

Increasing One's Cultural Proficiency

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Abstract

With the increasing number of culturally diverse populations in this country, it is crucial that educators acquire the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to be culturally proficient and to create culturally proficient classrooms that meet the academic and social needs of all demographic groups (Lindsey, Graham, Westphal, & Jew, 2008). This article includes a framework for developing culturally proficient classroom. It also provides activities for pre-service educators to increase their cultural proficiency..

Cultural proficiency is defined by Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2005) as “an approach to addressing issues of diversity, inclusiveness, and entitlement; it provides tools and help for an increasingly diverse world with an increasing number of well-intentioned and fearful people” (p.1). Rather than educators attempting to mold students of different cultures into the majority language and culture in a “melting pot” process based on an assimilationist premise that this process is necessary for national unity, they should provide students with “opportunities to better understand who they are as individuals while learning how to interact positively with people who differ from themselves” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003, p. 39). Furthermore, cultural proficiency involves a process that acknowledges and validates persons’ current values and feelings. It encourages change without threatening persons’ feelings of worth, placing blame on individuals, and creating feelings of guilt. As part of this part of this process, educators and students are encouraged to reflect on their own individual values.

According to Lindsey et al. (2003), in culturally proficient classrooms and schools, “the culture of the school promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about differences and responding appropriately to differences” (p. 39). One important dimension of

culturally proficient classrooms is teachers who have developed a sociocultural consciousness so that they understand the influence of race, ethnicity, social class, and language on their thinking, behavior, and being (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Sociocultural Consciousness

In today's schools, a need exists for teachers who know the students they are teaching; know what to teach, and know the methodologies to effectively teach students (Kea & Utley, 1998). Teachers need to be able to use quality research-based pedagogy that meets students' needs and facilitates their learning so that they attain their fullest potentials. Culturally relevant pedagogy is responsive to the academic, emotional, and social needs of all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse ones (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2006). It is important for educators to "critically examine their own sociocultural identities and the inequalities between schools and society that support institutionalized discrimination to maintain a privileged society based on social class and skin color" (Kea, et al., 2006, p. 3). Subsequent to this examination, they need to use their commitment and skills to confront obstacles to change, becoming agents of change to establish socially just and equitable conditions in schools (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally proficient educators support the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Nieto (2003) reminds us that culturally responsive or multicultural teaching needs to encompass more than ways of promoting self-esteem or providing a curriculum that substitutes one set of heroes and inventors for another. When culturally responsive teaching is limited to these practices, students might acquire positive feelings regarding themselves and their heritages, but they might not receive the needed academic skills that prepare them to be successful in the workplace (Ballenger & Ninness, 2009).

Culturally responsive teaching involves educators' use of diverse students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles to make learning more appropriate and effective (Gay, 2000). Culturally diverse teachers provide inclusive educational programming that respects cultural differences and relates learning to students' cultures. When teachers exhibit an affirming attitude toward students with diverse backgrounds, they greatly affect their learning, belief in self, and overall academic achievement. Culturally responsive teachers provide connections between students' prior knowledge and what they need to know (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). They learn about their students' past experiences as well as their home and community cultures in order to establish relationships and incorporate students' experiences in teaching and learning contexts. These educators use a constructivist approach to facilitate all students' critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and multiple perspectives (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1992) supports that culturally responsive teachers use "cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 382) to help students develop to their fullest potential.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed by Bennett (2001) for the multicultural classroom can be used by classroom teachers to provide a framework for constructing a culturally responsive classroom and creating culturally proficient people. The framework rests on four broad principles. These principles consist of: (a) theory of cultural pluralism, which affirms the right of every ethnic group to retain its own heritage; (b) social justice and the need to end racism, sexism, and other forces of prejudice and discrimination, (c) affirmation of culture in the teaching and learning process, and (d) visions of educational equity and excellence leading to high levels of academic learning for all children.

Culturally responsive teachers teach and lead for social justice. They accomplish this task by dismantling deep-seated structural, social, political, and human injustices and systematic patterns of dominance and suppression that deny students of color material, academic, and political equality. Finally, culturally proficient teachers are culturally aware of their culture identities and the cultures of their students and colleagues of color. The following activities can be used by pre-service teachers to develop this cultural awareness.

Activities to Develop Cultural Proficiency

Cultural Webs

In this activity, participants write their definitions of culture, and they share these definitions within small groups. Next, they construct webs showing aspects of their individual cultures. In the middle of the web, they write their names and list the various cultures of which they are a member. As they participate in this process, they reflect on their various cultural identities. Participants then share their webs within small groups (Lindsey et al., 2009)

Cultural Metaphors

Participants discuss the metaphors of this country being a melting pot, which involves the assimilation of cultures into one national culture, versus a fruit salad, which involves individual cultures retaining their individual flavors but at the same time enriching the total taste of a national culture. In addition, the participants discuss the following two questions: Is it necessary for citizens to give up part of their cultures for this country to maintain its unity and sense of nationalism? In what ways do various cultures enrich this country (Lindsey et al., 2009)

Exploration of Cultural Roots

In this activity, participants think about their families of origin and the places where they grew up. They go back in time as far as they can remember and describe the following aspects of their family's heritage such as:

- Education
- Religion

- Occupation
- Wealth/Income
- Food
- Language
- Politics (Lindsey et al., 2009)

What's in a Name?

In this activity, participants share with partners what their first names are and the histories of these names (i.e., their meanings, how they were given them, etc.). They also share their perceptions of their own names (whether or not they like them, what they signify to themselves and others, etc.). They then share the country origin of their last names. Thereafter, participants and their partners reflect on any cultural knowledge they have obtained from their discussion of each other's names (Lindsey, et al., 2009).

Cultural Perceptions

In this activity, participants select someone in the room who they do not know to be their partners. They then take turns with their partners guessing how their partners would respond to each of the following:

- Country of family origin and heritage
- Language spoken
- Interests or hobbies
- Favorite food
- Type of movies, TV programs preferred
- Type of music preferred
- Pets or favorite animals
- Type of reading materials preferred

They then share their perceptions with their partners, and their partners provide what their actual responses would be. Participants then reflect on what assumptions were accurate and which ones were not. Finally, they determine which assumptions were based on stereotypes (Lindsey et al., 2009).

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