

Master Capstone Project

**A Professional Development Study to Diminish Teacher Subject Based Bias to Improve
Student Engagement**

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Abstract

This professional development (PD) study focused on teaching, learning, and growing in providing bias free lessons across all subjects. The leading participant in this study was myself with the fundamental guidance of my mentor, field supervisor, and students. All intervention was guided by my mentor and field supervisor. Personal journaling conserved a culmination of goal completion over the duration of six months which also entailed feedback from others and self-reflection. Results from the study found body language, voice tone, manipulatives, and diversified lessons aided in cultivating lessons free of prejudice, granting engaging lessons for all students.

Introduction

This study began in September of 2020, mid-pandemic where teachers and students made adjustments between remote and in-person learning. I observed student engagement and enthusiasm to be stale during literacy lessons, different from the enthusiasm and engagement during science. Upon every literacy lesson, I had discovered my own enthusiasm and excitement was missing, after several weeks I acknowledged a link between my actions and lack of my students. Through personal assessment and reflection, I was able to set a goal of conducting all lessons with a bright and positive attitude in which students would feel excitement through my voice and body language. Review of multiple studies and observations of mentor teachers demonstrated there are many ways to teach lessons that will overcome subject biases thus cultivating wholesome engagement reflective of my own passion in teaching.

Dilemma (or Problem Statement)

During literacy lesson delivery, I noticed behaviors in which my students exhibited were almost identical to behaviors and emotions I was relaying after finding myself grieving over teaching reading. Behaviors exhibited by students were dull, with displays of disengagement, a lack of willingness for involvement in group discussions, and seeking of other means for entertainment. When transitioning into science and social studies lessons, students often demonstrated a heightened level of excitement and eagerness to learn about any given topic within the subjects.

Recognition of these behaviors led to the discovery of the bias I potentially possess thus building the question, “What can I do differently to keep literacy lessons free of subject biases?”

Therefore, I chose my focus to be a professional growth study reflecting on my own knowledge and growth in practices, strategies, and communication.

Rationale

Every lesson directed by a teacher takes hours of planning to effectively teach a skill. Even with careful planning, well-chosen strategies, and clear communication techniques an educator can manifest a bias hidden or not recognized. Stevens (2017) asserts biases are not often brought to the attention of the people who encompass them. Referred to as implicit bias; they inevitably influence decisions, actions, communication, and body language. Stevens (2017) depicts implicit bias as a result of the human brain trying to make sense of the present world. The researchers found that educators can inadvertently exhibit some form of bias within any classroom.

A bias can often be interpreted as a classroom management dilemma. Teachers will alter or generate a strategic plan of action, interpreting the bias as the problem of the classroom and not of their own. The nature of implicit bias fashions a notion student behavior can be resolved with rules and regulations required for the success within the classroom setting ignoring the query of whether a bias may be the elephant in the room. Scialabba (2017) outlines the steps to overcoming a bias is to acknowledge it, stop it, and change it. Studies show all people have implicit bias however, it is something often overlooked by the modern educator.

This professional development study intends to recognize and stop my bias; utilizing reflective practices to change the delivery of lessons without impeding student engagement.

Literature Review

The review of the literature indicates biases exist in many forms, thus requiring proactive ways to address them if the goal is to create a classroom learning environment rich in engaging the whole child. In addition to the study of bias, various communication styles were studied comparing and contrasting the negative and positive effects in conjunction with lesson delivery.

Bias, fears, and the affects

A number of negative effects have been found when educators possess any kind of bias within a classroom. One of these effects is students lacking a proper foundation in educational and real-world subjects, which build throughout grade levels. Torkar (2015) reports results from a study in Slovenia in which preservice teachers negative attitudes towards snake conservation and incorporating reptilian animals into studies, impacted development of future science curriculum. In any grade level teachers influence students attitudes toward and familiarity with endangered/protected species such as snakes. Other studies show the negative effects of teacher subject bias. Wagler and Wagler (2018) studied the effects of middle school teachers' fear of arachnids resulting in narrowing their choice of curriculum for students. In their study, researchers noted students were not exposed to foundational knowledge of biological and ecological studies.

