

Exploring Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teachers' Perspectives on Fostering Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms

Amy J. Samuels

University of Montevallo

This article examines perspectives of in-service teachers related to culturally responsive pedagogy and possible strategies for employing the framework in the K-12 setting. Benefits and barriers to facilitating a culturally responsive framework are explored, as well as approaches and pedagogical tools for fostering equitable and inclusive classrooms. Based on the findings, I posit the value of creating spaces for teachers to be reflective in their practice, as well as examine their own biases, to cultivate culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning.

Introduction

Considering the current social climate and the politically-charged atmosphere in the nation, many teachers are aching to figure out how to talk about current events and issues related to diversity in their classrooms. However, many educators do not approach related issues and report such learning was minimal in their educational training (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Research conducted with pre-service teachers found students' knowledge of diverse cultures was marginal (Davis, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000) and reveals both in-service and experienced educators often employ a pervasive deficit paradigm and blame students and their families for lower academic achievement and perceived inadequacies (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McKenzie, 2001). Consequently, there is often a cultural disconnect between teachers and their students (McKoy, MacLeod, Walter, & Nolker, 2017).

As such, when working to advance educator preparation and better equip the next generation of teachers to advocate for educational equity, teacher educators and preparation programs must commit to fostering learning that examines how to meet

the social and academic needs of diverse student populations. Teachers must develop a knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures, explore how equitable and inclusive practices can be implemented in schools, and imagine strategies for challenging existing barriers. Furthermore, teachers must have the opportunity to understand their evolving identities and how they influence (in)action, counter or perpetuate biases or deficit paradigms, and expose or ignore injustices. When teachers are provided opportunities and spaces to be reflective, interrogate their assumptions, and investigate the realities of their biases, they are better prepared to consider how to promote equitable and inclusive classrooms and better positioned to be agents of change.

To explore strategies in educator preparation that foster teacher voice, my study was designed to examine teachers' perspectives related to culturally responsive pedagogy and possible strategies for employing the framework in the K-12 setting.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culture is central to how all learning takes place (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching that includes cultural references and recognizes the importance of

students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The approach is meant to promote engagement, enrichment, and achievement of all students by embracing a wealth of diversity, identifying and nurturing students' cultural strengths, and validating students' lived experiences and their place in the world (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy is characterized by teachers who are committed to cultural competence, establish high expectations, and position themselves as both facilitators and learners.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study sought to explore perceptions on culturally responsive teaching of K-12 in-service teachers serving in low socioeconomic schools in a large urban school district in the southeast region of the United States. I collected data from approximately 200 teachers over a four-month period. Participants engaged in small focus groups of four to five to explore characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as highlighted by Villegas and Lucas (2007): (1) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (2) learning about students' lives, (3) being socio-culturally conscious, (4) holding affirming views about diversity, (5) using diverse instructional strategies, and (6) advocating for all students.

The purpose of the research was two-fold. While my primary goal was to contribute and inspire increased dialogue related to perspectives of culturally responsive teaching of currently practicing teachers, the secondary aim was to create spaces for education professionals to engage in discussion regarding how to best foster this framework in the K-12 context.

Teachers volunteered to attend a six-hour professional development session divided into two three-hour sessions. The primary

purpose of the first session was for teachers to build a foundational understanding of cultural responsiveness and related components. The facilitator led participants through a thorough presentation about cultural responsiveness as both a theoretical framework and a pedagogical practice. While there are strategies and teaching approaches aligned with cultural responsiveness, the facilitator emphasized the need for practitioners to view this approach as an attitude that becomes part of the classroom climate and culture. Culturally responsive teaching cannot be viewed as a separate unit of study or a stand-alone lesson, but rather an approach and attitude that is fostered in overall teaching.

