

Fostering Critical Reflection to Build Culturally Responsive Practices

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Original Study

Problem

Using a qualitative, social design experiment, this study examined how critical reflection of special educators' beliefs about students can be fostered through teacher learning groups in order to help teachers examine current practices in schools and work to enrich culturally responsive practices for exceptional students.

Theoretical Framework



Drawing from transformative learning theory (Engeström, 2008), it was theorized that engaging participants in reading and discussing critical texts and sharing of personal stories would help participants envision ways to better support and advocate for their exceptional students who have been marginalized.

Methods

Participants included 10 special education teachers working in urban schools in the Central US with high numbers of English learners and students on free/reduced lunch. Participants were placed into small collaborative groups for 8 sessions, read critical literature related to cultural awareness, engaged in audio-recorded small group discussions, and wrote personal written reflections following each session. Discussions were transcribed and then analyzed using grounded theory.

Findings

Participants recognized that negative teacher talk in schools perpetuates the marginalization of some students, based on race, language use, and perceived ability. Through critical reflection, educators can bridge negative talk in schools into productive dialogue that instead promotes culturally responsive ways of thinking and working so that diversity can be recognized as valuable.



Critical Reflection

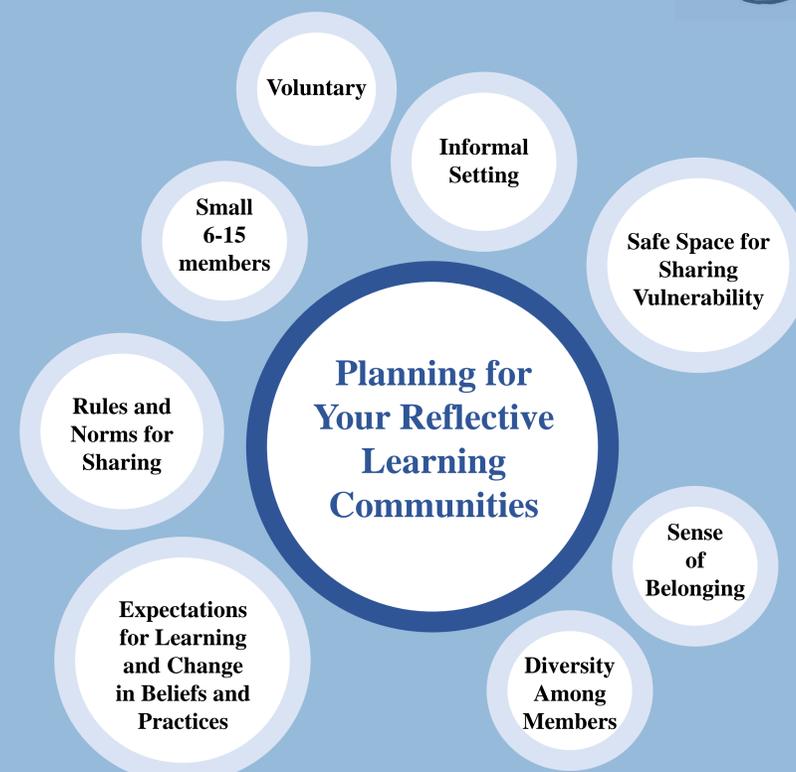
Why is that important?

Developing critical reflection in special educators is important because, as a school leader, they must advocate for diversity to be recognized and valued (Howard, 2003). Historically marginalized students need culturally responsive educators to meet their needs. If special educators are not aware of their own cultural biases, they may fail to advocate for or individually provide appropriate interventions and supports, thus leading to disproportionate representation (Klingner et al., 2005).

Building Reflection Groups

Key Features

Teachers can actively develop culturally responsive thinking by engaging in critical reflection and “authentic conversations (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001) with colleagues that question existing knowledge, practice and beliefs. Features of reflective learning communities include:



Engaging in Reflection

Reading Critical Literature

Critical reflection begins by helping teachers critically examine their ways of thinking. This can be prompted by engaging in the reading of critical literature which prompts the reader to become aware of existing practices which may be biased and/or detrimental to students. It can also “jar” teachers into recognizing how they contribute to the continuation of such practices and beliefs.

Re-imagining the Future

Through “authentic conversations (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001),” teachers can then talk through their reflections, which can be disconcerting. Exposing ones’ beliefs and potential biases is challenging, but doing so among a revered group of colleagues who are also sharing deep and meaningful reflections is empowering. Then, teachers can begin to project forward new ways of thinking, generating ideas to foster new culturally responsive practices that embrace and promote diversity.

Generating New Practices

Bridging Out from Reflection Groups

As leaders in their school, special educators become natural agents of change in their schools in regards to promoting and valuing diversity.

