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Educators, Question Your Level of Cultural Responsiveness

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly diverse, while the faculty of these institutions generally lack the diversity of the student population they teach. This imbalance necessitates educators implement culturally responsive teaching within their classrooms. The intent of this article is to guide educators in determining whether they practice and implement culturally responsive teaching within their classrooms. To make this examination, I present questions that educators should ask themselves to determine their level of cultural responsiveness. In response, educators should look to investigate their level of cultural competency, analyze social constructions that reflect growth in cultural responsiveness, and verify their transformation as a culturally responsive educator.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly diverse, with a growing number of students of color, differing religious faiths, varying sexual orientations, and gender expressions, etc. Meanwhile, the faculty of these institutions generally lack the diversity of the student population they teach. This imbalance underlies many of the problems these schools presently face, such as retention and recruitment, campus climate and student success. Traditional methods of education may fail to support students from varying backgrounds. The challenge of meeting the needs of diverse learners is especially prevalent in classrooms where the instructional styles of the teachers are incompatible with their students' learning preferences (Donkor, 2011). Many students will attend classes with educators who do not understand them or their learning needs. It becomes paramount educators develop an awareness of how the intersectionality of their students' ethnicities, culture, and identities impact the

teaching and learning process so that they may meet the learning needs of their students. Faculty members must employ teaching practices that best serve all students. This requires educators to be culturally responsive in their teaching practices.

Culturally responsive teaching uses the learners' cultural referents to empower them academically, socially, psychologically, and politically (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Such teaching does not fit the school culture to the students' culture but uses students' culture to help students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions and conceptualize knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Both learners and teachers benefit from the effects of culturally responsive teaching (Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Educators and students thrive in a learning environment that integrates the identities and beliefs of all. Educators then understand their own identities, examine their own philosophies, and endeavor to grasp the context within which they are teaching. This article was written to guide educators towards

Cultural responsiveness by helping them know their beliefs within and outside of their classrooms. Educators should ask themselves such questions as: Am I culturally competent? Do I analyze social constructions? Am I undergoing transformation as an educator? Critical reflection on the answers to these questions will aid educators in understanding how to equip themselves better and transform their teaching to increase cultural responsiveness.

Am I a Culturally Competent Educator?

Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together to enable effective cross-cultural interactions (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). It acknowledges and incorporates the importance of culture, assesses cross-cultural relations, employs vigilance towards the dynamics resulting from cultural differences, expands upon cultural knowledge, and helps one adapt to meet culturally-unique needs (Cross et al., 1989).

McCalman (2007) suggested the first step toward becoming culturally responsive is understanding one's own culture and how it affects her interaction with others. For an educator to be culturally responsive, she must utilize cultural competence to

understand both how to interact with students and first interactions between learners that have cultural diversity from her or each other. How can an educator understand if she is culturally competent? One trait of being a culturally competent educator is the ability to impart multicultural skills to students (Vescio, Bondy, & Poekert, 2009). This teacher does not shy away from the discourse of oft-misunderstood topics of culture, such as white privilege, but instead recognizes the dynamic her own culture can have on the instruction of her students. She also understands and acknowledges the different cultural norms of the students represented in her classroom.

Another trait of this educator is having an appreciation of diversity that is evidenced in her teaching agenda (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). She strives to know and comprehend her students' cultural differences and how those differences impact their learning (Richards et al., 2007; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Gollnick & Chinn, 2016). Canniff (2008), Gay (2000), and Sealey-Ruiz (2007) suggested educators who practice culturally responsive pedagogy can have a positive influence on the lives of their students because they develop alternative pedagogies to complement the educational experiences of their students.

A teacher with this trait rejects the notion that ideas of one group are more valuable than the ideas of another group, instead working to normalize differences by teaching from a diversity-centered perspective (Richards et al., 2007). Guy (2009) discussed his commitment to creating an inclusive class environment by stating, "...I work at constructing dialogic, open-ended, and participatory environments in which all individuals, regardless of background or identity, can speak and be heard" (p. 43). She also makes her teaching agenda student-centered, rather than teacher or curriculum focused. She knows each student and is responsive to their learning needs. She has a curriculum that allows for multiple perspectives to be represented (Canniff, 2008; Richards et al., 2007). This educator implements readings and materials that integrate perspectives from beyond mainstream thought; she recognizes the value of showcasing the works of those that resonate with her diverse classroom. She does this through understanding how students of different backgrounds communicate, construct knowledge, and learn.

