

The importance of culturally responsive instruction



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This paper will define culturally responsive, relevant, instruction, and the difference between external elements and internal elements of culture and why this is important for instructors to understand, specifically in the case of ESL/ELL students. This paper will also present research on the importance of culturally responsive instruction and the ways school districts can successfully address our increasingly diverse classrooms by using culturally responsive instruction to ensure students' progress in the classroom. Lastly, the paper will discuss ways that teachers can continue to grow as learners using reflective portfolios as they might for the students they teach in a way to accurately assess learning that has been accomplished.

Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culturally responsive instruction is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is important for teachers to recognize that they bring a specific culture into the classroom as do their students. In the discussion of culture there are two categories of elements, the external elements of culture and the internal elements of culture.

External elements of culture are the ones that appear most readily in the classrooms. These are also the aspects of culture that can lead to stereotyping. The external elements include things like food, holidays, clothing and dances. These are tangible and concrete expressions of culture. The internal elements are family values, views on child rearing, and non-verbal communication styles, such as, eye contact, personal space and touch. These internal elements are less concrete and can be significant

when teachers are trying to determine a families values of their child's education (Brown, 2003).

Research in the area of culturally responsive teaching has shown there are important key elements that can be introduced that can increase the success of ESL students. Gaining students cooperation in urban, diverse classrooms involves establishing an environment where teachers address students' cultural and ethnic needs, as well as their social, emotional and cognitive needs (Brown, 2003). Teachers and school districts must be open to adding these elements into the curriculum and keeping expectations of ESL students high, while at the same time providing ways to allow them to participate fully within the zone of development and language acquisition that they are currently functioning. This knowledge and understanding of the present research will allow classroom teachers and school districts to provide teacher training that includes methods of culturally responsive instruction and ways to help the school be open and welcoming to parents and their values, while teaching them the values of the education system in this country.

Key Elements of Culturally Responsive and Linguistically Responsive Intervention

These four key elements have been assembled by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems. The research was done as a result of the disproportionate number of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds being placed in special education. These elements highlight a response to intervention that provide culturally and linguistically responsive interventions. When teachers understand that culture provides a

context for the teaching and learning of all students, and they recognize that differences between the culture of home and school can be a source of challenges in the classroom for both the teachers and the students, schools can address these challenges to allow for school improvements (Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

The first key is preventing school underachievement and failure. This prevention happens when there is shared responsibility for educating all students and including a culturally responsive curriculum and instruction. A. Ortiz states that a positive school climate is “one in which educators (teachers, administrators, and related service personnel) share the philosophy that all students can learn and that they as educators, are responsible for creating learning environments in which culturally and linguistically diverse students can be successful (Ortiz, 2002). To ensure this type of success all educators must have high expectations for every student regardless of their cultural, linguistic, economic or any other characteristics they may bring to the classroom.

Students are best served by culturally responsive instruction that goes beyond the external elements of culture, such as food festivals or culture days. This means that the curricula must build on students socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge and experiences, taking into account their strengths and available resources. Students need to be actively engaged in the instruction, through meaningful dialogue with teachers and other students alike. Classroom instruction needs to be comprehensible on two levels, a) embedded in contexts that are familiar to students, and b) content instruction within their zone of proximal development.

Some other aspects of this first key element are; making an array of services available, special education, early childhood education, Title I programs, bilingual education and community programs, creating collaborative relationships with the students and their families. In this scenario, schools reject the notion to put the blame of students failures on the family and focuses on shared responsibility and equity (Moll, Amanti,& Neff, 1992). This can serve to bring parents and families into the school, helping to ensure their child's success. The last aspect of this element is to provide professional development that focuses on effective practices for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Effective staff development in this area provides culturally self-awareness to staff and better understanding of their own expectations, beliefs, knowledge and skills.

The second key element is based on early intervention for struggling learners. Even when the school-wide practices focus on prevention, there will be still be some students who show academic or behavioral difficulties. It is crucial at this juncture that the intervention starts as soon as these difficulties are noticed. It has been noted that failure to respond quickly enough has often showed the interventions to be unsuccessful. Early intervention has both classroom and school wide components. In the classroom teachers use diagnostic/prescriptive teaching approaches. When these efforts are not adequate the teachers have access to peer and expert consultation, general education problem solving teams and alternative programs, such as tutoring (Ortiz, 2002).