A study conducted on college students, the researcher observed the impact personal fears have in mastery of science-based courses. Sanstad (2018) distinguished fear of teaching science rooted from the perception of the subject being too hard or complex. Science had built anxiety within preservice educators due to a fear of science being interpreted as too difficult and requiring too much to learn. Sanstad (2018) examined the differences between treatable anxiety and fears in adults learning at a college level. The researcher determined singular fears to be

treatable while anxieties as a collection of different fears manifested together thus making it difficult to master science instruction.

Effective Communication

In a study observing the relationships amongst teachers and students, researchers found a positive connection between educators and students' results in academic achievement. Shan, Lin, Shi, Wang, and Cai (2014) investigated how a positive classroom has a positive effect on learning performance amongst students. This study investigated three factors in building a positive classroom through the influence of effective communication between students and teachers, achievement sharing, and learning performance through an empirical analysis of self-efficacy beliefs, student engagement, personality traits, and learning strategies. A similar study conducted by Keser and Yavuz (2018) studied how effective lessons begin with effective classroom management. Within the study, 44 preservice teachers were observed throughout several lessons and presentations, to determine classroom management problems. In their study, they found positive relationships and increased student engagement, were components of student success.

According to research, effective communication embodies consistent acknowledgment of students' voices; making eye contact frequently and facing students rather than turned away. Brown (2019) studied communication skills between adolescents and adults. The study focused on congruent communication, defined as a kind of speaking that does not attack others, but remains balanced by using active listening techniques responding with empathy to students' frustrations and anxiety, and body language and facial expressions that match verbal messages. The researchers data found empathetic listening, built stronger relationships between student and teacher.

Effective Teaching, Teacher Strategies, student strategies

Research suggests strategies to improve engagement within a classroom come from a variety of different techniques a teacher implements for all subjects. In contrast to having teacher strategies, student strategies are considered necessary for effective teaching. Lee, Lan, Hamman, and Hendricks (2008) studied whether notetaking had an effect on retention of science lessons for 3rd graders. Science was the chosen subject due to its high involvement of reading and writing. They found the students demonstrated thorough notes when using forms that included writing prompts which were taught by the teacher. The researchers noted retention of science material was higher through written recall versus only through memory.

A similar climate of research put teachers in the place of students within team planning, where teachers were observed to take on roles different than what they ordinarily would assume. Smit, Rietz, and Kreis (2018) studied the effects of collaborative lesson planning by science pre-service teachers on their attitudes and knowledge. There were 120 pre-service teachers studied. Peer coaching was utilized to build a system in which teachers accepted roles of being a coach to their grade level team versus taking over lesson planning through the use of team leaderships. Researchers found teachers switching roles during lesson planning, instead of assigning roles removed negative biases which had a correlation with student attitude during and at the end of lesson delivery.

When looking at ways to be an effective teacher, Alsharif and Yongyue (2014) conducted a three-year study to determine the effect of instructor attitude, enthusiasm, and teaching style on learning for distance and campus pharmacy students. The study involved 187 distance students and 285 campus students who were admitted to the pharmacy program at Creighton University in 2009, 2010, and 2011. Instructor enthusiasm was measured based on responses to general

questions. Students were asked whether the instructor was “full of energy” when teaching, 99% of the distance students and 94% of the campus students strongly agreed. Students also agreed the instructors teaching style aided in helping with mastery of their course content.

Student-centered Learning

Student centered learning involves including the students in planning, implementation, and assessment, by inviting the learners into building the lessons through a share of ideas. Several positive effects of student-centered learning were highlighted in a study conducted by Brough and Calder (2014) who investigated principles and practices of student-centered mathematics lessons. The study examined curriculum integration where children, of two primary schools, were involved in creating real world math situations through collaboration such as determining how long four meters (the length of a sump hole in their playground) were using estimation and actual measurements.