As opposed to an assimilationist viewpoint, which ascribes to the idea that everyone should forsake their culture and accept the mores of mainstream society, this educator adopts cultural pluralism, a view that all differences should be preserved and accepted as equally valuable (Banks, 2006). She accepts her students' reality is

constructed by their race, class, gender and other aspects of being (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). She can appreciate these differences as the students' strengths and resources, rather than deficits that need to be corrected to enhance their ability to learn (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Do I Analyze Societal Effects on Education?

Social and political forces affect the work of educators within the classroom, and especially affect students within and outside of the classroom. Educators “need to understand that social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified through a societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 22). A culturally responsive educator not only tries to influence her peers towards understanding these social inequalities; she also encourages other educators to adopt a sociocultural consciousness in the area where they have the most influence: the classroom.

What does it look like when an educator is able to analyze the societal effects on education? To begin, she critically reflects upon her own positionality and understands how it impacts the relationships between herself her students (Canniff, 2008). Through critical self-reflection, she develops a sociocultural consciousness that challenges preconceived ideas and beliefs (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). She acknowledges her biases as well as her privileges. She asks herself, “How are we complicit-intentionally or otherwise in maintaining the cycles of oppression that operate in our courses, our universities, our schools, and our society” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 83)? This educator is keenly aware she may teach students designated as societal rejects. Whether due to ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender identity, and expression, or any other quality that defines her students, she understands those in her classroom may have been mentally, emotionally or psychologically harmed by society or even the educational system itself. She also understands the dangers of deficit theory, which paints certain students as intellectually and morally deficient rather than exposing the institutional and structural power imbalance that prevails over society (Gorski, 2008). She analyzes the hegemonic social constructions that undergird social norms, which impacts people within and outside of the education system. She understands “social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified through a societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). She impacts her

pedagogical framework through examine her beliefs and knowledge concerning herself, others and society at large.

Once that paradigm has been expanded and rearranged, the framework from which she views the world is foundationally and permanently transformed (Poutiatine, 2009). This educator will infuse diversity and social pluralism in every part of her teaching, regardless of the subject being taught (Gorski, 2006).

Am I Undergoing Transformation as an Educator?

Growth as a culturally responsive educator does not take place without a personal and professional transformation. Transformation is “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 6) and “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Mezirow claimed that transformation happens for people during critical reflection and dialog with others when they critically examine beliefs, emotions, and meanings that they have learned from their environment. Transformation involves more than just a sudden and rational change of mind and behavior. In the case of culturally responsive educators, it is common to begin the process of transformation when they experience an event that invokes critical reflection (Canniff, 2008).

One of the first steps in engaging in critical reflection for cultural responsiveness begins with examining how cultural belief systems influence the experiences of learners and teachers’ beliefs about their students (Canniff, 2008; McCalman, 2007). Not only do they question their assumptions and beliefs, but culturally responsive educators also examine their own personal histories, the histories of others, and how each person’s history has shaped his or her beliefs and outcomes in society (Richards et al., 2007; Vescio et al., 2009). Therefore, educators should seek to understand not only who they are and how they think, but to challenge their notions of knowledge, question their assumptions, and to perceive the framework from which they are teaching.

What are signs of transformation that an educator can look for to show her transformation? A culturally responsive professor experiences disorienting learning and teaching encounters that cause her to rethink her beliefs. As she changes in her understanding of sociocultural differences and equality, her pedagogy transforms to

match her values. This educator establishes relationships both with like-minded individuals as well as those of a different worldview. These relationships challenge her beliefs and convictions of how she views the world. She is never afraid of correction and welcomes the change in her worldview when she understands her mistakes. This educator cannot choose to “unknow” what she has learned through transformation without intentional denial. Her transformation and cultural responsiveness are therefore constantly evolving. As she ages and encounters diverse people and circumstances that challenge her perspectives, she experiences growth in transformation. Her transformation occurs across time because of the multiple dimensions of being (rational, affective, spiritual, imaginative, somatic, and socio-cultural) experience transformation at varying periods in a lifetime (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006).

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education have responded to their increasingly diverse student bodies by becoming more diversity-oriented, not only because of the integration of differing voices and beliefs but also due to external pressures from government and society. One of the answers to meeting this challenge is in culturally responsive teaching. Many scholars have argued that culturally responsive teaching is necessary for every educator to ensure the success of their students. However, one does not become culturally responsive on a whim – there is a period of transformation that occurs in the lives of each educator that is necessary for equipping them to take on the challenges associated with culturally relevant teaching.

Even if educators have good intentions, they can still encounter difficulties in the classroom if they are not familiar with their students’ cultures, experiences, and communities. This requires the development of cultural consciousness and engagement in critical reflection about the influence of culture in the class, curriculum, and institution. Changing the dominant power structure means educators are obligated to lead the way in making the pedagogical changes before they can impart them to their students.

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