The second session served primarily as a focus group. Applying their foundational knowledge of what they learned in session one, participants were asked to read current literature and engage in discourse about what cultural responsiveness looks, sounds, and feels like in the classroom. Participants were given time to carefully read and individually reflect on the theoretical framework and provided characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as presented by Villegas and Lucas (2007). After individually reflecting, participants engaged in focused small-group dialogue about how the characteristics could be generally interpreted and applied in the K-12 setting. Participants were heterogeneously assembled so both elementary and secondary teachers were represented in each group. In their collaborations, participants were also asked to consider real-world examples of how the characteristics could be best applied or facilitated in their current contexts. Teachers were given the opportunity to explore perceived advantages, as well as challenges, of employing a culturally responsive framework in their professional practice.

Participants. Participants in the study exhibited an interest in the topic and

voluntarily registered to attend an in-service session on the topic of culturally responsive teaching. Attendance and participation was strictly voluntary on the part of the teachers. Participants were currently in-service and serving in low socioeconomic K-12 schools in the same large urban school district. While most participants were teachers in elementary settings (approximately 60 percent), 40 percent of participants were middle and high school teachers who represented various content areas. Teaching experience of the participants spanned a large continuum and represented teachers from less than one year to those with over twenty years of experience. In addition, participants represented a mix of female and male, as well as Black, Hispanic, and White. Specifically, 70 percent of participants were female while 30 percent were male. In relation to racial composition of the participant group, approximately 55 percent were White, 40 percent were Black, and 5 percent were Hispanic.

Data Collection and Analysis. I collected and analyzed data from the communications I transcribed from participants in the focus groups, as well as my observations of the focus group dialogue and related notes. Participants recorded their beliefs about benefits and challenges of facilitating culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as their perceived understandings and viable application of the framework. In groups, participants were asked to clarify and expand upon their written ideas, specifically adding detail to teaching practices and pedagogical tools that can be employed to facilitate culturally responsive practice.

Once I collected the data, I employed coding procedures to determine themes from transcripts and my observation notes. To move from the raw data to conceptual themes, I employed Rubin and Rubin's (2005) steps of interview data analysis. The data analysis process involved: 1)

recognition, 2) examination, 3) coding, 4) sorting, and 5) synthesis. Recognition, examination, and coding involved preparing the data. Sorting and synthesis involved analyzing the data. Recognition entailed the process of reading, reviewing, and studying the transcripts and notes to determine conceptual themes important for understanding the research. Examination involved carefully exploring concepts and themes to clarify meaning and understanding. Coding called for designating and employing a system of color-coded highlighting to readily retrieve and examine conceptual themes across the interviews based on 1) interpretation of the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching, 2) application of culturally responsive teaching, 3) perceived benefits, and 4) perceived challenges.

Findings. Findings revealed commonalities regarding teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive pedagogy, including perceived advantages and challenges. While participants considered facilitation of culturally responsive teaching beneficial in a multitude of areas, restraints of time and resources were heavily emphasized. Findings also examined how to integrate theory and research into practice to impact decision-making committed to academic success and outcomes for all students, especially students from historically-marginalized populations.

Advantages of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Participants considered facilitation of culturally responsive teaching beneficial in relationship building, fostering cross-cultural understanding and inclusiveness, and influencing more diverse world views. Participants spoke extensively about how cultural responsiveness has the potential to positively influence classroom culture, foster

positive relationships, and build a solid relationship of trust. They spoke about how these components not only encourage students to feel connected, included, and valued, but lead to empowerment on behalf of students, helping them better understand and positively view both themselves and others; thereby inspiring them to maintain cultural identity and integrity. In addition, the positive classroom culture and enhanced inter-student and teacher-student relationships serve to boost student self-esteem and self-worth which results in increased confidence and sense of safety in the classroom. It creates an environment where students are willing to share and take risks and establishes a classroom culture where students are willing to take off their masks (Kafele, 2013) and imagine new possibilities, particularly in relation to learning, access, and opportunities. In a classroom where culturally responsive pedagogy is practiced, bridges are built that connect students, teachers, schools, and community.

