

Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students

Dr. Jayanna C.T.
M.A.,M.Phil,Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
SJM College for Womens
Dental College Campus
Chitradurga - 577 502, Karnataka State

Abstract

The development of the culturally responsive teaching competencies: Implications for teacher education in two measures—the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE) and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) Scale—were developed and administered to a sample of pre service teachers in the Midwest. The findings from this study suggest that pre service teachers are more efficacious in their ability to help students feel like important members of the classroom and develop positive, personal relationships with their students, than they are in their ability to communicate with English Language Learners. Pre service teachers' culturally responsive teaching outcome expectations was highest for the possibility that a positive teacher–student relationship can be established by building a sense of trust in their students. Item-specific means were lowest among the pre service teachers for the possibility that encouraging students to use their native language will help to maintain students' cultural identity. The implications for these findings for both research and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords

- Culturally responsive teaching;
- Teacher self-efficacy;
- Self-efficacy and outcome expectancy beliefs

Introduction to CRT

CRT is a direct response to concern over an academic achievement differential and high school dropout rates based on race, socioeconomic class, and level of English language ability. Demographically, this academic achievement gap is generally evidenced between (1) White economically advantaged students and (2) students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families. Examined from a school reform perspective, CRT is a concept that signals a need to expand the customary professional knowledge base for teachers in

order to close this achievement gap. CRT is best understood as a response to traditional curricular and instructional methods that have often been ineffective for students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families. CRT calls attention to schooling norms where White middle-class values and expectations are privileged while other cultural, racial, and economic histories and community backgrounds are overlooked or degenerated. In contrast to assimilationist teaching, CRT values and incorporates as appropriate a student's culture into instruction. In this regard, CRT is not only interested in providing mainstream knowledge through different techniques, but it also involves transforming the actual perspectives, knowledge base, and approaches of a conventional classroom's curriculum and instruction.

For effective CRT, teachers would need to expand and apply their multicultural knowledge, skills, and dispositions so that opportunities for student gains in academic achievement and a willingness to complete public school are improved. Pre service and in service teaching education is the primary avenue by which teachers can learn how to create conditions of cultural expression that are more congruent with the backgrounds of their culturally diverse students and their families. Through CRT preparation, educators can better grasp how student cultural backgrounds affect learning and student development. This can lead to a multicultural commitment on behalf of educators, a professional disposition that is widely recognized as a foundational attitudinal component for the successful development of CRT.

Historical and Theoretical Foundations

CRT developed out of tensions within a society that aspires to unified democratic ideals and goals while being demographically composed of a culturally and linguistically diverse multicultural population. The following section addresses CRT in a historical and democratic context specific to the United States. The emerging recognition of the costs of marginalizing students of color in the educational process is examined. CRT is further discussed in relation to multicultural education and critical pedagogy. The final section concludes with a presentation of the tensions around the concept of culture and its subsequent implications for CRT.

Critical Pedagogy Foundations

The concept of pedagogy in its contemporary usage is a perspective that envisions effective teaching as a process rather than a set of discrete techniques. Congruent with CRT, pedagogy as currently defined situates effective teaching more as two-way communication between teachers

and students in contrast to the direct transmission of information to students by teachers. A teacher, then, practices approaches to teaching and learning that build relationships with and among students and focuses ultimately on how and to what extent students are learning. This definition of pedagogy mirrors research that finds achievement improves through active student participation in the learning process. More specifically for CRT, *critical pedagogy* offers ways to look at teaching and learning that can bring to the forefront such concepts as ideology, hegemony, resistance, power, knowledge construction, class, cultural politics, and emancipatory actions. The underlying concepts of critical pedagogy are theorized as necessary for teachers and their students to understand seemingly intractable conditions of social and educational inequities. CRT uses a critical pedagogy philosophical orientation to differing degrees when conceiving and implementing curriculum and instruction.

Identifying Dominant Practices

Unraveling issues of political dominance and oppression is a task that critical pedagogy attempts to undertake. Such work necessitates a knowledge base that analyzes how and why a dominant ideology supports a particular kind of political and economic arrangement that directly affects public school goals, policies, and practices in ways that can undermine the academic achievement of students of color. CRT theorists and practitioners find critical pedagogy as an approach where culturally responsive teachers can acquire a knowledge base that helps explain the existence of inequalities that can negatively affect the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. Freire noted that when inexperienced teachers from mainstream cultures find themselves working with culturally different students, students' language, values, and behaviors may be so different from their teachers' that the culture of those students may be deemed by teachers as strange and dangerous. Advocates for CRT contend that culturally responsive teachers must not retreat from such differences but should become themselves students of these differences as a means to know and help each of their students socially and academically.

