

TEACHING IN CHALLENGING TIMES: HOW CAN CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY ASSIST TEACHERS DURING COVID?

Laura Trujillo-Jenks, Ph.D.
Texas Woman's University

Rebecca R. Fredrickson, Ed.D.
Texas Woman's University

Karen Dunlap, Ed.D.
Texas Woman's University

Sarah McMahan, Ph.D.
Texas Woman's University

Abstract

During challenging times, the teaching profession becomes the beacon of hope and enlightenment. As has been seen in the era of COVID-19, teachers have been appreciated and praised for providing teaching and learning experiences that promote success for students. Additionally, it has been demanded of them to provide more culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to ensure that all students are getting the most from the different forms of instruction that is provided during COVID-19 (i.e., virtual, blended, F2F with shields and masks). To ensure that pre-service teachers are prepared to deliver teaching and learning that includes CRP, targeted activities that include real-world opportunities are a must and should include simulated experiences, along with field experience, bridging, and professional development activities.

Keywords: COVID-19, culturally relevant pedagogy, preservice teachers

How are teachers adapting to these challenging times? Before the COVID-19 quarantine, things were different. School functioned stereotypically as it always had. As of April 11, 2020, over 55.1 million students had been impacted by school closures (*Education Week*, 2020); suddenly thrusting families across all socio-economic lines into a new version of “homeschooling”. Teachers and parents/guardians were equally unprepared for the challenge that ensued (McMenamin, 2020). For a majority of families in America, the role of “teacher” and “parent” quickly merged into one creating a sense of angst for both. Parents were given the responsibility of “finishing” the 2019-2020 school year as the “teacher” of record. Teachers were placed in the position of providing parents necessary resources for their child’s conceptual mastery in an uncharted online venue that was unpredictable at best. That being said, the pandemic provided an excellent opportunity to once again examine teaching as a profession.

As professionals, teachers have had multiple “experts” telling them how to do their jobs for years. This includes legislators, members of multiple Boards of Education, and politicians who may not have entered a public-school building since they themselves were students. *The Washington Post* examined this very problem by describing the appointment of Betsy DeVos as the United States Secretary of Education (Strauss, 2017). Ms. DeVos has never (1) been a public-school educator, (2) attended a public school, or (3) considered placing her own child in public school. This could read one to believe in the adage, “those who can’t do, teach” to be apropos; however, this could not be further from the truth. Educators

go through rigorous training to become teachers possessing unique certifications required by state law to be “highly qualified”. In addition, once hired, educators must participate in continuous professional development (Goodwin, 2019; Strauss, 2017), such as understanding and being responsive to the different needs of each student.

With this new era of teaching and learning that COVID has thrown us in, teaching and learning through strong pedagogy that includes Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is needed. The term Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) has been used a great deal lately by both educators and non-educators alike. However, this is not a new phenomenon or pedagogical approach. Renowned educators such as Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Django Paris have laid the foundation and continued engagement with the research supporting CRP. The term was originally published by Gloria Ladson-Billings in the early 1990’s (Knight-Manuel & Mercaino, 2019). CRP is easily defined, but more difficult to utterly understand. Lynch (2016) defined CRP as, “. . . a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students’ unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student’s cultural place in the world” (para 2). If this is the correct direction to help students best learn, then preparing pre-service teachers in understanding CRP is essential.

Preparing Preservice Teachers

In higher education, there is a continuous charge and demand for teachers to be ready to teach and meet the needs of all students on day one (DeMonte, 2015). Often, with the charge, more impetus is put on classroom aspects that focus only on instruction, assessment, and classroom management. The professional aspects of being a teacher may be left out as they are more difficult to define, observe, and assess. State and national teaching standards attempt to address these issues; but it is often more in the concept of understanding laws surrounding students and schools. Additionally, the concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) are now required to be interwoven through all activities in and out of the classroom. Below are multiple ways that CRP can influence and improve the K-12 classroom.

Simulated Activities

Multiple programs offer differing simulated activities to assist preservice teachers in learning to become teachers. These commercial programs offer avatars for students and give the preservice teachers the ability to practice teaching in a controlled environment that can be artificially manipulated to teach certain skills. For example, when teaching questioning strategies, university faculty can utilize these simulated activities for preservice teachers to demonstrate competence in using questioning strategies in a more authentic environment. These simulated activities can also be used for different teaching aspects such as classroom management and instructional techniques. Bilingual avatars are used to allow preservice teachers the opportunity to practice working with second language learners and employ modifications to their instruction to support and enhance their instruction. Adult avatars can also be leveraged for learning to conduct a parent/teacher conference or for future administrators to practice providing feedback to teachers.

Field Experience Activities

One of the most authentic exercises for preservice teachers and future administrators comes from their work in the public schools. Through scaffolded and supported field experience activities, both preservice teachers and future administrators have the opportunities to enhance their pedagogical knowledge through authentic, hands-on learning, while still being supported by a mentor teacher or administrator. Barnes (2006) reaffirms that educator preparation programs must provide scaffolded learning experiences that allow preservice teachers opportunities to apply skills and strategies they have learned in diverse field placements. Purposeful and authentic experiences help candidates focus on their own dispositions and attitudes about diversity so they can better understand how to best meet students' needs.

