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The Role of Educational Leaders in Implementing a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Designed to Increase the Learning Opportunities for Diverse Students

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Abstract

While there has been a dramatic shift in the demographic educational landscape of the United States, to a more culturally diverse student population, the characteristics of teachers and educational leaders have remained largely homogeneous. Classroom teachers and school principals remain predominately White, approximately 90%, and 84% respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Taylor & Whittaker, 2003). According to many experts, the differences between school and home culture result in lower rates of academic achievement for diverse learners. This article focuses on the challenge facing educational leaders to respond to this demographic shift by leading the implementation of a more culturally inclusive pedagogy that will improve the learning opportunities of diverse students.

Article

The Importance of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Education

There has been much research on the lagging educational achievement of diverse students in the United States. In their book Bridging Multiple Worlds: Case Studies of Diverse Educational Communities, Taylor and Whittaker (2003) show that â€œThe underachievement of diverse students has been attributed, in part, to a traditional school curriculum that has failed to meet the needs of too many students from culturally and linguistically diverse groupsâ€� (p. 26). The authors believe the basic problem is the omission from the curriculum of the contributions and participation of minorities to the history of the United States. In Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality, Spring (2004) agrees when he describes deculturalization in education as â€œâ€¦destroying a peopleâ€™s culture and replacing it with a new cultureâ€� (p. 3). Spring states that cultural prejudices of racism and bigotry have forced diverse students to learn an Anglo-American centered curriculum. The author is defining racism as the combination of

"…prejudice plus power" (p. 5). Lareau and Horvat (1999) concur when they describe the deep concern on the part of some African-American parents about the legacy of discrimination against their children in the classroom. This is at the very heart of the issue to enhance the academic achievement of diverse students.

In her book, Other People's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom, Lisa Delpit (1995) focuses on power relationships and the manner in which they are played out in the classroom. The power relationships she describes establish unspoken rules and traditions that often result in alienation and miscommunication. Delpit stresses that those with the greatest power are frequently least aware of its existence. Conversely, those with less power are often most aware that they do not have it. For example, White educators by virtue of their position or numbers present a primarily Anglo-Americanized curriculum without taking into consideration the opinions of and the contribution that ethnically diverse groups may have made to the subject matter.

In her book The Right to Learn, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) describes a skillful pedagogue as one who knows his or her audience. She emphasizes the importance of teachers who understand the "…differences that may arise from culture, language, family, community, gender, prior schooling, and the other factors that shape people's experiences" (p. 295). It is this understanding that helps teachers to incorporate diverse cultural experiences into the classroom. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) agrees by writing that schools need to explore non-conventional activities that validate diverse social cultural families. By so doing, teachers can shape lessons that will enhance the students' ability to understand. Therefore, the issue facing educational leaders is how to effectively implement a program that would enhance the learning opportunities for diverse students.

Implementing a Program for a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Much of the research shows that academic achievement of students from culturally diverse backgrounds will improve if schools and teachers ensure that classroom instruction is inclusive of the students' home culture. For example, Banks (as cited in Taylor and Whittaker, 2003) has recognized four strategies to help assimilate ethnic content into elementary and secondary curriculum: "teaching about the contributions of diverse groups, adding content about diverse groups to the curriculum, transforming the curriculum, and social action" (p. 30). When teachers use the contributions approach, they celebrate the cultural diversity within the classroom by focusing on the ethnic heroes, holidays, and foods that help define a cultural group. Adding content, for example new lessons focusing on ethnically diverse cultures adds to the curriculum and leaves its basic structure unchanged. At the transformative level, the curriculum itself changes because the structure of the curriculum becomes more inclusive of concepts, issues, events, and themes from ethnically diverse points of view. Finally, the action plan allows students to make decisions on personal, social, and civic issues outside of the classroom and challenges them to find solutions (Taylor and Whittaker, 2003).

In their book Rethinking School Reform: Views from the Classroom, Christensen and Karp (2003)

stress that all good pedagogy should be rooted in the studentsâ€™ needs and experiences; in other words students should be encouraged to explore how their ethnic background connects to society. Because of the ever growing cultural diversity of the classroom, the authors emphasize the need to have curriculums be inclusive of everyone in society, and to examine critically their histories and interconnections. For instance, teachers need to celebrate diversity as well as help students understand why some differences translate into power while others become a source of discrimination and prejudice. Beverly Tatum illustrates this well in her book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (1997) when she describes White privilege as the systematic advantage White people have over people of color, intentional or otherwise, by simply being White.

