

Teaching and Learning from a Different Perspective: The Case for Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Patricia M. Tilghman

Every workday, educational practitioners cross thresholds into America's K-16 learning environments encountering a new and evolving set of opportunities and obstacles. Squarely on the table of educational issues is the discussion surrounding the capacity of and the teacher efficacy in the ability of all students to learn. This notion is no truer than for students from diverse backgrounds. Deeper discussions may center on the existence of achievement gaps and variances in performance outcomes of students from non-dominant populations. The inception of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 brought forth greater scrutiny with regards to student performance. Increasing numbers of researchers are engaging in scholarly inquiry with respect to the academic achievement of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. Richards, Brown, and Forde (2007) contend that the changing demographic make-up of today's classrooms necessitates teachers to be able to instruct students who differ in culture and language abilities. They further posit that in order to meet the differing needs of these diverse learners, teachers must not only utilize theoretically sound instructional practices, but also engage in culturally responsive pedagogy. The work of other noted researchers has suggested that when students are able to identify culturally-relevant components reflected in responsive curricula that are infused with high-yield instructional strategies, engagement and student achievement increase (Banks, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hattie, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Inherent in the aforementioned is the concept that students who exhibit higher levels of engagement in the learning environment are able to attain higher levels of achievement. In their work on student engagement and achievement, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that substantive engagement of students in instruction yielded a significant link to achievement. When students

from the non-dominant culture are not able to access congruous cultural, historical, and sociopolitical referents in the curriculum, the resulting outcomes are persistent achievement gaps, disengagement in the learning environment, (Lutkus, Rampey, & Donahue, 2006) and disproportionately high dropout rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Bearing this in mind, the focus of this discussion is the assertion that a social action focused, culturally-relevant curriculum delivered through the use of research-based, high-yield instructional strategies in tandem with culturally-responsive practices is needed to foster increased student engagement leading to improved student performance. Implementing culturally-relevant curriculum affords all students the opportunity to see themselves, their communities, and their cultural affiliations in the content presented. The incorporation of the research-based, instructional high-yield strategies provides teachers with specific learning protocols to increase depth of student knowledge and understanding.

America's Changing Classrooms

The demographics of the United States today reflect perpetual changes in the nation's constituency. In their discussion of the 2010 U.S. Census, Humes, and Jones (2011) shared that 72% of people identified themselves as White and 13% as African American. It was further noted that 16% of the participants identified themselves as Hispanic reflecting a 43% growth increase in this category since 2000. The cultural composition of the one-room schoolhouse in decades past reflects images of mono-ethnic, mono-linguistic learning environments. Conversely, in light of the current demographic trends, today's classrooms bespeak a much more divergent scenario incorporating multiple languages, ethnicities, and economics levels. During the 2002-2003 school term, 4 million, or roughly 8% of students enrolled in public school were provided services as English

Language Learners (NCES, 2005). Further noted in this report are that nearly 42% of all students in grades K-12 were students of color. Through the use of a diversity index which represents the percentage by chance, that two students randomly selected from the same classroom would be from different ethnic backgrounds, immigration trends were explored. The New York Times (2013) reported that the U.S. had a student-diversity index of 52% in 1993 which rose to 61% in 2006. A higher number indicates a greater level of diversity in the student population. Virginia's overall classroom diversity index rose from 46% in 1993 to 57% in 2006.

Achievement of Students from Diverse Backgrounds

As a result of policies and regulations developed by local, state and federal education agencies, school and district accountability departments are implementing measures to collect pertinent, substantive data on student growth with particular emphasis on students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. Nieto and Bode (2008) stated that disproportionalities between the scores of White students and those from non-dominant populations, which have been identified through the analysis of longitudinal data, are now commonly referred to as the achievement gap. NCLB set forth ten primary areas of action "to close achievement gaps with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that "no child is left behind" (107th Congress, 2002). There is continual debate about the long-term effectiveness of the legislation. With perceived effectiveness aside, NCLB has been the springboard for the establishment of a variety of programs requiring states and localities to provide equitable pathways to academic success for those from traditionally underrepresented, underperforming, and marginalized populations.