The third key element explains diagnostic and prescriptive teaching.

Teachers teach skills, concepts, reteach using significantly strategies, use

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informal assessment strategies to identify students strengths, weaknesses, and possible causes for for academic or behavioral difficulties. In the case of Ell students the assessments of conversational and academic language proficiency are crucial to planning instruction for language and academic goals (Ortiz, & Garcia, 1990).

The fourth key element is the availability of general education problem solving support. Peers and experts can work collaboratively to address the student's learning problems and guide the teachers as they implement the recommendations. Schools can also have teacher assistance teams that can help teachers resolve problems that routinely occur in their classrooms. Through observation of each others classrooms they can offer suggestions to improving instruction and/or behavior management. ESL teachers can demonstrate and model lessons and strategies for their general education peers (Ortiz, 2002).

Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom

One of the first steps a teacher must make in creating a culturally responsive and relevant environment is to engage in reflective self-analysis. This means examining their attitudes to different ethnic, racial, gender and social class groups. Often the first place to start in creating a culturally relevant classroom is with the family of the student. Finding out as much as one can about the family, using family surveys, reading books or providing books to read in the classroom that represent the diversity of the cultures in the classroom, and using careful observations of the students to see which experiences connect with them.

Acknowledging and nurturing the cultural knowledge of culturally and linguistically children can help bridge the gap between home and school. Having the children bring in pictures of their families, asking children to share favorite songs and stories from home or inviting families in to share important aspects of their culture can help children feel valued about who they are. Cultural incongruities between the values and patterns of communication at home and school can undermine successful learning. Many classrooms in this country emphasize individual responsibility, achievement and competition, other cultural groups may not be accustomed to this style of learning (Bowers & Flinders, 1990). Providing both individual work and cooperative group learning activities can respect both these values and help all the students become more successful learners.

Drawing on a young child's experiences and background, and allowing multiple modes of expression, helps foster self-esteem, and foster confidence. For children that are struggling to understand classroom directions, routines and conversations and ways to communicate their thoughts in a new language, non-verbal methods of communication provide students with an alternative way to participate and communicate in the classroom.

As previously mentioned teachers will need to be trained to meet the needs of the students that now routinely enter our classrooms. Research has shown that the best outcomes for ELL students come from bilingual programs when they first enter school in this country. Since it is difficult to staff all schools with bilingual teachers, capable with fluency in quite a diverse group of languages, it is therefore necessary to train teachers that are in the

classrooms today to best work in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. One such way that has shown some good results is the use of reflective teaching portfolios.

Zeichner, emphasized that "sensitive and effective teaching of diverse students requires teachers' sociocultural knowledge about child and adolescent development; about second language acquisition; about the ways that socioeconomic circumstances, language, and culture shape school performance and educational achievement as well as specific knowledge about the languages, cultures, and circumstances of the particular students in their classrooms" (Zeichner, 1993). The use of these reflective teacher portfolios was to broaden and deepen the teacher learners' understanding of teaching diverse students. The way these teacher portfolios work is they include and reflect the teachers' attention to and focus on their own growth as a teacher over time, and not to simply accumulate students' work. The portfolio should reflect the teacher's knowledge of their students as part of the socio-cultural context through, reflection, peer sharing, and focused discussions on tensions, and confusions. The portfolio should also demonstrate the progression of the teacher as a ESL teacher (Barton, J. & Collins, A., 1993).

Summary

It is clear that teacher's face challenges in today's classrooms, with the changing profiles of learners in our classroom. Culturally responsive teaching shows itself to be effective for ELL students as they learn to become confident learners in our classrooms. It helps with language acquisition, self-esteem

and also to feel pride in where they come from. Culturally responsive teaching goes beyond the ELL student and is as important in the diverse classrooms we find today. Cultures change from school to school, and neighborhood to neighborhood. As teachers we hear dialectical differences in our English speakers, we deal with parents that have different values in terms of discipline and education. As educators the best we can do is to try and meet these challenges as they come, by our own continued learning, and acceptance of differences. New teacher training programs need to address the type of classrooms that the new teacher will find today as they get hired. Reflection of our own biases, stereotypes, and judgments will help us become more culturally responsive teachers. We will be able to create the type of classroom for our students that will allow them to acquire the language and skills they need to compete in the world, but also with allowing them to keep pride in their own cultures as we learn together in this very global society that we now live in.