**Sheltered Instruction Strategies, Building Community of Practice Across a District, and an Ontology of Home: A TXST Alumna’s Insights**

*By Dr. Joellen E. Coryell*

COVID-19 has challenged teachers, students, administrators, and families in many ways. But, unexpected and wonderful outcomes can come from the most challenging of situations. Dr. Delia Cruz Fernandez, ESL Instructional Coach in San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District (SMCISD) and Texas State University Educational Leadership program alumna, began the 2019-2020 school year by offering a weekly professional development academy for using sheltered instruction strategies to assist English language learners. Sheltered instructional methodologies are about making content more comprehensible, and while these strategies were initially created for English language learners, the methodologies are useful regardless of English proficiency, ability, and level. Her Sheltered Instruction Academy was held on a different campus each week and focused on different strategies and content areas weekly. It was an opportunity for teachers to discuss effective ways to make learning content across subject matter more comprehensible for their students who were learning English in their classrooms. Generally, teachers would participate in those sessions that were held on their respective campuses.

But when COVID-19 measures were put into place and school was conducted remotely, Dr. Cruz Fernandez needed to re-think how this work would continue. In March, the Academy went online. Knowing that remote teaching was challenging and time-consuming, Dr. Cruz Fernandez didn’t want to add more work for Academy participants, but instead wanted to tap into the activities these teachers were already putting into place – and to share those strategies with others. Each week, one or more teachers, or invited guests from Texas State including Dr. Maneka Brooks (Assistant Professor in Curriculum and Instruction), presented strategies for applying sheltered instructional methodologies online with their students. Presenters shared on topics including reading and writing online, the use of different apps teachers were using with their students, and emotional support for their online learners.

One unexpected outcome occurred because the Academy went online. Teachers and administrators from across the district started attending the online sessions weekly, rather than only when the Academy came to their campus. This situation promoted a sense of community across the district, something that Dr. Monica Valadez, Director of Language and Community Development for SMCISD, believes has made a distinctly positive difference. Academy participants also began talking about their ontologies of *home*. These educators began by sharing photos of and discussing what home means to them and what community is and what it could be. They thought deeply about *why* they do what they do in their teaching and how they were connecting with students and their families in ways they hadn’t before remote teaching. Dr. Valadez believes putting language to this ontology of home encouraged educators to connect their students’ lives and experiences with the curriculum and with their teaching. She also explained that when participants grounded their discussions and their work in community development, they realized they could be secure, willing to share, and acknowledge that each had something to contribute. Teachers and administrators started focusing on the social relationship of learning and teaching. The attention to the ontology of home, rather than solely on the technology of remote teaching, is helping to move the district to a healthier view of learning.

Teaching remotely online has helped teachers to understand their students’ development of mastery for certain skills in new ways, and in fact, they started using sheltered instruction more once teaching online. Putting the Academy online, and recording the sessions for those who couldn’t attend, also gave teachers the opportunity to share their craft - educators learning from each other. Teachers are using particular strategies so that they can support all of their learners instead of silo-ing English language learners with a deficit view, lens, approach. Making content comprehensible is now understood as good practice across the district. It has helped to build teachers’ knowledge, to help them make sense of inequity, and to work to construct equitable access for education. The online Academy also worked to break down barriers and bring different departments together that have had competing priorities and initiatives. Making content comprehensible is now understood as good practice across the district. Drs. Cruz Fernandez and Valadez believe that now, these educators understand that knowledge is there in the community, when perhaps they didn’t know this before.

The SMCISD Sheltered Instruction Academy will continue throughout the summer with a focus on Spanish classes at different levels and will likely remain online or in a hybrid format in the fall.

Here you can view a video of one of the Sheltered Instruction Academy videos led by Dr. Cruz Fernandez.