Extending beyond soft skills and social emotional skills, participants highlighted the potential for students to develop increased open-mindedness and expanded worldviews through participation in dialogue and engagement in constructivist and/or collaborative learning. Participants spoke extensively about how culturally responsive teachers serve as facilitators (as opposed to “sages on the stage”); therefore, there is increased accountability on students and their role in the learning process. In a culturally responsive classroom, students learn by doing; thus, student engagement is enhanced. Such engagement consequently results in increased student learning and achievement. In addition, dialogue associated with sociocultural consciousness and diversity awareness is embraced. Students are given the opportunity to let their voices be heard and engage in conversations related to

current events and the existing sociopolitical climate. This dialogue exposes students to systemic inequalities (conversations often avoided in schools); thereby allowing them to develop increased awareness of multiple perspectives and sensitivity to the surrounding world. Students not only have the opportunity to explore their views, they are encouraged to examine and consider alternative views. While many teachers avoid such conversations because they can result in potential discomfort, participants agreed culturally responsive teachers engage students in such conversations because there is value for both the learner and the learning process. Furthermore, along with increased student growth, in a culturally responsive classroom, teachers are also viewed as learners since they can learn from their students, become more knowledgeable of the populations they serve, and develop an increased understanding of diverse social, political, and economic contexts.

Challenges of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Participants also expressed concerns about the practicality of implementing culturally responsive teaching by highlighting potential difficulties. Participants spoke at length about challenges that result when trying to navigate potentially controversial topics in the classroom, especially when the teacher may have limited background knowledge in relation to the given topic or may disagree with the practices of a group. Such topics can result in discomfort, and, as a result, may be minimized or avoided. For example, participants spoke of their resistance to discuss the LGBTQ community or related issues. These participants cited their Christian background as the catalyst of their disapproval of the lifestyle. Since they had anxiety about the topic and feared they may

say something that could be perceived as negative or controversial, they preferred to avoid related topics.

Other participants spoke of their anxiety related to conflicts that could arise among students who embrace opposing ideologies. For example, when considering police brutality in the black community, many teachers explained a deep divide between advocates of *Black Lives Matter* and *Blue Lives Matter*. Therefore, rather than risk aggravating students and initiating conflict between opposing viewpoints, some teachers felt it was better to avoid such topics in classroom discourse, especially since they felt they have not mastered skills to negotiate difficult discourse.

Participants also articulated existing biases, both personal and institutional, and how such biases can result in a decreased commitment or motivation to be culturally responsive. For example, participants emphasized the need to be reflective of their work and aware of their potential biases and inequitable practices. However, since engaging in reflective practice is also a potentially uncomfortable process, as it may reveal characteristics teachers do not want to see, this process may also be avoided.

Reflecting on bias, the idea of religion reemerged, and participants highlighted resistance to be responsive to certain populations, particularly the LGBTQ community, with whom they felt their religion does not embrace. One participant spoke of her struggle to be responsive to a student in her class who has two mothers who are lesbians. She stated, "I just feel it unfairly places me in an uncomfortable situation. I always feel I must watch what I say or do. It is not that I don't want to embrace and be welcoming to all of my students, but I just don't agree with it. It's easier just not to talk about it."

Other participants alluded to the notion of white privilege when discussing

institutional realities that limited white teachers' interactions with people who were racially different than themselves; explaining these limited interactions make it challenging for white teachers to recognize the existence of oppression, discrimination, and limited access and opportunity. Since it is not something they have to negotiate in daily life, it can be challenging to recognize. Participants asserted that many teachers, particularly white teachers, feel they are being fair if they are being equal; however, what they fail to understand is that equality can serve to perpetuate inequity, particularly when the system is built on both an unequal and inequitable foundation.

