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Teacher Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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Introduction

Culturally responsive pedagogy, as defined by one of the most prominent authors in the field, Geneva Gay (2002), is “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Culturally responsive pedagogy can be thought of, then, as teaching practices that attend to the specific cultural characteristics that make students different from one another and from the teacher. ‘Cultural characteristics’ include commonly thought of concepts such as values, traditions, and language, but also extends to include concepts such as communication, learning styles, and relationship norms (Gay, 2002).

Interest in the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy, measured by the amount of literature available, has been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s. A likely reason for this is the growing body of evidence which shows that diverse students are consistently underperforming compared to mainstream students. Recently, the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, run by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, examined this issue using a metric they labeled “Opportunity to Learn.” The Opportunity to Learn comprises four components: high quality early childhood education; highly qualified teachers and instructors in grades K–12; college preparatory curricula that will prepare all youth for college, work, and community; and equitable instructional resources (Schott Foundation, 2009). In May 2009 the foundation reported that students from historically disadvantaged groups (Black, Native American, Latino, and students in poverty) nationwide have only a 51% Opportunity to Learn compared to White students (Schott Foundation, 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy is most obviously a part of the second component, but it can be argued that

culturally relevant pedagogy is a necessary part of all four components.

The Importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

There are two groups of children to consider when discussing the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy for student achievement: students who are currently living in the United States and not achieving, and students whose arrival is anticipated. This is an important consideration because evidence shows both that the American public education system is not meeting the needs of diverse students currently (Schott Foundation, 2009), and that the numbers of diverse students in American public schools is projected to continue rising (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2008). If it is true that diverse students are not achieving because of cultural differences in the ways they learn best and the ways they are taught, then it follows that higher and higher percentages of students in the United States will continue to underachieve.

The Schott Foundation made several projections based on its data, including potential loss of wages for these students in their lifetimes (\$82.2 billion) and “total annual economic burden to taxpayers because of inequity” (\$59.2 billion). The foundation also projected social and civic consequences, including underemployment, health risks, lack of civic participation, and incarceration (Schott Foundation, 2009). If, as President Obama has requested, the United States is going to produce the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, then we must commit to providing all K–12 students access to education that will allow them to reach their potential. Since the numbers of students of color is increasing, and our education system has not, to date, provided adequately for these students, it follows that a ‘new’ approach, one that teaches students according to

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the ways that they best learn, will have to make its way into our classrooms.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Multicultural Education

A distinction must be made between culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education. Education that is multicultural can be delivered to a classroom containing students from the same culture; the content presented is representative of various cultural perspectives. Culturally responsive pedagogy, on the other hand, must respond to the cultures actually present in the classroom. It connects new information to students' background knowledge, and presents the information in ways that respond to students' natural ways of learning. Multicultural education may be a heading under which culturally responsive pedagogy exists. Culturally responsive pedagogy is one means to the ultimate objective of multicultural education for all.

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Literature for this review was obtained through searches of the *ERIC* and *EBSCOhost* databases and from local college libraries. In addition, the reference lists of applicable articles were reviewed for other potential sources. The primary criterion for inclusion in this review was the material's recent specific applicability to culturally responsive pedagogy. More general information on multicultural education was excluded, as well as most information published before 2000. One research report published in 1998 was included because the material it presents is unique.

The theory behind culturally responsive pedagogy is included in all of the literature reviewed, and can be summarized as follows: Students learn best when they are engaged in their environments and with the information to be learned. This engagement happens when students feel validated as members of the learning community and when the information presented is accessible to them. Students feel validated and capable of learning presented information when their learning environments and the methods used to present information are culturally responsive to them (e.g., Gay, 2002; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007; Nieto, 2004).

