Research supports that culturally responsive teachers can make a positive difference in students’ attitude towards learning and school, pointing the way for retention and school success. Standard V requirements for candidates to demonstrate that they can positively impact student learning, including those of ELL and Culturally Diverse learners invites teacher-educators to rethink field experiences in order to support candidate experiences and growth in learning to teach in culturally responsive ways that include not only majority students but minority as well. (Nieto, 2009, Banks, 2007)

This Community Action grant provided support for Secondary Education faculty and candidates to partner with a middle school teacher and her linguistically and culturally diverse class of 6th graders. The teacher’s overarching aim, beyond teaching the 6th grade curriculum and preparing for proficiency testing in spring, was to increase fluency in reading for all her students, using Literature Circles as a means to consistently provide structure for both 6th graders and candidates.

Planning together in Spring and Summer 2009, the researchers and teacher planned to integrate SEC 430 and SEC 532 and Literature Circles to provide 1) SEC ED candidates with sustained experiences of creating lesson plans, teaching and reflecting on their impact on their respective 6th grade group, using data (on-going formative assessment) to “modify, adapt, adjust” their teaching to increase student learning. (St 5.1a)

During fall, winter and spring, candidates from Dr Lawrence’s SEC 430 and 532 courses were placed in an integrated clinical field experience to support candidates’ cultural understanding of how to teach all students, but particularly culturally/linguistically diverse students in heterogeneous groups as candidates wrote/reflected/revised curriculum for the Literature Circles in response to what they were learning from and about their students. In this setting, teacher candidates planned, taught, gathered student-learning data, and reflected on their experiences. They rethought their assumptions about teaching and learning, applied culturally relevant and

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ELL teaching strategies, and came to understand individual students, and how to create learning experiences that were respectful of the strengths and capacities of the diverse learners in their small groups. Candidates were asked to write their reflections including both Student-Based evidence and Candidate-Based evidence, how their teaching positively (or not) impacted student learning. Using on-going formative assessment, candidates were expected to modify their pedagogy in order to maximize the fluency, comprehension and literacy of their Literature Circle 6th grade students over the quarter. The use of formative assessment and reflections on these data and experiences in teaching heterogeneous small groups allowed us to challenge candidates’ assumptions and engage them in generating ways of responding instructionally that were responsive to all.

We decided to immerse candidates into a diverse 6th grade classroom with many below grade level readers to structure weekly lessons of reading a novel and integrating the subject matter around social studies, adding science and math where appropriate. With the Community Action Grant funds we purchased class sets of Tuck Everlasting, Three Cups of Tea (young adult version), and Assassins of Rome to align with the social studies scope and sequence. Additionally, books were purchased for Reading Workshop, an approach to teaching reading that asks students to choose books of their interest to read and work on independently. The grant provided an array of books, high interest and diverse enough to match the class levels of reading.

To teach their 6th grade cooperative groups, candidates discovered firsthand the challenges of engaging and supporting all middle school students to learn and of meeting the specific needs of CLD learners. The candidates employed principles of SIOP, the sheltered intensive observation protocol, as a framework for planning and teaching in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. Working in small groups allowed for ongoing formative feedback to candidates continually pointing back to the language and content objectives of their SIOP lessons and allowed them to build on the context of the classroom interactions. It was very powerful because as the candidates became more sensitive to their ELL/CLD pupils, so they also became sensitive and more responsive to their other pupils. Responsive teaching then became associated in their minds with good practice.

Since each SEC ED course was aimed at teaching candidates about curriculum and instruction, the contextualization in a real-time, real-life classroom provided the framework for candidates to experience the implicit actions of teaching, rather than the abstract, external actions that are privileged when taught apart from pupils. We had confirmed that while instructors can “cover” instruction that is culturally, linguistically responsive, when it is applied on site, candidates themselves have an urgent need to understand it deeply in order to apply it in practice. This clinical model allowed for faculty to observe first-hand the development of teacher-candidates as they developed and then taught curriculum to their Literature Circle groups.

