

Cultural Competency through the Lenses of Anthropology

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Diversity is a characteristic of not only American society, but also American education. While issues of accountability and student achievement are foremost for educators, the issue of diversity continues to permeate and stand as a significant subject for American educators. Clearly, the face of the American student population has changed and continues to change. At the same time, the teaching force in the United States is significantly different from the varying face of its students. In 2002, minority students made up 69% of the population, while teachers were predominantly white (Johnson, 2002). Even more so, the issue of the cultural divide between teachers and students is extended further when considering the differences in ages and norms. Many teachers work in schools that are notably unlike the schools which they attended. To add, the norms and families of these students are different from those of current teachers (Johnson, 2002).

All of this creates a great cultural divide between teachers and the students that they serve. However, despite this great split, teachers continue to be unprepared for the challenges of a more diverse student population (Johnson, 2002). Few teacher preparation programs offer courses in cultural awareness. Those that do offer courses in cultural awareness typically do not require them. As a result, many new teachers are entering the classroom unable to deal with the challenges of the ethnic and cultural differences of today's youths.

If teachers are to meet the needs of a changing more ethnically and culturally diverse student population, then school leaders must promote cultural competency among staff and the students in their schools. This includes in-service training and professional development activities that will not only make students and teachers more aware of cultural differences, but promote an open dialogue of individual cultural identity.

Anthropology

In order to begin any discussion on cultural competence, one must look backwards and analyze

the behaviors of previous generations. While working to best understand why people act a certain way in the present, it is necessary to study the behaviors and actions of those who lived before us. When the topic comes to understanding human behavior on a broad level, looking into the past requires a working knowledge of anthropology.

In its simplest form, anthropology is defined as the knowledge or study of human beings. The science has been split into four fields, and the one most closely related to our topic is cultural anthropology, also called social anthropology or socio-cultural anthropology. In a sense, these anthropologists make the argument that culture is based on human nature and that people are capable of classifying experiences, encoding classifications in a symbolic manner and teaching their findings to others. In short, culture is learned, and because of this, people living in different places have different cultures. Part of the conflict with different groups of people involves the strain between one living in his ordinary (local) world versus his struggle to exist in the global (universal) society (Barrett, 1984).

In regards to cultural competency this is important. If culture is learned then educators must understand that their students come from an extensive range of backgrounds and social beliefs. This presents a number of ramifications for educators. Students will come with a number of learning styles, behaviors and cultural norms that may not coincide or parallel with that of the teacher. Nevertheless, educators should embrace these differences.

The origins of this branch of anthropology fall to the early 19th century with the study of ethnology. Ethnology systematically compares different human societies. Ethnologists were concerned with the idea of why people living in different parts of the world behaved in different ways. It was believed by the early theorists that beliefs and practices were passed from one group to another, either directly or indirectly. Some believed that they spread from one place to another, although

the explanation of how was never fully developed. There were beliefs in a cultural evolution, complete with several stages (Crotty, 1998).

When studying cultural competency, this is also relevant. Much as ethnology proposes that culture varies because of people living in different parts of the world, our students come from a number of communities that can be remarkably different. An average school may exist in a community that serves students from a number of ethnic groups, religious beliefs and socio-economic backgrounds. Each of these students, because of their backgrounds, presents a number of challenges which educators should understand and embrace.

Ethnography

By definition, ethnography is “a methodology that sprang in the first instance of anthropology and anthropological theory has been adopted by symbolic interactionism and adapted to its own purposes” (Crotty, 1998, p. x). Ethnography puts the researcher squarely among the culture being studied. The key word is immersion. In ethnography, the anthropologist lives inside of another society for a considerable period of time.

