

Embracing Diversity: Immersing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Our School Systems

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Abstract

As the world grows more diverse and our educational institutions continue to expand, it is imperative to ensure that a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is promoted within every classroom. According to Rychley and Graves (2012), research has shown that diverse students are “consistently underperforming mainstream students”. Historically in America, the whitewashing of history has resulted in many turning a blind eye to the struggles faced by minorities – the harsh truths seemingly washed away like words in the sand. Laws and regulations have been embedded with racism and often manifest as discrimination not only within our educational institutions, but also in the criminal justice system, job and health care industries.

All of these factors affect the everyday lives of the minority youth in our communities. Our cultures are molded by our experiences and it is the same for our students. Educators must create a classroom environment where they are able to connect their content with each student’s culture, language and experiences to bridge the gap between represented and underrepresented communities. Educators must acknowledge and honor the struggles that others have faced throughout their history in order to overcome cultural barriers and allow for classroom communities that value their peers, respect diversity and are compelled to learn about one another. This literature review touches on methods that allow educators to be more culturally responsive leaders within our school systems. Educators that explore this method of pedagogy in the 21st century seek to ensure a future of success for all students, including diverse learners (Kazanjian, 2019).

Erasing painful truths about the discrimination faced by minorities in America has become all too common. Research shows that discrimination continues to be an important and prominent part of life, having rippling effects on families and their well-being (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). For example, many curriculums within our educational institutions do not have a required African-American history curriculum. Teaching minority cultures and experiences should be emphasized yearly, not just during specific months.

Research shows that there is greater achievement in schools where education is multicultural, and students have a greater appreciation for their studies due to their experiences in their schools (Wiggin & Watson-Vandiver, 2017). This content should span all classrooms in all educational institutions. The enslavement of Africans largely contributed to the absolute foundation of this nation. Why are many unaware of this? The realities of how this nation was built through the present should be brought to the forefront and taught to emphasize how students can improve their futures. Despite the horrors and atrocities that have occurred, we can only learn from our own mistakes or the mistakes of others. "Out of sight, out of mind," or at least they say. When

one opens a history book, what does one see? One may see that the role played by minorities appears only to be a minute portion. As a result of this misconception, many minority students do not understand their role in history outside of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement (Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2017). On the contrary, white students do not realize the role that minorities have played in forming America. We must immerse ourselves in the histories of all, as their experiences play a major role in our cultures or way of life.

Educators play an important role in delivering the truth to our youth and creating an equitable and responsible school (How can we..., 2019). Our country's truth cannot be whitewashed. "What is whitewashing?" many may ask. According to the Merriam-Webster definition, whitewashing is "portraying the past in a way that increases the prominence, relevance, or impact of white people and minimizes or misrepresents that of nonwhite people." Educators must stop enabling this and bring forth our true American history. We cannot be oblivious to the history of sins against people of color. Doing this creates a space that reduces the harm done to minorities and does not acknowledge our country's treatment of these groups throughout history.

To be equitable in our classrooms and show support to each student based on their own individual needs, educators must teach in a culturally responsive manner. So, what does that mean? What is "Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)"? According to theedadvocate.org, CRT is "a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world." CRT is divided into three dimensions: institutional, personal, and instructional. In this review, we will discuss all of these dimensions in hopes that insight can be provided to allow educators to become more culturally responsive in the classroom.

The Institutional Dimension

The institutional dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the need for reform of the cultural factors affecting the organization of schools, school policies and procedures, and community involvement (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). How can we make institutional changes that represent all of our students? Schools must be able to support students who have been oppressed and marginalized by systems of discrimination and oppression. Therefore, institutional changes are a must in order to ensure that all of our students are represented fairly and equitably.

The organization of the school's component reflects the diversity within the administration as well as its core values. Does the administration respect and truly represent the communities they serve? Are they focused on meeting the individual needs of their students? How are we planning the use of physical space within the classrooms, and is it conducive to a productive learning environment for a classroom community of diverse learners? Only by understanding the communities can administrators understand the environment around their students and how it impacts their lives. Administrators must understand whom they serve and the community's needs to assist their students with progression toward a successful life.

The school policies and procedures element reflect how the policies and procedures impact the delivery to students of diverse backgrounds and the allocation of school funding to various

programs. How are we implementing policy to meet the needs of our students from diverse backgrounds? What are students getting to take honors courses? How are funds being allocated for the various programs offered by the school? School policies and procedures must allow students to be in a safe environment where their individual needs are met, and they can excel academically.

The community involvement piece reflects acknowledging high expectations for educator engagement with parents and the community to communicate that family identities are respected and understood by those within our school systems. Are the teachers stepping out into their students' homes and communities to get to know their families? Are they making consistent connections with students and their families? When students and parents feel as though they are being valued and heard, the outcome is much more progressive. These institutional factors play a major role in how students view education.

The Personal Dimension

The personal dimension refers to the cognitive and emotional processes teachers must engage in to become culturally responsive (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). Research shows that one of the most important aspects of the personal dimension is educators' ability to self-reflect to improve their practice. As educators, we must self-reflect and understand ourselves before seeking to understand our students. Self-reflection and self-awareness allow for better relationship-building and improved decision-making with our students.

Self-reflection also allows educators to confront biases they may not have realized in the past (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). Each experience has molded us into who we are, and it is the same for our students. Our experiences play a major role in whom we become and our own unique identities. In order to self-reflect, we must ask ourselves questions about who we are and why we believe what we believe. Exploration within ourselves is a great way to become more culturally responsive, as it gives educators a greater understanding and appreciation of differences. It also allows educators to respond better to student needs (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). As McCain and Farnsworth (2018) suggest, understanding ourselves as cultural beings will allow us to understand better ways to connect with our students as cultural beings and assist with guiding them to their greatest potential.