Students were asked to determine how they would estimate and what would they use for actual measurements. Another problem developed by the students, was to determine how they would change their learning environment, being the size of the classroom. The lessons placed students in the center of learning, which required teachers to share power and work with students in a partnership. Researchers found student-centered learning had students immersed within their learning. Students were observed having open discussions and suggestions concerning the requirements, resources, and budgets for expanding the classroom thus building mathematical inquiries and allowing the students to retain control over their learning.

In contrast, a mixed method approach (student centered together with teacher-centered) is indicated by research to be effective within a higher education classroom setting. Bidabadi, Isfahani, Rouhollahi, and Khalili (2016) reports results from a study conducted on higher

education teachers through use of mixed methods. Over the course of the study, teachers indicated unfocused students were asked about their present barriers for lack of focus and how the teacher can help. In their study, students were faced with problems they conceived as being important, placing responsibility for recognizing what works and what does not so a higher level of understanding can be reached.

Research indicates there are numerous positive effects when classrooms take a student-centered approach, however some research indicates subjects and classroom situations determine whether student-centered or teacher-centered would be most effective. Wu and Huang (2006), for example, investigated ninth-graders' engagement in teacher-centered and student-centered technology-enhanced classrooms where students used computer simulations to learn concepts about force and motion. Two science classes examined in the study were assigned differently, one class was assigned teacher-centered and the other student-centered. This study exhibits evidence that different instructional approaches do not lead to dramatic differences in students' performances on achievement tests or achievements in general. Instead, differences of approaches give students different ways of engaging in a lesson.

Wu and Huang (2006) reports students in the student-centered class reported having significantly higher emotional engagement, made reflections about what they did, and centered their discussions on the content of simulations, while students in the teacher-centered class interacted through initiation–response–evaluation sequences, discussed student-initiated questions, and explored difficult concepts under the teacher's guidance.

Classroom Pedagogy

Research suggests a playful pedagogy is a form of effective teaching practices with the integration of technology via SmartBoards or interactive white boards. In a study by Morgan

(2010) interactive play through the use of interactive white boards was examined to determine if a playful pedagogy would remove sedentary practices and desk bound activities within the classroom. Thirty classrooms were observed with children age ranged from three to seven years of age. Over the course of two-half day sessions, the researcher recognized through data collection, students were able to express themselves and represent their ideas across the different media. Interactive play through use of technology was noted to bring out a different side to learning in which students figured out different aspects of the board available to them. Playful pedagogy has been found to a number of positive effects within the classroom.

In a study conducted by Marcon and Faulkner (2016) determined playful pedagogy can bring real world interests into the classroom to motivate students literacy practices, particularly girls. In this study a classroom of 26 students, consisting of 14 girls. The study took place over two weeks, incorporating nine 72-minute periods. The results from the study found girls worked collaboratively in a number of ways. First, they used expressive language to seek help from each other, with one novice player mentoring another as her competency grew. Secondly, the girls orally collaborated to devise solutions to problems within the game, motivating through play to collaboratively problem solve.

In comparison, a playful pedagogy is said to be effective for learners of all ages. Whitton and Langan (2019) reports results from a study in 39 undergraduate students in a university in the North West of England investigating whether higher education students believe fun should be part of learning. The researcher found some students enjoyed lessons that involved games. However, this study also shows that games are not necessary, or even important, for the creation of fun learning.

Question

When teaching, what can I do differently to keep literacy lessons free of subject based bias?

Purpose

To grow professionally in my teaching styles, creating learning experiences rich in engagement and excitement for all students within my classroom.

Methodology

Context

This research was conducted at a Catholic private school in Snoqualmie under the Archdiocese of Seattle. According to OSPI data collection fall of 2020, there are approximately 163 students enrolled in grades K-8. The school community consists of high-income families with a strong Catholic faith. Student population is predominately white (97%) with 3% of the student body being Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Indian, and African American ethnicity (OSPI, 2020).

Data Gathering Instruments/Assessments

Input from my mentor and field supervisor were vital in determining what changes needed to be made to remove my bias from my literacy lessons, which were ultimately affecting student engagement. Over the course of sixteen weeks, data was collected from video recordings, debriefings, mentor feedback sessions, and journal entries:

Inquiry #1: Video Recording Reflections.

