan which is an example of an internal reflection. The next assignment is for the students to parallel with other students in the same assigned grade levels in their field placement and collaborate their input while assessing each other's lesson plan. This is an example of parallel reflection. The external reflection is when Lynda provides color coded feedback in the student's lesson plan. The specific color coded feedback helps the students to grow professionally through self-knowledge and in learning the preparation of a lesson plan.

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Clear Goals and Intelligence. Clear goals and intelligence are presented through problem based learning. This is a group of students collaborating on a world problem to find a solution. Once the solution is identified, the results are presented in a teaching scenario. The problem solving skills are a learning transfer of the clear goals for the course and the intelligence is the implementation of the problem solving skills.

Independence and Active Engagement. Independence and active engagement are the results of being an active agent in teaching. students are introduced to professional organizations and they are taught how to apply the professional organization's information in their learning. NCTM (National Teacher of Mathematics) is a national math research organization that is discussed throughout the semester and thoroughly introduced in the course syllabus. The students learn to be active agents in their engagement of learning and become independent learners through the application of current research trends.

Learning from Students. As an educator, how you learn from your students can breed success in student achievement. At the end of every lecture, students reflect in one paragraph what they learned for the day and pair/share their reflections. Three students are asked to respond, to illustrate in a graphic organizer of their responses and this culminates with the lecture objectives. Though the reflection is a simple, informal activity, it is a quick check for understanding.

Analysis

In the following matrix, each instructor identified a teaching strategy they implemented which demonstrated each of Ramsden's (2003) effective teaching principles.

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Table 1.1. *Analysis Implemented Strategies*

Educational Environment	Interest and Explanation	Concern and respect for students	Assessment	Clear Goals and Intelligence	Independence, Control and Active Engagement	Learning from Students
Preschool Teacher Training in Developing Country	Execution of requested topics and strategies	Cultural competence through discourse	Daily evaluation of session used by instructors to modify curriculum	Contextual learning/ risk taking to demonstrate challenge	Adaptation of cumulative learning for home activities	Immediate use of student feedback
Community College Department of Early Childhood	Classroom observation & reflection	Student able to observe Demonstration teacher/ model by demo teacher	Conceptual understanding through application	Observation link to contextual learning	Model Approach for practical application	Classroom assessment and reflection
Four Year University School of Education	School Home connection	Risk taking	Reflection -Individual -Parallel -External	Problem Based Learning	Active agents in current educational research	Checking for Understanding through Reflection

Reflection of Strategies

After reviewing their strategies within Ramsden's (2003) effective teaching principles, they considered their strengths and limitations in comparison to the three teaching environments.

Common Strengths

Observation of students for practical applications was used within the community college and university environments, as well as, using reflection as a tool for assessment and evaluation.

Contextual learning for understanding was used by instructors in the community college and the Non-governmental organization (NGO) preschool Teacher Training Institute.

School-Home Connection activities were a common method used by the NGO Teacher Training Institute and the university school of education.

Common Limitations

Within the NGO Preschool Teacher Training Institute, several limitations existed, understanding a different reality, language barriers, distance, and time. The focus during the four week-long trainings was to transfer knowledge of child growth and development with age appropriate activities for conceptual understanding. Teaching concepts and application had precedence to reflection and observation of students.

Within the community college early childhood studies, the instructor's limitation is the time constraints in which to check for understanding of student learning and application simultaneously. This is due to the varied standards of each student's classroom settings.

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Within the university school of education setting, a limitation is the inability to consistently observe students for practical application in their classroom settings. This is due to the course criteria.

Individual Dissimilarities

Each instructor then considered the dissimilarities in the comparison. Each identified a strength, and a limitation that enables them to implement effective teaching principles in their environment.

Preschool Teacher Training in a Developing Country

Strength. Presenting workshops in Zambia came with many challenges, but the strength which presented itself in every week of the Preschool Teacher Training Institute was the learning from the students. Only when we learned from the students; for example, about their cultural attitudes towards children, or about the natural resources available in the area, could we provide a curriculum that is appropriate and useful to them.

Limitations. During the workshops, we became very aware of our dependence on materials in the early childhood classroom, even simple materials such as paper and crayons. When these materials are not available to teach concepts, the instructors must be creative to demonstrate teaching strategies with other resources.

Community College Department of Early Childhood

Strength. The strength in observation and reflection in learning and teaching is the linking of pedagogy and practice. When students are able to apply what they have learned and reflect on these practices, the learning becomes concrete and “real” to them.

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Limitation. A limitation of this process is reflection and observation. Teachers in this process must be able to understand the reflection process and evaluate their own classroom.

Four Year University, School of Education

Strength. Pedagogy is a strength that Lynda identifies that comes with over 20 years of teaching experience in the public school and teaching pre-service teachers. The teaching experience supports a solid foundation of appropriate teaching methods and strategies. Instructing pre-service teachers how to be quality educators can stem from a solid foundation of a pedagogical approach of teaching.

Limitation. The idea of observing all the pre-service teachers teach or engage with the elementary students is a limitation. The limitation can be due to the quantity of field days during the semester. The instructors are out in the field during the students' assigned field day and make contact with the students and the cooperating teachers, but cannot officially observe each teacher teach a full lesson due to time constraints.

Conclusion

In three different lens, three Early Childhood teachers explain and substantiate their best teaching practices. Though each teacher has her own philosophical convictions, and through individualized contextual environment, she has executed the most appropriate teaching strategies to best fit the students' needs and students' learning experiences. These teaching strategies have organically defined the Early Childhood teacher's strengths, but have also served as a muse for each other and to continue to serve as muse to further their professional development as future Early Childhood leader.

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