Our earliest interactions with our families and those closest to us help to define who we are. Where do we learn to call ourselves a daughter, a mother, or a brother? Where do we learn the qualities that align with these roles and responsibilities? We learn this through our relationships with our family members. Educators and students are alike. These are all facets of our cultural identity that we often do not reflect on. It is important to note that adolescence is crucial to our student's developing a sense of self and identity.

During this time, our students will determine what and who they are committed to, their values and morals, goals, and aspirations. Teachers who are more culturally responsive show more consistent patterns of self-reflection in their teaching (Civitillo, Juang, Badra, and Schachner 2019). All of the reviewed texts emphasize how we can help our students develop a positive sense of identity and become resilient toward problems and emotional struggles that present themselves during their life due to cultural differences. Self-reflection serves as a way to help us

become better educators, which will, in turn, help our students to recognize and become their very best selves.

We must empower students to share their thoughts and experiences. However, we must first become observers to understand where students are in their developmental stages and how it relates to their life experiences. By being observers, we can learn each of our student's needs to introduce the necessary skills to cope with the feelings brought about by embracing their cultures...Students deserve to be authentic with themselves and the world around them. Observing student experiences can help us make stronger connections with our students. (Strahan, Jones, and White, under review).

It is so important to begin relationship-building with our students from our first point of contact. This is a major point for us as educators because sometimes we don't take the time to get to know each one of our students on an individual level. Every interaction counts, and this solidifies that we must understand where a student has been to understand how to help them get to where they are going. Observing student experience can help us make stronger connections with our students (Strahan, Jones, and White, under review).

The Instructional Dimension

Teachers' beliefs are a major component in how they provide instructional strategies in the classroom (Civitillo, Juang, Badra, and Schachner 2019). The Instructional Dimension of CRT focuses on ensuring that our teaching tools are compatible with the cultures we serve. These learning tools must create a conducive learning environment for our children. We must be able to provide texts and images that people write of their cultures. Students connecting with what they are learning is the most effective way to retain knowledge and be excited about what they are learning.

Building strong relationships with the students and showing respect for their beliefs is the best way to keep them engaged. We must use the student language and culture to respect each student's personal and community identity (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). We must familiarize ourselves with the different uses of grammar and context in their cultures. In our school systems, we want to promote student engagement, learning, and achievement.

It is important to understand that there is a difference between Multicultural Education (MCE) and CRT. MCE refers to presenting information from the perspective of various cultures, while CRT presents the information based on the cultures present at the time. When students enter the classroom, students need to feel comfortable and secure in who they are. Students must be allowed to immerse themselves in the diverse classroom and authentically who they are. We must realize that culture often plays an important role in educational ideologies (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2018).

As a result, it is important to utilize a variety of methods to provide information to students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Chenowith, 2014). Some other methods of exploring the instructional dimension include exploring family histories. Give students surveys with probing questions about their history to pique their interest about who they truly are and why they are the way they are. Acknowledge diversity within the classroom and discuss the advantages and

disadvantages of being from certain groups. Educators should get to know their students' families and visit their homes to learn more about their origins.

Build relationships with these students and their families to show your respect for who they are. They will open up to someone they know who cares. Network with other teachers who are having success in teaching a diverse population. Learn all that one can to expand the skill set and knowledge basis. Get to know yourself and how you can be more culturally responsive. Participate in reforming our schools (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). As educators, we now have the research to understand the benefits of providing CRT in our classrooms.

Implications

As teachers, we are responsible for ensuring that all of our students are treated fairly, with equity, dignity, and respect. Students have the right to the best education possible. It is our responsibility to continue improving our practice to ensure that we create the opportunity and conditions for students to do so. If our instruction only reflects the cultural and linguistic values of one group of people, we are not reflecting those characteristics that we desire to have as great teachers. Teachers are to address the needs of all learners.

To do so, we must build relationships and get to know our students one-on-one. Using this method of pedagogy not only allows teachers to transfer the necessary knowledge to students but also to impact students' lives forever. The teachers can close the gaps where the school systems fall short. Teachers can provide the individualized understanding and support that many students need to succeed. (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007).

Conclusion

Together, all three Culturally Responsive Teaching dimensions can significantly impact our student and teacher success in the American educational system (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). This pedagogy makes the student learning experience more engaging, relevant, and comfortable.

Overall, these texts reviewed have proven very beneficial to both upcoming and established educators, as there is a wealth of information to learn about being a culturally responsive educator. It has only solidified my dedication to being the best teacher I can be and has made me want to ensure that I am more intentional about every interaction within my classroom. I have received a wealth of knowledge on culture, adolescent development, adolescent identities, and the role that I, as an educator, do and can play in student success and ensuring that I am helping students overcome cultural barriers and become united. I now have various tools in my toolbox to ensure that I have a welcoming and collaborative classroom that encourages students to step into their identities and grow.

Learning about the concepts in the course has improved my ability to socialize, empathize, and assist my students with problem-solving skills and navigating the world in 2021. It has truly assisted me in ensuring that every interaction is meaningful and that I am creating a classroom culture that nurtures the trust and collaboration the authors speak. All the sources were well-written and organized and provided a wealth of information based on solid evidence. I am

grateful for the opportunity to have read this material created by those dedicated to improving our educational institutions for both students and educators.

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