Several videos across math, science, and reading were utilized to take note instances requiring change. During a math lesson from October 23rd, 2020 my field supervisor noted my body language was sending off a negative appearance stating, *“I notice your arms are folded a lot. I happen to be sensitive to body language and was wondering what message students might*

be picking up if you are walking around with folded arms? Consider how we speak as teachers even when we are moving around the room silently. What does our body say?''. After reviewing the video and watching only my movements, I noticed crossed arms, towering over students, and lack of facial expressions made the lesson very boring. Further analysis of the video displayed a lack of engagement stemming from me instead of my students, through my communication, voice, and body.

It was not until November 2nd, 2020, when I noticed my bias through video reflecting. My field supervisor mentioned, *“One of the things I really like about your style of teaching is that when you explain something, you do it not because you have to, but because it is really interesting and your interest in it comes across to the students and imparts a bit of curiosity in them.”* After her comment, I immediately reviewed the video focusing on my body movement, voice, and excitement for teaching science. It was very different from what I had viewed in my October video. As I sat back, I compared and contrasted my communication styles and skills focusing more on how engaged my students were when I was excited about a lesson versus the latter.

After reflecting upon the positive and negatives of my two recorded sessions, I implemented student centered learning into my language arts lesson conducted November 5th, 2020. My field supervisor mentioned, *“Pulling students into the action of the story!! Great way to make this more tangible for them and help students struggling to learn how sentences are made up. This also allows more fidgety students the ability to move around and stretch it out so they can learn better,”* which was in part to the way I put students into a story and removing the written-in characters. When I reviewed this segment, it was evident that student centered learning would prove to be an engaging aspect for my literacy lessons. My lesson was focused

around giving up my need to control the lesson and allow my students to lead by having them build upon one another's responses.

My literacy lesson dated January 28, 2021, is where my field supervisor recognized my growth. It came to my surprise because I had wholeheartedly accepted the changes I needed and began to implement my plan of action, which was changing my movements, voice, strategies, and lesson planning. Body movements showed more excitement and my voice was friendly and welcoming. As my mentor mentioned before, I kept my humor and incorporated fun into my literacy lessons by making my students the center for learning. It was not about my lectures, but more about what my students needed and that was an effective teacher. My field supervisor mentioned, *“Even in these short clips I can see the classroom management you have created in this environment. I am very pleased to see such growth and passion for teaching in you!!”*

A lesson done March 6, 2020, affirmed the changes I had implemented within my classroom. After reviewing and reflecting upon my changes, I compared this video and one from October. Using my TPEP framework rubric, I assessed myself. While as an individual, we are always growing and changing; I feel the same applies for teaching. Student engagement was evident, my body movement was positive. I was no longer slumped over nor looking as if I was dragged into a lesson. My voice sounded so encouraging, my students said I sounded like someone from a theme park announcing a spectacular ride. I watched myself elicit student answers with excitement, asked students to develop ideas off of others, allowed them to lead me in recording data, and maintained a positive attitude through the lesson. My field supervisor mentioned, *“As always you are an amazing instructor and teacher to these students. I am very proud of all your work. You have implemented much of what I offer, and it shows in the students' engagement and responses.”*

Inquiry #2: Journal.

Through every video reflection, numerous playbacks of certain recordings, and singling out the wrongs I noticed in my teaching, my focus remained on my question: “What could I do differently to remove my subject based bias?” though it echoed in my thoughts differently. Study after study, I singled out the issues I noticed, and the ones brought forth from my mentor and field supervisor. I read countless numbers of journals and studies, attended Positive Behavioral Social Emotional Support (PBSES) Professional Development (PD) and received critical feedback from peers outside of my classroom because I had determined my lack of excitement had to be rooted in classroom management. However, I was incredibly wrong.