As candidates are immersed in a learning context unlike one in which they experienced as a child they begin to broaden their perspectives about how to value and incorporate all students in the learning environment. However, just

incorporating meaningful field experiences in a variety of settings does not mean that candidates are well prepared to meet the needs of all learners. It is also important that dialogue and discussion about what is seen in the classroom is embedded into pedagogical coursework. This allows for all candidates to critically reflect and construct new knowledge based on listening, understanding, and valuing others' perspectives. Through immersive experiences and critical discourse, educator preparation programs are assisting in supporting candidates' understanding of CRP.

Bridging Activities

The transition from preservice to inservice teacher is often a daunting task for recent graduates. In an attempt to help preservice teachers bridge the gap from preservice to inservice, additional professional learning before starting their first year of teaching. The NTA serves as a bridge by providing focused professional development specifically related to structures and systems new teachers must be ready to implement in the first week of school. The NTA includes breakout sessions facilitated by current teachers and administrators from area school districts. The breakout sessions extend on the practical application of practices that are learned in teacher preparation coursework. These sessions build on the foundation laid in coursework and early field experiences but extend the learning by exposing new teachers to additional research-based strategies and methodologies they can utilize during the first weeks and months of school.

Following NTA, faculty members continue supporting participants during their first year of teaching through emails, phone calls, and/or texts. This practice provides novice teachers opportunities to ask questions and seek help on issues they may not feel comfortable addressing with their campus administrative team. One past NTA participant noted "I am glad I can ask you a question because I don't want to ask my team or campus principal because I don't want to look dumb".

Professional Development Activities

One strategy that supports teachers as professionals is to allow them to determine their own continual growth needs. Allowing them to find professional development that meets the needs of their annual goals gives the teacher ownership of their growth and allows for a more professional teaching and learning environment (Konen, 2018). This also allows the teachers to become true models for their students and encourages them to practice what they preach. For example, teachers are expected to meet with each of their students and collaboratively seek both strengths and weaknesses in a given subject. The students are to set goals for themselves and are encouraged to find their preferred learning style. This parallels what administrators should do with teachers. Teachers should be able to set their own goals and work toward meeting those goals with the guidance of the instructional leader of the campus.

The principal and other campus administrators can also support the professionalism of teachers by allowing them more ownership of the campus. What this means is allowing them to set agendas for faculty meetings, professional development days, and/or beginning of the year teacher week. Because teachers are professionals and because they have specific knowledge about teaching and learning that works, they should be given time to facilitate faculty meetings, for example, especially if the meeting focuses on pedagogy, instruction, student learning objectives, or assessment. Usually, faculty meetings are a time to talk at teachers, but a better use of time would be a more collaborative meeting where teachers are given the opportunity to show their expertise. This not only illuminates what teachers are doing in the classroom, but it also allows the administration and other teachers to see their colleagues as valued members of the campus.

Allowing teachers to lead meetings gives them a chance to showcase their strengths and may even allow them a chance to work on their weaknesses. For example, when a teacher leads a discussion in a meeting, that discussion would be in an area that he/she is a guru. However, the weakness may be leading a discussion with peers, which may be stressful, but practicing this skill will eventually lessen the stress. The leading of meetings also gives the teachers an opportunity to show leadership.

Create a Sense of Trust

Ultimately, any strategy where a teacher is told what to do without being given any autonomy is a horrible strategy. Not trusting professionals to perform at a professional level leaves no room for trust or growth. It also stifles collaboration and insight from different persons, which could bring about rich discussions, brainstorming, and ideas. When teachers are asked to use a standardized curriculum with continuous high-stakes testing, there is a lack of trust demonstrated for the teacher as a professional (Bruno, 2018).

This creation of trust also holds true for students who want to be valued as productive learners. Teachers who are culturally responsive to the needs of all students within their classroom will be fostering trust through targeted and specific instruction. For example, if a teacher creates a learning plan of action tailored to a student's learning needs, and the teacher consistently refers back to that plan to ensure the student is getting what is needed, then the student may begin to trust that the teacher will uphold her or his word recorded on that plan. Additionally, when students observe a teacher to show genuine interest in each and every student within the classroom without making any one student feel uncomfortable or singled out, trust becomes cultivated naturally.

Conclusion

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is not new but is not always implemented into the K-12 classroom. Teachers and administrators need definite and concrete ways to utilize these theoretical constructs into practice in the classroom. Continued ways and next steps for integrating CRP into the classroom include:

- Allowing preservice teachers to spend more time in the classroom and practice the skills and craft that they are preparing for.
- Understanding the purpose of what a teacher looks like and learn to promote the attributes of this profession in a manner that is not only respected, but also, seen as a vital role in our communities.
- Analyzing state expectations and other requirements in order to become a professional teacher and meet those expectations through performance-based learning, or experiential activities.
- Allowing future educators to own their profession by learning how to best fit in, including CRP.

Universities can put these bullets in action, with the help of school districts. Having a strong relationship with school districts is paramount as it allows preservice teachers the time and practice to learn the craft of teaching. Giving preservice teachers this time only strengthens the profession and gives the preservice teachers opportunities to work with practicing professionals.

As the world moves forward into a new normal, the impacts of the Coronavirus on the United States' education system will continue to be felt but will lessen as time goes by. The reverence for teachers will wane and their professionalism will come under scrutiny again. It is up to universities, educators, and the public to remember the impact teachers have on society and the important role that they play in the development of a better society.

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