Participants also emphasized the challenge of having a narrow understanding of cultures and assets of the students and communities they serve, which also results in a potential disconnect and decreased likelihood of embracing this framework. Again, connected to the idea of limited exposure, participants examined the impact minimal interaction with people of color and other historically marginalized populations has on teachers, particularly white teachers. When teachers are not familiar or do not have experience with people who are different from themselves, they may perceive difference as less valuable or deficient. For example, a participant explained when teachers have limited interaction with Mexican students and families, they may not understand the rich culture and sense of community and easily overlook, minimize, or fail to recognize such characteristics as attributes. Rather than embracing and being inclusive, teachers may perceive the culture as something that should not be embraced. She continued by explaining when teachers only see students struggling to understand English, living in substandard conditions in migrant communities, or being involved in negative activities related to gangs or drugs,

teachers may think, “We need to work to help these students leave that lifestyle.”

Alongside potential discomforts associated with cultural responsiveness, participants also highlighted practical challenges. Teachers spoke extensively about the demands and restraints of time and limited resources. When time is already restrained by intensive curricular demands and large class sizes, teachers explained it could be overwhelming to accommodate learning opportunities for all populations, especially when striving to meet the needs of a diverse classroom population. In addition, when access to resources or pedagogical strategies is limited or teachers do not know where to find them, they may not have information, materials, or knowledge they need to facilitate a diverse, representative, and inclusive curriculum.

Since culturally responsive teaching encourages teachers to position themselves as both facilitators and learners, and the challenges highlighted consistently connect to a need for increased exposure, information, and resources, strategies to help navigate these existing challenges are not only available, but are also an expected component of the culturally responsive learning process.

Strategies for Facilitating Culturally Responsive Teaching

Along with perceived advantages and challenges, participants reflected on strategies for best employing culturally responsive teaching in the K-12 context. Similar to Ladson-Billings’ (1995) article titled, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” participants contended many strategies that embrace culturally responsive practice are simply characteristic of “good teaching.”

Participants spoke most extensively about giving students voice and allowing that

voice to be largely represented in multiple contexts. They spoke of the need for dialogue and rich, meaningful conversations in learning. Such discourse should serve to encourage questions about diversity and difference, as well as provide students the opportunity to discuss real-world experiences, cultural influences, current events related to social (in)justice, and the influence of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status in historical and current-day inequities. Teachers should establish a classroom expectation where all students are expected to participate and employ strategies to encourage participation of multiple voices in discussion. Strategies such as asking open-ended questions, accountable talk, modeling effective conversations, fishbowl, talking chips, encouraging multiple perspectives, and turn and talk were discussed.

Together with promoting student voice and providing opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, participants also emphasized that culturally responsive learning is characterized by high expectations for all students and actively engaging students in learning. Reinforcing strategies of collaborative and constructivist learning, culturally responsive teachers frequently assume the role of learning facilitator and encourage students to take a lead role in the learning process. This not only provides opportunities for collaboration, but provides students opportunities to present their ideas in various ways. However, teachers underscored that to create an environment where such active learning can thrive; a respectful environment must be established. Team building activities can be used to foster positive relationships and teachers need to scaffold content and model the process to encourage an environment where students feel safe to take risks and actively engage in rigorous learning.

In their exploration of how to facilitate culturally responsive practice, participants also noted the need to encourage respectful talk always. To reinforce this idea, racist, sexist, and anti-gay remarks, or comments that are prejudicial and unkind in anyway, should never be ignored or minimized, but rather immediately addressed. Still, when addressing such comments, teachers highlighted the need to promote understanding about why the comment are inappropriate, unacceptable, and/or hurtful, not simply reprimand the student for misbehaving.

Teachers also underscored the importance of embracing differentiated instruction and student choice. To determine how students will likely construct knowledge, it is critical to assess students' prior knowledge. Diverse groupings and allowing for differentiated content and presentation styles serves to encourage differentiation. For example, rather than requiring all students to write a three-paragraph essay, teachers can give students a choice to write an essay, construct a poem, or act out a skit to demonstrate their learning related to a given learning outcome. Participants noted the use of surveys (both student and parent) can be advantageous in learning about students' interests, skills, and backgrounds. Content can then be tailored to students' interests, encourage various learning modalities, and incorporate a variety of instructional strategies to enhance engagement and appeal to diverse learners.