Bias Acknowledgement

My “ah ha”, my moment, came from differences I saw in myself teaching science and then teaching literacy in the months of October through December. Suddenly, my own anxieties were subsided, and my fears had taken over which in a study read, determined fears are harder to conquer than anxieties. Quietly, I questioned myself as to whether I had a bias in literacy. I dove deep to determine where it had grown from. As someone who loves to read and write, I was finally going to acknowledge my happiness in teaching only reflected when my subject was one that I was captivated by, that subject being science. Even within one of my videos, my field supervisor immediately recognized how knowledgeable and excited I was when teaching a science lesson.

Eliciting Peer Feedback

Shuffling through weekly assessments, I would constantly beat myself up about how my students’ achievements were not as I had expected to be. When I lesson planned, I only thought of how I could deliver the lessons. Each week I would lay out my plans, graphic organizers,

worksheets, background information, but never stopping to think” what about my students?” I felt tired, defeated every Monday when we began a new weekly skill. I recall my dislike for teaching literacy, everything about it (the lack of hands on, the amount of differentiation, the same lessons every week), all or in part related to assessment scores. When I say I dove deep, I dove into this wall I had built within, blocking all my excitement for teaching, and dwelling on percentages. My pride, the piece that I kept holding onto, was determined to conclude my students’ achievement was classroom management only.

I remember seeking advice from my peers concerning their management skills and what was working for them. Some of the literature I reviewed mentioned how positive relationships between teacher and students helps improve classroom management. However, in a meeting with my mentor, she had mentioned my classroom management was not the problem. She stated the relationships I had built with my students was strong and it was evident in their daily demeanor. My mentor did note that I needed to bring in consistency and stick to a teaching style for more than just a month. With this in mind, I worked my way through some more literature, specifically one study conducted on a class of third graders. Lee, Lan, Hamman, and Hendricks (2008) study focused on the effectiveness of notetaking and how it would help with retention. It dawned on me, I needed to teach my students strategies in order to make myself an effective teacher. I needed to put the learning in their hands.

After meetings with my mentor and observing a guided lesson conducted by her, we spoke of how I could change my literacy lessons to be more student-based rather than lecture-based, the ugly “teacher-centered” lessons. So much literature exists when it comes to student-based learning, the studies speak for themselves. A few classes in my degree program, my math professor also taught me just how effective student-centered learning was and equipped me with

strategies to implement in math, but how could I turn those strategies into reading. How do I make reading fun? Better yet, I asked, how do I make myself excited about reading? This is when I saw my change, I was using my video reflections and research to shape my lessons and stamp out my biases.

Growth

Equipped with studies and recognition of my bias, feedback from my peers, mentor, and field supervisor, I said the new year would definitely bring a new me by bringing in a better lesson planning, communication, and teacher strategies. When planning large projects, I would bring my students in to determine what kind of project they would like to complete. They were encouraged to offer ideas and collaborate on small class projects. For literacy, I developed the idea of having more fun with learning by having my students guide me through the completion of graphic organizers. I focused more on student centered discussions by having them tag team in discussions and offer ideas to add on to ones already voiced by other students. My reading groups consisted of group collaborations and team projects to display understanding of weekly reading skills such as comparing and contrasting, theme, character motivations, and more.

Affirmation

Instead of lecture-based lessons, my lessons were student-based. I knew this because my students were eager to answer comprehension-based questions, they were adding onto open discussions, and my energy levels seemed to have shifted to the same energy I exhibited during science. Literacy was no longer somber; it was opposite and rich with student engagement and excitement. When I recreated my Professional Growth Plan (PGP) and compared it to the previous PGP I had submitted in the beginning of my student teaching, I met my goals. I sought feedback, accepted constructive criticism, acknowledged that I needed change, created a plan,

and continued to model and implement these changes I needed in becoming an effective teacher. Using the 5 Dimensions Teacher Principal Evaluation Program (5D TPEP) rubric to help guide my growth, my mentor affirmed these findings and stated I had indeed grown in effective literacy lesson delivery. She claimed my growth should be maintained through professional learning communities (PLC) and that peer-to-peer observations would help with maintenance.

Inquiry #3: Mentor Notes/Peer Feedback

Mentor feedback of two different lessons consisted of suggestions to utilize during lessons to build a more student-oriented learning experience and creating diversified learners.