Traditional pedagogy also leaves little room for student creativity. Christensen and Karp (2003) encourage greater student involvement through plays, simulations, or experiments that encourage students to work cooperatively. Those teachers who are open to incorporating cultural differences in classroom instruction are in an ideal position to help raise the level of academic achievement for culturally diverse learners. However, it would be unfair to expect teachers to perform miracles. The ability to meet this challenge for diverse students depends upon the way the teachers are prepared, as well as their commitment to their responsibility as moral stewards. Goodlad (as cited in Senge, 2000) addresses the issue of the ethical dimension of schooling as a moral endeavor. He believes that schools play a primary role in the development of educated people â€œâ€¦who acquire an understanding of truth, beauty, and justice against which to judge their own and our societyâ€™s virtues and imperfectionsâ€� (p. 279). Goodlad also addresses access to knowledge. â€œWhen school practices result in mal-distribution of knowledge with poor and minority students receiving less access, it is morally wrongâ€� (p. 280). In other words, the epistemology of teaching goes beyond simply presenting the subject matter. Rather, it requires a nurturing pedagogy that embraces and draws out the cultural diversity in the classroom. What then are the potential challenges to this implementation faced by the educational leader?

Potential Challenges to Implementation

Implementing a program that would create a more culturally responsive pedagogy requires the buy-in of the teachers. In their book Trust in Schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe that in order to support a new program teachers must believe in the good intentions of school leadership. Fullanâ€™s (2004) philosophy is similar to Bryk and Schneider when he writes that an essential component to successful change is that leaders must have â€œmoral purposeâ€�
(p. 4). In other words, teachers must believe that the educational leader is acting in the best interest of all stakeholders. In order to achieve this buy-in the educational leader must set clear goals and objectives; for example, enhancing the academic achievement of diverse students through a more culturally inclusive pedagogy. Bryk and Schneider also stress the need to provide professional development resources to prepare teachers to become more creative and culturally inclusive in the classroom.

In Schools that Learn, Peter Senge (2000) categorically believes that a forced change by a well-meaning and capable principal will most likely fail. Senge describes possible strategies an educational leader may try in order to avoid failure. First, she must make it clear that this initiative is a first effort to solve a problem. An effective leader should attempt to create a team-based process that will build a sense of ownership on the part of all stakeholders. Second, she must reduce the intensity of the change by allowing changes to the curriculum to come in stages. Therefore, teachers have more time to adapt to it and make it their own. Finally, she must avoid the need for major changes by having ongoing and open discussions that address achievement inconsistencies (p. 92).

In Leading Effective Secondary School Reform, Loughridge and Tarantino (2005) ardently state that no educational leader or administrative team can create school-wide change without the support of teacher leaders who serve as pivotal members of committees and provide professional development and coaching to staff members (p. 62). They go to say that, educational leaders should encourage the opportunities for teachers to engage in subject matter workshops, as well as reflective problem solving conversations that focus on improving the delivery of a more culturally inclusive pedagogy (p. 63). Teacher education is a powerful way to ensure that teachers are better prepared to effectively respond to culturally diverse students.

Conclusion

he population of students in United States schools is becoming more diverse yet our schools continue to maintain the traditional approach to school curriculum and pedagogy. The cultural and racial diversity of the student population is not the problem; it is the pedagogical approach of educators. Maintaining the status quo ensures lower rates of academic achievement for culturally diverse learners. The foremost challenge in education today is to create learning environments that maintain and embrace the cultural integrity of all students and raise achievement levels. The method of addressing the problem described in this paper is to have a more culturally responsive pedagogy. For an educational leader the major challenge is to identify effective ways to change the perception of teachers so that they are willing to deviate from their long-held traditional beliefs with respect to pedagogy, culture, and learning.

For both academic and moral reasons schools, should embrace and celebrate cultural diversity within the classroom and close the unacceptable achievement gap. Incorporating diverse students' cultural experiences into the curriculum and getting teachers to buy-in to a new pedagogical approach to be positive steps toward effecting change and increasing learning opportunities.

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