This literature review elucidates four teacher practices that are essential if teachers are going to effectively design and implement culturally responsive pedagogy. These four practices are: (1) that teachers are empathetic and caring, (2) that they are reflective about their beliefs about people from other cultures, (3) that they are reflective about their own cultural frames of reference, and (4) that they are knowledgeable about other cultures. Since the data presented shows that the diverse student population in the United States is not being adequately educated, and classroom teachers have the most direct contact with these students during school, a logical focus for this literature review was teacher characteristics that would ensure the delivery of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Required Teacher Characteristics

Caring and Empathetic

In order to be fully effective, culturally responsive pedagogy relies on several teacher qualities. Teachers must be caring (Gay, 2002; Dalton, 1998; Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 2004) and empathetic (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2006). "Caring" is used in the literature not as a synonym for "nice" or "kind," but as a descriptor for teachers who are unwilling to tolerate underachievement. Gay (2002) describes caring teachers as those who "care so much" about their culturally diverse students that they insist on holding them to the same standards as other students. Irvine (2003) uses caring to describe one-to-one student-to-teacher relationships, as well as the teacher's role in the greater community. Empathy, as described in the work of Gretchen McAllister and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2002), appears to be not a separate teacher characteristic, but a refined element of caring. Specifically, empathy refers to the teacher's ability to understand the classroom from her students' perspectives. Thus, the "caring" teacher will be more successful if she approaches her goal of holding all students to the same rigorous standards by seeking first to understand where her students are. Empathy is also necessary for other characteristics to be described later in the review.

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Reflective About Their Attitudes and Beliefs About Other Cultures

According to several researchers, teachers will be unable to fully do the work of culturally responsive pedagogy if they do not first investigate their own attitudes and beliefs about other cultures (e.g., Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006; Nieto, 2004). This is true for more than one reason. First, teachers must come to terms with their preconceived notions of the abilities of students from diverse backgrounds if they are to see past the stereotypical underachievement of diverse students (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006). Second, according to Nieto (2004), one consequence of being part of an inherently racist society is the internalization of untruths about different cultural groups, which can surface in the ways that these students are discussed. For example, describing an English language learner as "not having language" is far from appropriate, yet a possible mistake when teachers have not done the work of investigating their own deeply held beliefs about their own and others' cultures (Nieto, 2004). Other examples include "culturally deprived" and "cultural or linguistic deficit" (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006). Third, Quaye and Harper (2007) cite evidence that many college professors believe that all students should "assimilate to white cultural norms and practices" (p. 36). This thinking can be conscious or unconscious, but without confronting their beliefs and attitudes about students from backgrounds other than their own, teachers will be unable to become "multicultural" (Nieto, 2004).

Reflective About Their Own Cultural Frames of Reference

Different from the practice of reflecting on one's own beliefs about other cultures is the ability to identify

one's own cultural frame of reference. This is called the "worldview" by Howard-Hamilton (2000) and McAllister & Irvine (2002). An illustrative example of the way teachers' worldviews can influence their classroom practice is provided by Gay (2002). She explains how symbolic curriculum—"images, symbols, icons, mottoes, awards, celebrations, and other artifacts" (p. 108)—that is used in bulletin boards and other classroom displays quietly teach students about whom and what is important. Robins, et al. (2006) write about "cultural blindness," which they define as "any policy, practice, or behavior that ignores existing cultural differences or that considers such differences inconsequential" (p. 89). They explain that cultural blindness can cause unintended harm to minority groups by perpetuating the sense that they are invisible. If teachers have not done the work of uncovering their own worldviews, then this frame of reference could stealthily undermine students' feelings of empowerment and belongingness, which all of the researchers reviewed attest will likely lead to minority students' lack of success in school (e.g., Nieto, 2004, Banks, et al. 2001, Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

Knowledgeable About Other Cultures

Nearly all of the literature reviewed contained extensive discussion about teachers educating themselves about the other cultures represented in their classrooms. The only two articles that did not explicitly address this were written for an audience of college professors (Howard-Hamilton, 2000 & Quaye & Harper, 2007). Since culturally responsive pedagogy requires that adjustments be made to mainstream teaching practices in order to reach students with learning styles other than those of the dominant culture, it follows that teachers will have to have knowledge of these cultural practices in order to adjust instruction appropriately. The knowledge required is more sophisticated than differences in foods and holiday celebrations, however. Gay (2002) adds learning styles, preferences for cooperative vs. individual problem solving, expectations for behavior between children and adults, and gender roles to the standard categories of values and traditions. Grant and Asimeng-Boahene (2006) make a case for teaching citizenship education through African proverbs, viewing the language of the proverbs as a "cultural resource," and explaining that teachers have to use these natural resources to make connections to their students. They refer to the proverbs as a "cultural prism that reflects beliefs and experiences that are close to their own families and communities" (p. 19). McAllister & Irvine (2002) posit that, besides knowledge of cultural practices, teachers must experience what it is to be a member of a nondominant culture. In their professional development