Each of the suggestions were implemented in my plan of change when lesson building:

- **Scanning of Document:** In order to accommodate the different levels, scanning document so that I can write at the same time and model sentence structure, spelling, etc. This will help those who have trouble finding words, e.g., mosquito, and/or are lost on their own paper.
- **Scaffolding** Do a couple of responses with students, then gradually release responsibility. For those who are prepared to move forward challenge them. “Alright, I see that you have written down one idea, I challenge you to find one on the board that is not your own and write it down.”

Additional thoughts from the mentor included having students share ideas, then write after each expert to avoid the shouting at the end. More controlled share out session. Breaking it down into more controlled segments. Use the white board to write down and brainstorm while students are thinking of ideas. Essentially, help their thinking along. Keep connecting with the kids. Your enthusiasm and love of learning is apparent. Continue to bring in your anecdotal information and your sense of humor to connect with the students.

Reflection

This professional development study (PD) highlighted many areas of growth for me as not only a teacher but as an individual. All of the literature reviewed created a larger scope into identifying and rectifying my own bias towards teaching literacy by changing the way I communicate a lesson, excitement I build towards a lesson, and placing my students in the center of the learning. Instead of looking at my students as the reasons for a disengagement, I was steadfast in my decision to look within myself and change my view on literacy by teaching myself to adequately plan an engaging lesson. In doing so, I identified my negative bias was in literacy, which resulted in my lessons being bland, lecture based, and focusing only on assessment results instead of the whole student. Through recorded video sessions, I was able to identify the differences in my voice and body language across different subject areas. With assistance of my field supervisor, I received valuable feedback concerning my identified problem areas.

My mentor teacher was present in many of lessons. She identified ways in which I was not effectively engaging my students and showed me how to properly engage my students through movement, voice tone, and manipulatives. After reflecting on my areas for improvement, I reviewed my recordings and observed the way I questioned my students, how I utilized my equipment, and began to change my teaching style. Over the course of six observations, I implemented new engagement strategies and changed my lessons to reflect student centered learning.

My classroom atmosphere shifted, and my field supervisor recognized my changes. She noted how I had grown in the past few months. When my mentor did a final observation of me in March of 2020, I asked her to critique me using the model administration normally uses when

completing teacher observations 5 Dimensions Teacher Principal Evaluation Program (5D TPEP Model). She noted many areas in which I had grown, especially in the area of student engagement. My mentor mentioned how my enthusiasm for teaching each subject encompassed what I had been working towards, lessons free of bias and an increase in positive energy. She proclaimed I had changed my teaching style to include more of my students' voice than I had when she first observed me. An area for growth was mentioned, I was to stick with consistency and focus less on the numbers presented on assessments instead focusing on gains my students made with classroom work.

Having a natural playful pedagogy already established within my classroom, made it easier to accept and continue with my new changes. As a gamer, I already connected with my students via their own interests, however with the gaming world ever growing I am now able to incorporate things I enjoy into literacy lessons. Research suggests bringing games into a classroom can motivate students when it comes to learning, therefore my lessons became more exciting for me when I incorporated lessons around games students were familiar with. My excitement for literacy had developed into something similar with my excitement for science.

In conclusion of my professional development study, my field supervisor pointed out the changes I made, including no longer crossing of my arms, movement around the classroom, involving students in active discussions, playful attitude, and creating peer-to-peer discussion groups; all of which made for a more engaged classroom. My mentor teacher gave me significant advice, declaring student engagement comes from how the teacher teaches, versus how the student listens. I now feel confident in my ability to teach each subject without allowing my fears and biases to affect how my students learn.

Professional Growth Plan

*At request.

References

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Author's Note

Melissa Narvaez is a private catholic school teacher of five years in Issaquah. She resides in Renton with her husband and children who also attend the school where she is employed. Melissa has been a long-time student at City University of Seattle. Melissa plans to continue teaching at the private school and growing as an educator in primary education. Her hobbies include camping, trail hiking, and collecting an exotic array of animals and insects to educate children about conservation efforts around the world.