Progress in learning to write curriculum and then teaching the curriculum offered real-world opportunities for candidates to confront their biases, assumptions, and embedded beliefs/philosophy about themselves as teachers and their students as learners under the watchful eyes of both faculty and the classroom teacher. We think this has potential to be a profoundly educative experience for candidates, acquiring teaching experience with immediate feedback from their students. To be effective, lessons had to be predicated on formative assessment of
students in order to adapt/adjust/modify instruction in ways that were inclusive, engaging, and educative for their Literature Circle students. In other words, candidates learned to base their teaching on data, direct from their teaching!

This approach uses instructor time in quantitatively and qualitatively different ways that may not be compatible with the time-intensive work at WCE. Ongoing collaborations with teachers could serve as simultaneous renewal for Woodring and school faculty as both learned from and with each other, - a way to build our collective capacity to be culturally responsive as a professional community of educators that learn together and with/from their students. Developing these sustained partnerships will require departmental and institutional commitment.

Outcomes have been intended and unintended. The intended outcomes, in short, learning about middle school curriculum and instruction became far more complex, nuanced, and personally transformative when situated within a middle school classroom among CLD/ELL pupils. The stakes ratcheted up and tensions increased on the part of some of the candidates, some of whom had scant experience in any field beforehand. Some candidates opened themselves to embracing this experience of working face-to-face with middle school pupils. Others resisted and pushed back loudly, revealing far more about their privileged framework of “teacher” than about the class at large. All candidates learned what it feels like to reflect authentically, based on student-data (work, attitude, behavior, etc) and experience the ebb and flow of teaching. Reflections over time revealed nuanced understanding of the connection between teacher planned lesson and student responses, and the challenge of teaching for understanding. Furthermore, candidates’ strengths and challenges in working with students in ways that were culturally responsive became central to our collaboration in learning, rather than remaining a distant intellectual topic that most candidates are “committed to” without being aware of the personal growth required to engage in ways that are culturally responsive.

The courses featured research supported “best practices” so candidates had the opportunity to begin thinking about teaching these practices with additional attention to the needs of ELL. The most powerful learning about language came through their experience teaching and building relationships with their students including bilingual students over time in their cooperative groups. By focusing on student learning, candidates learned when to back up and offer more scaffolding and when to move forward and ask for more. This integrated practicum served as a powerful experiential catalyst for developing conceptual understanding and strategies to support learning.

There is also a question of integration: How are faculty working together to ensure that students receive the range of conceptual and practical tools and teaching experiences they need across the secondary program? For example, do they receive a foundation of knowledge about legal and historical issues in their foundations course? Do they learn about language acquisition, first and second, in their Educational Psychology courses? When they learn about social constructivism, metacognition, conceptual change, and self-regulation are connections made to how these relate to working with ELL? Where in the program is SIOP developed and when are candidates presented with varying methods are connections made to how these are altered or varied based on student need? Do candidates learn how to write language as well as content objectives? Where in our program do candidates practice reading and writing across the curriculum?

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Integration? When do students have the opportunities to learn to teach and work with ELL students and follow their learning so candidates can gauge what impact their teaching has on this population? Do candidates have the chance to develop pedagogical relationships with ELL students to better understand student construction of knowledge based on individual, cultural and linguistic differences in students?

In this course, we offered candidates a very brief overview of teaching ELL in the mainstream classroom, but with genuine collaboration across the program students would have the opportunity to deepen this knowledge over time in a way that reinforced learning without repetition. This may be happening but if it is, as new faculty in an elective endorsement, we were not aware of what background candidates brought from other courses.

Outcomes:

Refined and deepened partnership with 6th grade teachers (Jan Westermann, James Walsh)

6th graders ALL increased in fluency and comprehension, including (and especially) ELL students. A few 6th graders made adequate progress, but the majority made large gains in their reading inventory, reading fluency, and comprehension/word recognition as indicated on tests that were given at mid way and end of each quarter. The data show that significant gains overall were made by those 6th graders at the low and middle range in fall testing.

Faculty have a chapter accepted for publication focusing on formative assessment and increasing student learning and responsibility, focusing on 2009-2010 experiences over the 3 quarters.