Cultural Complexities

The concept of culture is complex, and efforts to narrow its meaning can have negative implications for student learning under CRT. Multicultural educator Sonia Nieto (2000) defines culture as "the values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion" (p. 138). Culture defined as such is not a static entity that a culturally responsive teacher can easily identify because culture is interactive, affects a person's life, and is continually changing. Cultural tensions underlie the emergence of CRT. Debates exist among scholars and practitioners who approach the racialized achievement gap as a function of cultural deficiencies. Others contend that the academic achievement differential is based on a lack of acknowledgment of the cultural assets held by culturally different students. This debate has led to an examination of the theoretical concept of learning styles as a means to better understand the learning needs of all students. The following sections describe these varying perspectives and their relationship to CRT.

Cultural Deficits/Differences/Assets

At various points throughout U.S. history, population groups who were not of Anglo- or Western European origins have been considered to be culturally deficient, disadvantaged, or deprived. The cultural deficiency model that was articulated in the 1960s and cyclically reemerges over time has led, CRT scholars contend, to discriminatory schooling conditions for students of color and those from low-income families. The cultural deficiency perspective assumes that children and youth who are culturally different from mainstream society need an education that assimilates them into dominant norms and behaviors and away from the cultures of their families and communities. From this point of view, minority students are constructed as culturally disadvantaged by presumed deficits located within their cultural histories, beliefs, and conduct. Theorists who support a cultural deficiency standard tend to blame culturally different groups for their lack of economic and political gains and believe that a democracy must have a unified culture that is built on Anglo-European values. Theorists countered the mono culturalist's cultural Deficiency model by emphasizing cultural and ethnic differences. CRT emerged from this debate about an apparent lack of cultural congruence between the public school and the home life of students of color. Culturally responsive teachers who practice under a cultural difference model have been encouraged to learn about the various cultures of their students as assets rather than deficits and to incorporate those cultures into curriculum and instruction. A challenge for culturally responsive teachers, however, is avoiding a common tendency to stereotype students of color according to their ethnic or racial identification.

Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Dispositions

CRT requires teachers to acquire particular knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions in order to effectively meet the social and academic needs of culturally diverse students. The following three sections focus on these competencies.

Knowledge Base

Culturally responsive teachers hold a knowledge base that emerges out of historical and theoretical foundations similar to what has been discussed above. This includes a grounding in a multicultural perspective of U.S. history and a comparative grasp of the difference between expressed democratic ideals and actual institutional practices. Specifically, culturally responsive teachers need to be aware how the concepts of White privilege and property rights can be manifested in contemporary political, economic, and educational systems through various forms of biases and racism, including color blindness. Underlying this foundation is an understanding that citizenship rights have not always been able to be exercised equally by all groups of people and the subsequent economic effect that this has had on schooling, housing, and employment opportunities for populations of color. These studies also include the historic opposition and resistance by people of color to acts of oppression, especially as pertains to access to educational opportunities such as rigorous academic courses taught by qualified teachers.

Skills

Building on their knowledge base, culturally responsive teachers need specific skills to create interactive group curricular experiences from an antiracist orientation that works toward prejudice reduction among students. Culturally responsive teachers demonstrate a proficiency

to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom. This positive learning community environment permeates all classroom interactions under CRT and is conducive for student discussions on subject matter topics that allow for multiple viewpoints.

Future Directions

As long as a racialized achievement gap exists, the calls for CRT or a similar pedagogy will likely remain as a potential solution. In local school districts, however, where expectations exist for teachers to follow a standardized teacher-centered curriculum, CRT may be perceived as unrelated to academic achievement. Therefore, for CRT to be a sustained pedagogy, local school districts would need to focus on effective teaching research and provide teachers with inservice training and planning time that can enable CRT, especially when it comes to making significant

associations with culturally diverse communities and modifying curriculum to reflect the particular cultures of the students. CRT is at a stage where accessible and verifiable databases of culturally appropriate teaching materials and unit plans need to be more widely available in order for teachers to make culturally responsive modifications based on their local situations. Teacher preparation programs can aid in this process by providing future teachers with the foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for CRT. Thus, a multicultural education strand can be most effective when it is a central emphasis for preservice and inservice teacher education and is infused across all aspects of a training curriculum.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive teaching is an educational reform that grew out the civil rights movement and the emergence of multicultural education. CRT is a democratic, student centered pedagogy that incorporates and honors the cultural background of historically marginalized students and attempts to make meaningful links to academic knowledge for student success. As an aspect of an educational reform movement, CRT has been called on to help reduce the academic achievement gap. CRT is essentially based on effective teaching research with an infusion of cultural knowledge and skills. CRT challenges dominant modes of schooling that have limited democratic opportunities and the exercise of citizenship rights for significant populations of color. With a multicultural commitment, culturally responsive teachers understand that their work can have a lasting effect to the development of active democratic citizens.

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