The practice was advanced by Franz Boas. Boas, a German scientist, observed and participated in the social and cultural life of Arctic Eskimos as part of his fieldwork on Baffin Island in Canada. The experience changed Boas’ outlook and turned him from a “scientist’s view of cognition to an historian’s view of culture.” (Crotty, p. 76) In his view, cultures were “irreducible and incomparable.” Through his influence, Boas was credited with helping cultural relativism succeed in dominating American anthropology. Boas continued, “culture is not to be criticized. One is to observe it as closely as possible, attempt to take the place of those within the culture and search out the insider’s perspective” (as cited in Crotty, p. 76).

British educational researcher Martyn Hammersley (1985), an advocate for ethnography, defined ethnography this way:

Although ethnography was born to anthropology, the study was a form of research in which the social settings to be studied, however familiar to the researcher,

must be treated as anthropologically strange, and the task is to document the culture – the perspectives and practices – of the people in these settings. The aim is to ‘get inside’ the way each group of people sees the world. (p. x)

The immersion concept discussed how ethnography parallels much of what is promoted in studies of cultural competency. Much of the literature regarding cultural competency suggests that persons in an organization must live in the cultures that they serve. Only then can cultural competency be achieved and the organization meaningfully serves the community that it is within.

The Symbolism Starts at Birth

One notable concept forwarded by the American cultural anthropologists was that of symbolic interactionism. Clifford Geertz wrote of culture as a system of significant symbols (Crotty, 1998). The thought process behind this suggests that humans require a great deal of stimulation and continuous learning – of language and other symbolic systems – to maintain even normal human functioning (Barrett, 1984). Without meaningful symbolic communication, even normal mental functions cannot be aroused. One example of this noted by Barrett grew from a newspaper account from 1973. The article centered on a 13-year-old girl who had been held captive in her home for most of her life. The girl, Susan Wiley, was discovered by social workers and studied while a plan for rehabilitation was developed. Wiley was deformed, incapable of speaking, and wore diapers. Her muscle development was retarded from lack of exercise and she walked with a stoop. Her mental capacity equaled that of a 12-to-18 month infant. The reasoning behind these deficiencies and deformities was determined to be her lack of social contact during her developing years. Other children, who were neglected and later found, showed similar shortcomings. In each case, the absence of social stimuli and communications were seen as causal reasons.

Geertz (1973) defined significant symbols as “the meaningful symbols that constitute culture as an indispensable guide to human behavior.” Geertz continued,

without them (symbols), we would not be clever savages like in *Lord of the Flies*. We would not be nature's noblemen, who in Enlightenment thought lurk beneath the trappings of culture. We would not be intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves, as classical anthropological theory seems to imply. We would be unworkable monstrosities." (p. x)

Most of this symbolic interaction has a great deal to offer when studying cultural competency. Many of the habits we develop, which determine how culturally competent we will become as adults, are learned from the symbols we pay attention to during our developing years. The bottom line is that we are products of our environment. Most of our customary behavior is shaped by observation, by initiation, or by instruction at the hands of other members of the group. (Barrett, 1984, p. 54).

Most of these characteristics are formed in the first three years of life and the process begins at birth. Customs are learned. For example, does the family eat with forks or chopsticks? What language is spoken in the home? At what age are babies trained to crawl, walk, and toilet train? The particular society in which one is reared determines the answers to these questions and many others like them. Many of these practices have been developed for generations and will continue to pass on for future generations. The techniques and practices are ingrained in each society. A sociologist, Emile Durkheim, was one of the first to write about the influence from the great power that society exercised over every individual. He wrote of the education of children that begins from the womb. Durkheim described how babies are taught how to eat, drink and sleep at certain hours, how they are taught to clean themselves, how to remain calm, how to obey and to exert pressure, how to show respect and give consideration for others.