work with teachers, these researchers create opportunities for simulation of and immersion in cultures other than those of the participants, to give the teachers a chance to experience life through their diverse students' eyes (McAllister & Irvine, 2002).

There are two deeper, recurrent themes within this discussion of 'knowledge of other cultures' in the literature. One is the importance of language, not only words themselves, but the ways that language is used and the variety of language styles of different cultural groups. For example, behavioral norms in non-dominant cultures call for communication that it is active, engaging, and participatory, while in the dominant culture the norm is that speakers take turns (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 2004). In classrooms this often looks like teachers asking questions while students listen quietly and then offer the "right" response when the teacher solicits it. This represents a powerful disconnect between the teacher and her students, powerful because language is so central to one's experiences and ways of being in the world. The call for teachers to not simply know about or be sensitive to students' differing communication styles but become proficient in communicating in these ways themselves is made by several researchers (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 2004). Dalton (1998) holds teachers accountable to this reality in standards two, three, and five of her five standards for effective pedagogy.

A second recurrent theme is that the learning style valued in non-dominant cultures is more collaborative and communal than the more independent learning style that is typically valued in the dominant culture. Traditionally, learners are encouraged to work for personal achievement, but this is a foreign operating mode for many diverse students, who are taught that the good of the whole community is more important than the good of any one of its members (Gay, 2002). Dalton (1998) includes this difference in standards one, three, and five. Recommendations for instructional strategies that make use of diverse students' different communication and learning styles can be found in Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2007), Allison and Rehm (2007), and Dalton (1998).

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Finally, there is one additional idea under the general heading of 'knowledge of other cultures,' which is that,

while teachers must teach students in the ways that their cultures have trained them to learn, teachers must not stop their learning about these cultural ways at generalizations or stereotypes (Nieto, 2004; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007; Banks et al., 2001). Teachers must learn to balance the facts that, while students are members of cultural groups that have distinctive practices (Banks et al., 2001; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007), they are also at the same time individuals, and stereotyping them could have effects similarly negative to just ignoring them (Nieto, 2004).

Implications

After the review of literature, it is clear that much is known about how to better serve students who are traditionally marginalized in classrooms. It appears that there is a missing piece in applying the knowledge to actual classroom practice. Are there classrooms where different cultural lenses are worn by teachers and students? How is this received by the greater community? What work did the teachers engage in order to reconsider their knowledge from the perspective of a different culture?

Becoming Culturally Responsive

There are two levels at which proficiency with culturally responsive pedagogy can be addressed: practicing classroom teachers and students in teacher education programs. Based on teachers' responses to the simulation and immersion experiences in the professional development program CULTURES (Irvine, 2003; McAllister & Irvine, 2002), it can be concluded that these sorts of exercises should be replicated across the country. Also, a more difficult and controversial topic is teacher accountability. Ideally, classroom teachers would be assessed and given specific suggestions for improving their own culturally responsive practice. This is much easier said than done, however, because of the political nature of cultural responsiveness, and because in a system as vast and diverse as education, real leadership on a topic of this nature would have to come from authority figures who were themselves eager to do the reflective work necessary to effect change.

A more easily-reached population is students enrolled in teacher education programs. As a means through which to cultivate the kind of empathy and caring the literature says are essential characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, teacher education programs should make study abroad experiences requirements in their programs of study. This would also help to begin developing the knowledge of other cultures that is needed

by teachers. Another way to support the learning of cultural characteristics would be by centering students' work in the greater community where, presumably, students would have opportunities to work with diverse groups. This should already be happening in programs that send their teacher education students to K–12 schools for field work. Perhaps the teacher education students *are* immersed in diverse environments, but opportunities to reflect on and extend this learning are being missed.

