Students and Teachers Training Program Effects in an Underprivileged School in Rural Areas in Lebanon

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Abstract
Despite recent improvements in pedagogy, schools located in underprivileged area still lack the basic teaching requirements; thus, improvement should be acquired. Classical teaching should be only mentioned in history. The classrooms should be based on student-centeredness where the teacher facilitates the learning process without imposing any knowledge on the students. This paper is based on the findings of a teaching training project the authors conducted in a semi-subsidized school in an underprivileged area in the Beqaa where most of its population is of a low economic status and they are in dire need for financial and economic improvement. As for the sample of this study, 6 teachers were met on weekly basis and observed while teaching 90 grade 1 students. The purpose is to train the students and teachers in underprivileged school in rural areas in Lebanon to spread awareness of the importance of reading in Cycle 1 and in order to enhance the reading methodologies of the teachers for better students' learning in English Language. The findings show that the teachers gained new and different theories about learning approaches. The teachers' awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches were promoted. The teachers were able to integrate different teaching approaches in the English daily lesson plan encouraging critical thinking skill development, applied different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom. It was concluded that the training workshop series achieved its objectives and the teachers were introduced to new reading methodologies.

Keywords: Teaching methodologies, Training, Constructivist learning approach

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Introduction

In a previous study conducted in 2016 (Al Chibani & Hajal, 2017), a professional teaching training program was introduced to a semi subsidized school located in the Bekaa plain. The professional development program was supported by a grant awarded to the researcher from the United States of America Embassy in Beirut. The project was a teacher training program that aimed to enhance their teaching skills and introduce them to new methodologies adapted from the American Context the recipients have observed and worked on during the Fulbright for Junior Faculty Development Program they attended and participated in during summer 2015 in the United States of America. This research examined teachers' perceptions of the impact of their professional development experience on teaching practice (Ibid). The research concluded with high effective resulted where the training workshop series achieved its objectives and the teachers were introduced to new teaching methodologies which they started to use in their classrooms and this reflects in return on the students' achievements and motivation which is the end line objective of any learning process (Ibid). Moreover, the program influenced all of the participants' teaching skills in terms of introducing them to different theorist which help while developing their lesson plans while taking into consideration students with special needs. This was reflected through their teaching throughout the training program. Besides the results, the research ended up with several recommendations based on both the mixed methodology adapted and it was addressed to the trainers in order to obtain more effective results and implement in future training sessions. Two of the most important recommendations were to train the teachers another time in the beginning of the next academic year (2017), and to engage the students more in the training program. Moreover, the research wrapped up the research by a state of the research and future directions in order to benefit more from the results for future implications (Ibid).

Since the research conducted in 2016 can be considered a pre-pilot study for future studies in order to see the effect of the recommended professional development programs on the teachers and how much the constructivist learning approaches are integrated in the classrooms lesson plans and not only in the general objectives of the subject matter, this research is based on the previous results and recommendations and aims to promote more effective teaching of reading and learning in pedagogy through encouragement of thought, debate and discussion around recent pedagogical practice. Specifically it introduces the teachers to different theories about reading approaches, promote the teachers awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches specifically reading comprehension, integrate different reading approaches in the English daily lesson plan which encourage critical thinking skill development, apply different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom, introduce students to the several methods for acquiring effective reading skills, and utilize technology to engage with classrooms as part of the constructivist learning approach. The purpose behind this research is to train the students and teachers in underprivileged school in rural areas in Lebanon in order to spread awareness of the importance of reading in grade 1 of Cycle 1 and in order to enhance the reading methodologies of the teachers for better students' learning in English Language.

Project Description

Introduction and description of the project

The professional development program was supported by a grant awarded to the researcher from the United States of America Embassy in Beirut. The project is a training program that aims to enhance the schoolteachers' teaching skills and introduce them to new methodologies adapted from the American Context in order to apply them in their classrooms during their reading comprehension classes. The school the program was conducted in is a semi-subsidized one where its population is of a low economic status and is in dire need for financial and economic improvement.