According to Durkheim, the reason why children are so vulnerable to this type of training is that they have no choice. Acknowledging that children do not like to be toilet trained or fed, or dressed, Durkheim also noted that babies will cry as a defense mechanism, but come to realize that their wailing and howling tantrums will be exerted with

no effect. When the child realizes that the "world" is against him, he will comply. This is the reason why it takes less than three years for the core of a child's cultural tradition to emerge. It is not brainwashing, but rather the fact remains that the child has developed stereotypes, gestures and salutations that are peculiar to that society (Barrett, 1984, p. 56). The anthropologist Kluckhorn (1949) liked to refer to it as a "blueprint for all of life's activities" (p. x)

Predictability is also important in studying cultural behavior. As humans, we are creatures of habit. This is made easier because we are expected to follow rules and regulations, whether they are local, federal, or familial. While we follow our important rules, we also assume that others in society will do likewise. A good example of trust in other people comes from an analysis of car traffic. Almost all drivers have little difficulty stopping at the proper red light, but why should we assume that every other driver is following suit? We have an inherent expectation that others will observe the same rules that we adhere to, simply because these behaviors have been instilled in us during the process of earning one's driver license.

Anthropology and Cultural Competency

If anthropology is the study of human beings and settings around them that mold and shape them, then it creates a context for an examination of cultural competency. Anthropology connects to the idea that people act a certain way and beliefs and notions are part of a code that is taught. With this understanding, educators can take a new approach to not only dealing with learning styles and ways of learning that are different from their own, but also with behaviors that in many cases are interpreted as negative. For instance, an understanding of anthropology will lead to a more culturally competent organization that will look at language patterns and behaviors as different, but will try to find appreciation in its uniqueness (Crotty, 1998).

Cultural Competency and Schools

Cultural competency has been described as falling on a spectrum that includes five levels: cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence and cultural

competence (Hanley, 1999). The lowest level of this spectrum can be considered the most counterproductive. The first level, cultural destructiveness, can be defined as the misuse of psychometric instruments on populations that were not included in the standardization process. This can be exemplified by giving the SAT to Appalachian and Sea Island children and the Tuskegee experiment (Hanley, 1999).

The next level of the cultural competency spectrum is cultural incapacity. Cultural incapacity can be defined as a state in which the system or agency does not intentionally seek to be culturally destructive, but rather lacks the capacity to help minority clients or communities (Hanley, 1999). This can be exemplified by drawing accurate but inappropriate clinical or educational conclusions based on the professional's view of the world, such as not making eye contact. Other examples include an organization failing to understand cultural mistreatment so that it can be avoided and not providing bilingual personnel when needed.

The third level of the cultural competency spectrum is cultural blindness. Cultural blindness is the belief that color or culture makes no difference (Hanley, 1999). Examples include a number of beliefs. This includes the belief that all people are the same, and an adherence to the melting pot theory. It also includes instances when employees don't have an understanding of their own cultural heritage.

The fourth level of the spectrum is cultural precompetence. As it suggests, organizations that are culturally precompetent move toward the positive end of the continuum by recognizing cultural differences and making efforts to improve (Hanley, 1999). In this level of the spectrum organizations make small, but noticeable changes such as making the waiting room more welcoming by including pictures, magazines, or music reflective of the community served an employing people who resemble all aspects of the community served (Hanley, 1999). The final level of the spectrum is cultural competency or when the organization accepts and respects cultural differences, continues self assessment of cultural awareness, pays careful attention to the dynamics of

cultural differences, continually expands its cultural knowledge and resources and adopts culturally relevant service models in order to better meet the needs of minority populations (Hanley, 1999). This can be demonstrated by developing a cultural resources library or by allowing the whole community access to planning and decision making activities. Even more so, this means bringing in representatives of the community served to conduct workshops for professional who will serve them (Hanley, 1999).

Undoubtedly, most organizations are not culturally competent. And what is most unfortunate is the majority of schools are not culturally competent, in regards to teachers and students (Johnson, 2002). Instead, schools and their staffs typically fall in the lower areas of the cultural competency spectrum. Certainly, schools would not fall under the level of cultural destructiveness; rather, most schools would fall in the categories of cultural incapacity, cultural blindness and the very best, a few would fall into the level of cultural precompetence. Specifically, many schools fall into the class of cultural blindness. By intentionally adhering to the notion that cultural differences do not matter and that student bodies have not changed, many schools unintentionally hinder their students (Birrell, 1995).