Reflection as a Process

The work required to deconstruct one's own cultural identity through reflection should also be included in teacher education programs of study. As the majority of the literature reviewed shows, the work of becoming "culturally responsive" is quite personal, and may best begin with individuals engaging in reflection as a process. Are teacher education programs teaching students how to use reflection as a means to process their experiences in diverse settings, or simply assuming that reflection is an automatic process? Reflection must be explicitly taught as a process and then required and assessed throughout diverse experiences in order to be meaningful. If reflective skills are not explicitly modeled, taught, required, and assessed, clinical experiences that are intended to be opportunities for students to become reflective turn instead into the passing of time to fulfill a requirement.

In our experience, many teacher education student reflections are limited to surface level observations and do not dig deeply into preconceived ideas and expectations about student behavior and learning. As a result, these reflection exercises fail to help students learn to personally process the information for the purposes of designing culturally responsive pedagogy. Self-examination through reflection is a difficult task that requires training and support. Because reflection is such a personal process, it is easy for practitioners to evade the hard work of investigating themselves. This makes providing a structured reflection process necessary for both facilitating and assessing reflections.

Many teacher assessment systems require teachers to be reflective, and reflection has also been a key term in teacher preparation programs for years, but a specific definition for reflection or a structured way to provide constructive feedback for reflections is hard to find. John Dewey (1910) defined reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). Dewey's definition provides a framework from which four characteristics of reflection can be made actionable. These four characteristics are: (1) that practitioners' thinking is grounded in evidence,

(2) practitioners' thinking is flexible, not dualistic, (3) practitioners' thinking shows the ability to perceive classroom practices from both his or her own and the learners' points of view, and (4) practitioners identify for themselves areas of opportunity for further learning. When applied to the presented characteristics of culturally responsive practitioners, the desired result becomes clear as most can be applied to more than one reflection criteria.

Practitioners' Thinking is Grounded in Evidence

Classroom decisions should be based on understanding students' needs. Caring and empathetic practitioners who know their students are better able to assess and respond to student needs. Teachers should develop a trained ear for hearing their own thinking about their students' cultural characteristics and self-check that they are not allowing unsubstantiated stereotypes to guide their thinking.

Practitioners' Thinking is Flexible, not Dualistic

Teachers need to develop the ability to consider alternative methods that could improve learning outcomes. Also, flexibility in thinking is important for sharing classroom experiences with children in ways that do not judge them for being 'wrong' just because their actions or thinking do not align in a moment with the teacher's. This criterion encompasses all four characteristics of a culturally responsive practitioner as outlined here. A practitioner that is caring and empathetic, reflective about their attitudes and beliefs about other cultures, reflective about their own cultural frames of reference, and knowledgeable about other cultures is not a dualistic thinker.

Practitioners' Thinking Shows the Ability to Perceive Classroom Practices From Both His or Her Own and the Learners' Points of View

This element may be the point at which reflection has the greatest potential for influencing culturally responsive practice. When practitioners develop a trained eye for viewing classroom happenings from a perspective different from their own, they are able to move forward in ways that respond to the differences instead of holding all classroom participants to their own standards or views. Recommendations made in this article for teachers to be reflective about their attitudes and beliefs about other cultures and their own cultural frames of reference require that teachers learn to step outside of their own thinking

in order to examine it and also to acknowledge others' thinking.

Practitioners Identify for Themselves Areas of Opportunity for Further Learning

Being able to identify opportunities for additional learning means first being open to the possibility that there is always more to learn. Because people and cultures are dynamic, becoming knowledgeable about differences between them is an endless endeavor that lends itself to continuous learning.

Application of this definition, in combination with expectations for culturally responsive practitioners as highlighted here, supports a need for a structured process to both facilitate and assess reflection that guides practice. Becoming reflective is a process that must be continuously taught and learned, and include areas for consideration, modification, and/or further learning. Without this critical piece, the reflection process fails to recognize its potential in the cultivation of culturally responsive teachers.

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