The project was divided into two parts: The first part was for the Cycle 1 English teachers employed in a school in the Bekaa plain of Lebanon to enhance their teaching skills while teaching reading comprehension and introduce them to different English teaching methodologies. The second part was be for 90 Grade 1 students of Cycle 1 to enhance their comprehension of the importance of reading and introduce them to different new methods for acquiring reading comprehension skills. In Cycle 1, 6 teachers teach English.

Objectives of the project

The Objectives behind the training program is to promote more effective teaching of reading and learning in pedagogy through encouragement of thought, debate and discussion around recent pedagogical practice. Specifically, the project aimed to:

- introduce the teachers to different theories about reading approaches,
- promote the teachers awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches specifically reading comprehension,
- integrate different reading approaches in the English daily lesson plan which encourage critical thinking skill development,
- apply different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom,
- introduce students to the several methods for acquiring effective reading skills,
- introduce the American culture (use American stories and books) into the preschool curriculum in underprivileged schools and integrate it in the curriculum,
- utilize technology to engage with classrooms as part of the constructivist learning approach,
- and provide teachers with facilitates to be able to change/tweak in the curriculum in order to fit with disabled students and students with special needs.

Capacity Building

Every Saturday from the period allocated, January 7 till March 30, 2017, a capacity building workshop was conducted. The workshops were divided into three main parts.

a- Part one: Introduce the project, explore teachers' needs, and observe classes:
The trainer introduced the participants to the project and indicated the importance of participant in such professional growth programs. The trainer then discussed with the teachers their needs in order to enhance their teaching skills. Finally, by the end of the

first part of the project, the trainer was invited to attend several classes in order to build on the teachers' needs for more efficient training.

> b- Part two: Introduce the teachers to different theories about learning approaches, promote the teachers awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches:

The trainer conducted capacity building workshop sessions in order to introduce the new teaching methodologies based on constructivist learning approaches and implemented these methodologies with the participants in their classrooms over a period of month.

> c- Part three: Integrate different learning approaches in the English daily lesson plan which encourage critical thinking skill development and apply different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom.

The trainer helped the teachers integrate the new learning approaches discussed in part two into their lesson plans and helped them implement them in their classrooms.

Literature Review

Any change in education requires change in the content of the course and teacher training in order for the objectives of the new content to be delivered properly to the students. Professional development training help the teachers enhance their knowledge and skills to facilitate and deliver the content in a more effective way (Tunio & Abdul Aziz, 2012). "Education is a systematics and scientific process of providing knowledge, skills, and experience to develop a human force as per requirement of society" (Ibid, 2012, p. 951). This cannot be accomplished without taking into consideration several methods and resources such as students, teachers, parents, administration and other individuals. The stakeholders that is the purpose of this study are the students and the teachers. Al Chibani (2016) stated that teachers perceive positive significance and attitudes towards training workshops especially those of long term. Such training programs allows the teachers to implement what they have been trained to do and evaluate the programs objectives directly on students which are the aim of the learning process (Al Chibani, 2016). Harwell (2005) agrees with Al Chibani (2016) when he states in his study that the teachers' behaviors change when exposed to long training programs in terms of improvement and enhancement of teacher skills. Harwell adds that change cannot be expected if teachers' attitude where no possible to such training programs. According to Ibid, when the teachers' motivation is positive, this reflects on the students' achievement too. Joyce and Showes (2002) agree too that when the teachers have the chance to implement what they have been trained to do, positive impact on students will be remarked. Al Chibani and Hajal (2017) indicate that training programs are beneficial and help the teachers gain more comprehension of the new learning and teaching approaches. Ibid adds that training programs leave positive impact on teachers when allowed to implement the trained material directly. Also the purpose of the teacher training program are to help the teachers enhance the content knowledge, modern methodology and use of advanced technology so that they fulfill and satisfy the objectives behind education (Tunio & Abdul Aziz, 2012). In their study, Al Chibani