These inadequate levels of cultural competence can be linked to several reasons. First, the discomfort of discussing issues of diversity is a major hindrance to students. For many teachers, cultural competency means recognizing their own shortcomings and biases in regards to ethnicity. As that Whites make up the majority of teaching staffs, the anxiety of revealing biases and discussing issues of race and diversity, can be a hindrance to cultural competency.

Consequently, a teachers' inability to recognize and embrace their own cultural identity stands as a hindrance to cultural competency. In "*Learning How the Game is Played: an ethnically encapsulated beginning teachers struggle to prepare black youth for a white world,*" James Birrell (1995) narrates the journey of Ron who fails to meet the needs of students who are of a different ethnic group and whose background is different

from his. Ron's failure and frustration are the result of his inability to be open to another culture. Moreover, it is also caused by his inability to recognize his own cultural background. Birrell indicates that if Ron had an understanding of his own cultural identity he may have been able to relate to his students culture (Birrell, 1995).

Finally, cultural competency is hindered by attempts of school leadership to tackle cultural competency in a one day workshop. Many school districts and sites attempt to address the needs of diverse students by planning professional development activities that last for one day. In many cases, these activities focus on a sort of cultural awareness that involves gaining knowledge about another ethnic group. While cultural awareness is an important aspect in moving toward cultural competency, it does not address the need for teachers to have an open attitude and acceptance of cultural differences (Hanley, 1999).

Promoting Cultural Competency in Schools

Educational leaders should begin the task of making schools more culturally competent with exercises that allow teachers to identify, share and embrace their own cultural backgrounds. This does not simply include a discussion of race. While this is an important aspect of cultural competency, teachers and staff members should recall their family lives, traditions that existed in their homes and even the social economic status of their families (Hanley, 1999).

As with any other professional development activity, cultural competency activities should be planned collaboratively. It is undeniable that a principal's desire to make his or her school more culturally competent is an excellent endeavor. However, without the input of key stakeholders, specifically teachers, the chances of a school reaching this goal may not be as high. In order for a school to become culturally competent, teachers must embrace this idea. More importantly, teachers must be able to see the connection of cultural competence in regards to not only student achievement, but school climate. In order to do this, teachers must have a part in planning and even presenting the activities to teachers. In planning the activities, teachers can identify areas that may be

sensitive for a teaching staff and potentially create barriers to promoting cultural competence. By presenting these activities, teachers can emerge as leaders and further promote the cause of cultural competency.

Most importantly, educational leaders should promote programs and activities that immerse teachers in culture in which they serve. Ron's failure to relate to his students identifies the importance of teachers embracing their own culture (Birrell, 1995). In contrast, Johnson's (2002) "*My Eyes Have been Opened: White Teachers and Racial Awareness*," demonstrates that when teachers become immersed in another culture they can have a stronger sense of cultural competency and better reach their students. In this study, six white teachers were analyzed. Each had perceptions about race and diversity that would fall in either Hanley's level of cultural incapacity or cultural blindness. Yet, after being immersed in the culture of their students they began to recognize their shortcomings and changed their attitudes about their students. Johnson concluded, that when teachers are immersed in the culture of their students rather than merely studying it, they more able to reach higher levels of cultural competency. This study exemplifies the importance of creating activities that will situate teachers in settings were they better understand their students' culture.

Implications for Research

The topic of cultural competency can lend itself to a number subjects for further research. Student achievement is a priority for schools. It would be interesting to measure school achievement and the level of cultural competency in schools. Moreover, an examination of what effect professional development activities, or even a required course, could have on teachers and prove to be valuable for educational leaders. Finally, a study on the effectiveness of teacher education programs in regards to cultural competency could be useful for individuals in higher education.

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