Addressing the Needs

On the forefront of educational research is the pursuit of new ways to address the needs of diverse learners, especially in light of high-stakes testing and accountability (Meidl & Meidl, 2011). Villegas and Lucas (2002) shared that one strong

method to engage culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students is to view them as capable learners and partners in the learning process. Along this line of thinking, Ladson-Billings (2009) indicated that "when students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence" (p. 134). Understanding the role of culture and language in the learning process can provide powerful assistance in the successful acquisition of knowledge for students from diverse backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The instruction in most present-day American classrooms is comprised of a test-driven, Eurocentric curriculum for which there is no personal connection for students from diverse backgrounds with their historical and sociocultural experiences (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2008).

Utilizing student culture and language as a mechanism to increase achievement attainment rests within the purview of culturally-responsive teaching practices and multicultural education. Nieto and Bode (2008) posited that a major premise of multicultural education is to ensure the academic success of not only diverse students, but to provide all students with high-quality, equitable education that improves achievement. Culturally-responsive instruction capitalizes on the strengths students bring to the classroom by identifying, nurturing, and promoting those strengths to optimize student achievement for all (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). If the assertion holds true that students from economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds can reap learning and achievement benefits from multicultural educational and culturally-responsive teaching practices, then the core issue rests with the revising of school curricula to embrace and capitalize on the language, culture and lived experiences of students. In his work with underperforming Latina/o students, Cammarota (2007) found that his preliminary data strongly suggested that engaging students in rigorous, socially-relevant curriculum played a significant role in increasing educational attainment levels.

Understanding Culturally-Relevant Curriculum

When planning for instruction, schools, divisions, and classroom teachers often find

themselves asking such questions as: “Where will I take my students tomorrow, this week, this month, this year, for the next 12 years; how will they get to the endpoint; what knowledge, skills, and abilities will the students need to acquire in order to successfully reach the destination?” A school’s or district’s curriculum is frequently viewed as the plan for empowering educators to guide students to their academic “destinations”. Oliva and Gordon (2013) defined curriculum as “the plan or program for all the experiences that the learner encounters under the direction of the school” (p. 7).

The student should be at the heart of a quality curriculum, a part of a value-added process tapping into what students innately bring with them to the schoolhouse. As a leader in the field of multicultural education, Banks (1999) asserted through his work that there are four approaches to culturally-relevant curricula. The contributions approach centers on a general overview of various cultural heroes and holidays. Students may be afforded the opportunity to engage in activities for Hanukkah or be presented with reading material about Rosa Parks, as examples. In the second approach, the additive approach, content, concepts, and themes regarding other cultures are added to the curriculum; however, the structure remains intact. Structural changes to the curriculum occur in Banks’ transformative approach. In this level of curriculum, students are encouraged to engage in and view concepts, issues, and themes through the cultural filter of others establishing pluralistic viewpoints. For students participating in this type of work, critical thinking skills are necessitated. Finally, the social action approach includes all of the aspects of the transformative curriculum, but includes activities that empower students to be activists, seek answers to cultural conflicts from primary sources, and engage in real-world social issues. The supposition presented in this work is that culturally-relevant curriculum, in its full measure, reflects culturally-responsive practices in conjunction with research-based, high-yield instructional strategies, undergirded with a social action focus.

Culturally-responsive instructional approaches. Critical to the success of students

from traditionally underperforming populations is the incorporation of their respective cultures and everyday experiences into the learning environment. “Students real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the ‘official’ curriculum” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Offering a vigorous curriculum alone isn’t enough to ensure that students achieve at high levels if students are not provided support throughout the learning process (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). This support comes in the form of instructional strategies conducive to and reflective of students’ cultural affiliations and identities. The culturally-responsive teacher seeks to motivate students to become active participants in their learning through reflection and evaluation incorporating self-regulatory concepts such student goal-setting, performance evaluation and feedback utilization (Banks & Banks, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2008). These researchers further indicate that the implementation of culturally-responsive instructional practices encourages students to think critically as analysis and synthesis skills are needed to view and interpret content from multiple sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives.