and Hajal (2017) clarify that training programs help teachers gain more knowledge about the content which helps them prepare more effective lesson plans with variety of traditional teaching methodologies. Moreover, teacher training help give the education better since if trained properly, motivated and well trained they perform better in and outside the classroom. The improvement of the teachers lies in the hands of teacher education. The teacher success in the classroom lies on the effectiveness of the teacher training in the respect of acquired skills, knowledge, abilities and capabilities (Glaser, 1989). According to Aggarwal (1993) in order for a teacher training to achieve its objective, a positive attitude and learned skills are important. Rasal (1992) assures that it is important to have teachers training in order to enhance the quality of education. Moreover, effective professional development are the key for a more advances education skills that the pedagogies require these days. According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, (2017), training should change the teacher practices and improvement in student learning outcome. Teacher training should enhance the teachers' knowledge and practice of active learning and thus it should help the teacher shift from the traditional to the nontraditional methodologies. While working collaboratively during the training, the teachers help their students become more positive and seek to change the culture and instructions (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017).

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used in this project. Observation methods and focus group were adapted during the project in order to collect data. Cross analysis data was implemented through a method called triangulation in order to collect data from multiple sources of evidences for reliability purposes: Observation of classes, focus group with teachers, and focus group with students. Yin (2003) suggests to check for internal adapted consistency through triangulation (Yin, 2003). Even though there are several triangulation, this research adapted the "data triangulation" which allowed and pushed the researcher to get data from different sources (Patton as cited in Hajal, 2017).

Participants

The participants of this research are 6 English teachers from Cycle 1 enrolled in a semi-subsidized school in the Bekaa plain in Lebanon. Also, 90 grade 1 students were observed and applied the new methodologies while applying reading rules.

Data Collection

As mentioned in the previous section, triangulation process was used to collect data from multiple sources of evidences for reliability purposes. The first source was observation of classes, the second source was focus group interviews with teachers, and the third source was focus group interview with students.

The training program was conducted with 6 diverse Preschool Teachers in a semi-subsidized school in the Bekaa area in Lebanon who teach 90 grade 1 students of cycle 1. 7 students are disabled students: 5 students with hearing impairments and 2 students suffer epilepsy and are on medications. The continuous training program was conducted over a period of 16 weeks. The trainer met the teachers and students as a

group, listened to them, and discussed with them the different strategies they can implement in their classrooms with the limited facilities the school could afford due to the lack of financial benefits. Finally, a last meeting was held with the teachers and the students in order to hear their feedback concerning the program in a form of a focus group and to check whether the students have benefited and improved their reading skills. The aim behind the meeting was to evaluate the teaching training program holistically and to try to take each feedback into consideration in order to improve future programs.

A focus group was conducted with the teachers for recommending future implementations.

Observation

The researchers observed several grade 1 English classes in order to make sure the teacher started applying what was discussed and trained on during the training sessions. The researcher had a checklist with 17 criteria. Each criteria replicated in one way or another the skills the teachers were trained to use.

Focus group

After each training session, the researcher sat with the teachers in a form of focus group in order to elicit from them their feedback of previous techniques and skills used in their classrooms while teaching reading comprehension. In addition, one focus group interview was conducted with the grade 1 of cycle 1 students in order to detect whether their new knowledge is enhanced and was built on the previous one.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done based on the data retrieved from both the diaries written throughout the program and the data retrieved from the checklist filled by the researchers after each observation.

The first method used was collecting all of the individual qualitative feedbacks of the teachers and students, summarizing them, and analyzing the results. The second method was analyzing and finding patterns between the observation checklists and the focus group interviews.

The second method was analyzing the 18 questionnaires filled by the trainer while observing 2 classes for each teacher were analyzed.

The following finding summary is based on a mixed methodology were a merge from the two methods used to collect the data of the baseline school visits to the participating cohort 1 public schools.

Findings

To start with the results obtained from the focus group interviews conducted with each of the teachers trained and the grade 1 students of cycle 1 showed significant impact on several learning aspects.