Further exploring the idea of enhanced engagement, participants emphasized the need to tailor learning to students' interests by incorporating various cultures into the curriculum and designing lessons that are inclusive, representative, celebrate diversity, and encourage questions about difference. Teachers must reflect on the texts, resources, supplementary materials, and learning activities they are using and how

those resources serve to represent (or not represent) and include (or exclude) the students in their classrooms. If district-adopted or school-provided resources are not representative, participants asserted it is the responsibility of the teacher to seek and incorporate inclusive supplementary materials. In addition, lesson plans should consistently represent non-dominant groups throughout the academic year, not just during prescribed months such as Hispanic Heritage Month, Women's History Month, and Black History Month, because presenting information on any given demographic group in isolation only serves to marginalize further their story.

Discussion

Data from the focus groups and analysis of transcripts provided the opportunity to examine culturally responsive teaching from the perspective of in-service K-12 teachers who express an interest in this paradigm and work with diverse students. Findings suggested culturally responsive teaching extends beyond theory and teachers perceive cultural responsiveness as an advantageous framework that can be fostered in the classroom and incorporated into daily practice. While multiple benefits and advantages were discussed, employing culturally responsive teaching does not transpire without difficulty. Considering challenges highlighted by participants, in-service teachers would benefit from the opportunity to engage in professional development and learning opportunities that allow them to (1) explore their beliefs, values, assumptions, dispositions, biases, and experiences related to diversity, (2) discuss controversial topics to increase their comfort level and skill set when facilitating such conversations in their own contexts, (3) learn inclusive pedagogical strategies and consider how to best incorporate these strategies into

their environment, and (4) engage in dialogue on how to foster an inclusive climate and culture with students.

Conclusion

Considering current literature, as well as findings explored in this article, it is critical teachers have opportunities to examine culturally responsive teaching and consider how it can be best fostered and facilitated in their classrooms with their students. Along with providing opportunities for teachers to reflect and engage in discourse, it is imperative to explore specific strategies and tools for fostering an inclusive and responsive educational environment that gives voice to all students and promotes equitable access and opportunities. As Kumashiro (2000) argues, “we are not trying to *move to a better place*; rather, we are just trying to *move*. The aspect of oppression that we need to work against is the repetition of sameness, the ongoing citation of the same harmful histories that have traditionally been cited” (p. 46). As such, a change in basic assumptions is necessary to highlight cultural responsiveness as an educational asset, as well as cultural identity and integrity as something to be fostered positively and embraced.

Since research has established a connection between culturally competent educators and positive outcomes for students, in attempt to encourage equitable excellence, give voice to those who are frequently silenced, and ensure no child is made invisible; educators must be prepared and equipped with tools to create and facilitate environments that embrace cultural responsiveness. Teachers must be able to engage in a space where they feel comfortable to explore their own anxieties and vulnerability, as well as their biases, for the benefit of their students and an inclusive classroom. If educators are not exposed to

this information and these positions in teacher preparation programs (Davis, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2006), it is essential to create and facilitate professional development to provide opportunities for further engagement and learning. Since there continues to be a lack of congruence between classroom practice and strategies essential for authentic and effective culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers should be encouraged to embrace the recommendation of critical multiculturalism and begin with self-reflection and examination. Encouraging educators to explore how they act (and do not act), as well as what they say (and do not say), provides them the opportunity to reflect upon their biases and how they negotiate themselves in the classroom and with students. Along with examination of self, engagement in purposeful discourse and reflection on promoting cultural responsiveness as a clear, distinct, concrete, and practical process are critical components to creating an environment that promotes equitable excellence and embraces a climate and culture of trust, understanding, and imagination of new possibilities. If we truly desire to teach to transform, we must be able to promote and sustain both agency and advocacy for educational equity.

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Amy Samuels is an assistant professor at the University of Montevallo. Her research explores social and cultural foundations related to education and strategies for fostering equity, inclusivity, and justice.