Three broad tenets supply the conceptual framework for culturally-responsive instruction according to Ladson-Billings’ (1995) research. The first tenet is that of high expectations for academic success. This refers to the teacher maintaining and communicating high expectations for students to work at their full potential. Teachers provide intellectual challenges by expecting students to perform at and teaching to the highest standards (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The second tenet is that of working towards cultural competence. Cultural competence is the fostering of positive cultural identities within students through the incorporation of their sociocultural connections and their lived experiences into the instructional environment (Gay, 2000, Santamaria, 2009). Critical Consciousness represents the third tenet in Ladson-Billings (1995) framework. This concept focuses on the critiquing, interpreting, and/or acting upon current and historical social inequities. Culturally-responsive teachers build critical consciousness by discussing controversial topics and by engaging in social action efforts through identifying and acting

upon problems that impact the students' community (Howard, 2001a).

Research-based, high-yield instructional strategies. Not only is there importance to the cultural elements that must be seamlessly woven into the content area curriculum, but there is also great significance in the types of instructional strategies employed to transmit the content knowledge. "Deliberately incorporating specific aspects of the cultural systems of different ethnic groups into instructional processes has positive impacts on student achievement" (Gay, 2000, p.118). This line of thinking is further supported by Gay (2000) as she indicated that when the protocols and practices of the teacher are in tandem with the participation styles; work habits; preferred learning, participation, and thinking styles; experiential reference frames; and mental schemata, achievement for students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds improves. Student engagement and involvement is also fostered when teachers articulate specific strategies for instruction, provide constant scaffolding and monitoring, seek feedback from their students about their teaching, and find ways to engage and motivate students (Hattie, 2009).

Hattie (2009) identified six signposts for excellence in education. It is stated in the third signpost that:

Teachers need to be aware of what each and every student is thinking and knowing to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in light of this knowledge, and have proficient knowledge and understanding of their content to provide meaningful and appropriate feedback such that each student moves progressively through curriculum levels. (p. 238)

The concept of teachers understanding what students think and know, and then utilizing that information in the instructional process, has direct relevance and linkage to culturally-relevant teaching and learning. Knowing what students think, know, and feel is rooted in the sociocultural

context of their lives. Although Hattie's work does not advocate any one particular strategy or program, his meta-analysis does reveal the effect-size on student achievement for various approaches and constructs. These approaches are referred to as high-yield instructional strategies.

Social action focus. Our world is comprised of various sociocultural contexts including dominant and non-dominant value systems. Public schools can be considered microcosms of these complex, interactive systems. Public schools are typically based on the rules, norms, customs and traditions within the sociocultural values of the dominant culture. Therefore, students from diverse backgrounds are frequently immersed in learning environments that represent cultural contexts different than their respective families and communities (Lahman & Park, 2004). The cultural incongruity of the home and school environments can be bridged by developing and implementing culturally-relevant curriculum, thereby increasing equitable access to learning content for all students (Banks & Banks, 1995).

Neito and Bode (2008) define social justice as "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (p. 11). The authors further assert that the concept of social justice in education is based on four key constructs: (1) confronting misconceptions and stereotypes; (2) providing all students with the appropriate material and emotional resources including self-worth and high expectations for achieving their full potential; (3) capitalizing on the strengths and talents of all students, but particularly those from marginalized populations; and (4) fostering climates within the learning environment that promote critical thinking through service as agents for social change. By incorporating the sociocultural contexts of students into the program curriculum and classroom instruction, students will be able to see themselves reflected in the learning process and be able to more fully connect to the content concepts and deepen their understanding of the academic constructs. Further, by reframing the curriculum to include the social action component, students will be able to

critically think about issues, topics, and themes from the vantage point of others with differing sociocultural contexts.

Conclusion

It is evident that there are substantive and perpetual differences in the learning and achievement of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. Educational equity that reflects culturally-responsive instructional practices and culturally-relevant curricula are prerequisites for and a means for the achievement of maximal academic success for culturally diverse students (Gay, 2002). With the regulations of NCLB and the moral obligation to do what is best for all students, we as educators must pursue this notion of implementing social action focused, culturally-relevant curricula delivered through the use of research-based, high-yield instructional strategies undergirded by culturally-responsive practices to increase student engagement leading to improved student performance. “When we educate our children for and about cultural diversity, we enrich and empower ourselves as well as come closer to achieving a truly democratic civic society” (Gay, 2000).

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