



Educating Diverse Learners through Culturally Responsive Practices

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Abstract:

Culturally responsive practices are specific educational practices, instructional strategies, team processes, and curricula content which have been established by research to increase the achievement of culturally diverse students. We are culturally responsive when we adjust how we teach to the needs and experiences of our students. Students from diverse backgrounds may experience educational settings that are significantly different from their home cultures. Therefore, students from diverse backgrounds may have difficulty acclimating to school learning environments and acquiring new knowledge. The institutional dimension of culturally responsive practices emphasizes the need for reform of the cultural factors affecting organization of schools, school policies and procedures (including allocation of funds and resources), and community involvement (Little, 1999). Given the close interrelationship between instructor and instruction, this paper will focus on issues relevant to both the personal and instructional dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy and how they can serve to improve the classroom experience for all students.

Keywords : *Culturally Responsive Practices , Diverse Learners*

Introduction: Culturally responsive practices is a student-centered approach to teaching in which students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural and place in the world. Culturally responsive pedagogy provides avenues that connect students' prior learning with new knowledge acquisition while demonstrating an appreciation for students' cultures and languages. Teachers must be aware of their own identities, students' identities, and the ways each of them perceives themselves and others. They must show recognition and respect for differences and appreciate them as assets instead of deficiencies. Culturally responsive pedagogy is divided into three functional dimensions: the institutional dimension, the personal dimension, and the instructional dimension (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004).

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The institutional dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the need for reform of the cultural factors affecting organization of schools, school policies, procedures and community involvement. The personal dimension refers to the process by which teachers learn to become culturally responsive. The instructional dimension refers to practices and challenges associated with implementing culturally responsive in the classroom.

The Personal Dimension: Strategies for Preparing to Teach In a Diverse Classroom

The biggest obstacle to successful culturally responsive instruction for most educators is disposing of their own cultural biases and learning about the backgrounds of the students that they will be teaching. The processes necessary for preparing to teach in a culturally responsive classroom can be broken down into three general categories: exploring one's own culture, learning about other cultures, and learning about students' cultures.

Preparing for Culturally Responsive Practices: Exploring One's Own Culture

Before seeking out knowledge about the cultures of the diverse students that they will be teaching, educators must first investigate their own heritage, upbringing, and potential cultural and racial biases (Gay, 2002). A related misconception that many teachers labor under is that they act in a race-blind fashion; however, most teachers greatly overestimate their knowledge about other cultures, which manifests itself in a lack of cultural sensitivity in classroom management and pedagogical techniques (Bensman, 2000).

Eventually the focus of this reflection must turn toward one's ideas about and racism and bias. Ford (2005) suggests that a prospective culturally responsive educator should reflect about the fears, stereotypes, and biases that he has about people that are different from him. Once the educator can recognize that his own personal cognitive tastes are not objectively better than those favored by other cultures can he begin to investigate and appreciate the traditions and values of those cultures.

Preparing for Culturally Responsive Practices: Exploring General Cultural Backgrounds

Once an educator has thoroughly examined her own cultural beliefs, values, and biases, she is ready to begin learning about other cultures. Researchers have theorized that diverse cultures demonstrate common patterns of thought (Jackson, 1993/1994) and community behavior (Gay, 2002). In order to explore these cognitive and behavioral patterns, an educator must be willing to spend a great deal of time reading about and observing the standards and practices of various cultural groups that she will be dealing with in the classroom. Attaining a thorough base of knowledge is among the most critical steps that a teacher must take in order to educate students in a culturally responsive fashion; as pointed out by Howard (2007), "We can't teach what we don't know." Gay (2002) suggests that the prospective educator should become familiar with the cultural values, traditions, communication styles, learning preferences, contributions to society, and relationship patterns of her future students. While some of this education can be achieved by simply reading about cultural diversity, it is difficult to truly substitute for genuine interaction and discourse with members of students' cultures.

Goals of Culturally Diverse practices: Promoting Respect for Other Cultures

A primary goal of culturally responsive education is to help all students become respectful of the multitudes of cultures and people that they'll interact with once they exit the educational setting. This can be a daunting task for the educator, given that the world at large is infinitely more complex and diverse than the microcosmic environment that the student inhabits. In typical educational and social settings there is a marked tendency for students to exhibit classic in-group/out-group behaviors (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). In general, most students are comfortable interacting with people, behaviors, and ideas that they are familiar with but react with fear and apprehension when faced with the unfamiliar. Among its other goals,

culturally responsive instruction aims to educate students that differences in viewpoint and culture are to be cherished and appreciated rather than judged and feared.

There are a wide range of classroom activities that can help students recognize the essential humanity and value of different types of people. For instance, providing students with an opportunity to share stories of their home life, such as family holiday practices, provides fellow students with a window into their peer's cultural traditions (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). Showing students everyday photographs of people of different ethnicities, shapes, sizes, and garb gives students the opportunity to see people that look very different from themselves and their family engaging in the same types of activities that they and their family participate in; this activity can help humanize types of people that a student has never had an opportunity to interact with personally (Saifer & Barton, 2007). Welcoming guest speakers into the class that hail from differing backgrounds and have all made a positive contribution to important fields can also help dispel any preconceived notions that students might possess about the relative competence and value of people from different cultures.