On the basis of the research study for detection of the effectiveness of teacher training programs, the following findings were drawn: - The majority of teacher training programs were successful in professional skills development for the trained teachers. - Learned methodologies were mostly not applied in the classroom and the same traditional practice was continued in the schools by the trained teachers. - Approximately the majority agreed that the objectives of the project were accomplished and that the students showed better results throughout the learning process when introduced to new constructivist teaching approaches. - The teachers agreed that introducing new teaching methodologies boosts the students' motivation and allows them to have higher order thinking.

"Using ICT in education is beneficial especially when there are facilities in the school that help us while teaching."

"Introducing new methodologies which rely on the student's prior knowledge and help them gain new ones allows the students to be independent."

"It is very important for the students to be independent and understand that the teachers are facilitators. This is what the project is all about."

As for the results obtained from the focus group interview conducted with the 90 students, positive feedback and motivation was obviously shown, the students agreed that they felt more exited and motivated to learn new concepts when the teachers started using variety of methodologies such as ICT and cooperative work. Said by a student, "I loved the way our teacher used the commuter to show us a video before we started reading the story." "I liked the circle time and especially how we helped each other in the reading out loud time," said by another student.

The checklists filled by the researchers while observing the classes were also analyzed and several patterns were detected between the observation checklists and the focus group interviews. These patterns indicate the reliability of the project and its long term impact. Both checklists and interviews indicated that the new methodologies trained were effective on the students' motivation and learning process. They showed that the teachers understood that the learning process should be student centered and not only focus on the teacher. The teachers' role is to guide the learning process and help the students acquire new skills and concepts. By breaking the reading process into a mini lesson and a reading workshop, the students gained more knowledge and learned to be independent and learned how to listen to each other's opinions and voices. It also helped them analyze and criticize the stories whether from the content or the illustrations. From both the checklists and the interview, it became clear that the teachers gained new and different theories about learning approaches. The teachers' awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches were promoted. The teachers were able to integrate different teaching approaches in the English daily lesson plan which encourage critical thinking skill development, applied different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the training workshop series achieved its objectives and the teachers were introduced to new reading methodologies especially the reading workshop and mini lessons which they started to use in their classrooms and this reflects in return on the students' achievements and motivation which is the end line objective of any learning process. Moreover, the program influenced all of the participants' teaching skills in terms of introducing them to different theorist which help while developing their lesson plans while taking into consideration students with special needs. This was reflected through their teaching throughout the training program. This initial study adds to the literature in terms of encouraging teaching training in the public and semi subsidized sector which in return it affects positively the students' motivation, engagement in the classrooms and academic performance. Finally, the program has introduced the teachers to different theories about learning approaches, promoted the teachers awareness and comprehension about effective teaching and learning skills in relation with the constructivist learning approaches, integrated different learning approaches in the English daily lesson plan which encourage critical thinking skill development, applied different constructivist learning approaches in the English classroom, introduce the American culture (use American stories and books) into the preschool curriculum in underprivileged schools and integrate it in the curriculum, utilized technology to engage with classrooms as part of the constructivist learning approach, provided teachers with facilitates to be able to change/tweak in the curriculum in order to fit with disabled students and students with special needs, studied the impact of the training program on the teachers' skills perception, and studied the impact of the training program on the teachers' skills performance.

Thus, as a synthesis, several recommendation are addressed to the policy makers of education in order to promote the teaching and learning process to a higher level of thinking skills and in order to catch up with the 21st century dilemma.

Recommendation

A few recommendations based on the results are addressed to the policy makers in order to take into consideration while working on the curriculum reform.

To begin with, it is recommended that the teachers get continuing professional capacity building trainings in order to be introduced to the new teaching methodologies especially the constructivism.

Second, it is recommended that ICT frameworks to be integrated while preparing from training sessions to introduce and train the teachers about computer skills and to integrate ICT in education and understand its importance.

Third, enhance the principals' knowledge about different Leadership styles to promote new teaching methodology and encourage their teachers to apply them.

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