Teaching students about multicultural role models also serves as an effective method for demonstrating that people of all genders, ethnicities, and appearances can have a positive influence on the world and deserve to be respected and emulated. In addition to tailoring classroom activities and lessons toward multicultural appreciation, it is critical that the educator provide students with a culturally responsive learning environment. Wall spaces can be used to display posters depicting cultural groups in a non-stereotypical fashion, students can mark the countries from which their forebears immigrated on a world map (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), and classroom signs can be hung in several languages. All of these seemingly innocuous flourishes will help inculcate in students the rich diversity that surrounds them, both in the classroom and in the world outside the school walls. Such touches will help promote an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds feel more comfortable being themselves and will help insulate students from the cultural and ethnic stereotypes that pervade television and other mass media outlets (Cortés, 2000).

Goals of Culturally Diverse practices: Promoting Respect for the Student's Own Culture

Another important goal of culturally responsive education is to teach students to respect and appreciate their own culture and heritage. Minority students can sometimes feel pressured to dispose of their cultural norms, behaviors, and traditions in order to fit in with the prevalent social order. When this happens it can create a significant disconnect between the culture of the student's school and community lives and can interfere with emotional growth and social development, frequently resulting in poor performance in social and academic domains (Sheets, 1999). Providing opportunities for students to investigate unique facets of their community is one effective way to help students gain a greater appreciation for their own culture. Having students interview family members about cultural practices and traditions or write about important learning experiences that the student has experienced in his home community are just two of the many ways that students can explore their heritage.

Using a culturally-centered instructional approach can help facilitate cultural pride among diverse students. Given the current federal and state preoccupation with standardized testing in core subjects, it is particularly crucial that educator's multiculturalism core curricula such as math, science, reading, and writing (Gay, 2002). Providing diverse students with examples of diverse contributors to these fields and using culture-specific subject matter when teaching core topics will help them perform better in these highly scrutinized and important domains. Placing ethnically diverse students in a situation that emphasizes the strong points of their culture's

preferred means of learning may help provide them with a greater sense of self-efficacy and achievement (Gay, 2000).

Consistent exposure to positive role models is another excellent way to emphasize respect and admiration for the diverse student's own culture. All too often, students are exposed to ethnic stereotypes on television and in movies. Providing diverse students with role models who demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities and make social contributions in a non-stereotypical way helps students recognize the limitless ways in which they can have a positive impact on society. Larger groups of people can be presented as role models as well; discussing cultural groups in which people are supportive and solve problems together may serve to bolster the confidence and of students who belong to a more communally-oriented culture (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2004).

Culturally responsive practices used for Diverse Learners

- 1. Call and response:-** Call-and-response is a type of interaction between speaker and listener(s) in which the statements ("calls") are emphasized by expressions ("responses") from the listener(s), in which responses can be solicited or spontaneous
- 2. Cooperative Learning :-** Cooperative Learning (CL) is a learner-centered instructional process in which small intentionally selected teams work together on a well-defined learning task for the primary purpose of increasing mastery of course content.
- 3. Differentiated Instruction:-** Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach in which teachers adapt their instruction to student differences. Teachers modify their instruction to meet individual student's readiness levels, preferences, and interests.
- 4. Cognitively Guided Instruction:-** Cognitively Guided Instruction emphasizes learning strategies that enhance a student's meta-cognitive development. It focuses on the direct teaching and modeling of cognitive learning strategies. Students learn how to monitor their own learning (comprehension).

Aspects of Classroom Management in Culturally Responsive Instruction

Consideration of classroom management techniques is critical when building a culturally-responsive learning environment. It is imperative that the instructor have a vast body of knowledge regarding culturally-dependent interpersonal behaviors or else it is possible that behaviors that are normal within the scope of a student's culture will be misinterpreted as a behavioral problem or learning disability (Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003). In general, it is likely that conflicts between teacher and students will arise if the teacher has not sought education about the culture and accompanying behavioral patterns of his student.

Building a Nurturing Environment for Students

As a student-centered instructional method, culturally responsive practices are focused on catering to the social, emotional, and educational needs of the student. Among the first goals that teachers must achieve in order to successfully create a culturally responsive environment is convincing their students that they genuinely care about the students' cultural, emotional, and intellectual needs. Jackson (1993/1994) suggests several strategies for building a trusting relationship with diverse students. These strategies include such subtle gestures as being sure to learn the proper pronunciation of student names and expressing interest in the etymology of interesting and diverse names. Jackson also recommends having student's research and share information about their ethnic background as a means for fostering a trusting relationship with both fellow classmates and the instructor. Students are encouraged to analyze and celebrate differences in traditions, beliefs, and social behaviors.

Another important requirement for creating a nurturing environment for students is reducing the power differential between the instructor and students (Howard, 2007). Students in an authoritarian classroom may sometimes display negative behaviors as a result of a perceived sense of social injustice; in the culturally diverse classroom, the teacher thus acts more like a facilitator than an instructor. Providing students with questionnaires about what they find to be interesting or important provides them with a measure of power over what they get to learn and provides them with greater intrinsic motivation and connectedness to the material (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Allowing students to bring in their own reading material and present it to the class provides them with an opportunity to both interact with and share stories, thoughts, and ideas that are important to their cultural and social perspective.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive practices can help students from all backgrounds to achieve a greater self of appreciation for their own cultures and other cultures. Becoming a cultural responsive teacher does take work and dedication, including honest self-assessment and design of new culturally-sensitive lesson plans and materials, but the resulting classroom experience is well worth the time invested. Culturally responsive practices help students and families alike to become more active and successful participants in education and coexisting in a multicultural world. Culturally responsive practices help teachers to use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more effective for them, it teaches to and through the strengths of these students.

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