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Where is Social Justice in Culturally Responsive Teaching?

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Abstract:

Over the past twenty-five years, there have been considerable demographic shifts in public school populations in the United States particularly in urban schools and in some of the largest states in America. As the school populations become more diverse, they pose serious challenges for teachers because of the academic and discipline gap that exist between White and African American, Latino, Native American and some Asian American students. Today, educators are looking to culturally responsive teaching as a way of closing the achievement and discipline gaps especially as school districts focus more and more on rigor as a way of meeting the needs of the Common Core Standards. Numerous researches have shown that culturally responsive teaching is the most effective way of meeting the learning needs of culturally diverse students. Consequently, scholars have written extensively on culturally responsive teaching, but most often, these scholars mention social justice as essential components of culturally responsive teaching without delving into the underpinnings between culturally responsive teaching and social justice in students' academic achievement. Some scholars have even ignored the issue of social justice in their

studies completely, and one editor even wondered if we can realize social justice in the field of teaching? In other words, although social justice is an essential component in the conceptualization of critically responsive teaching, in most cases, it is either overlooked or marginalized. The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework that integrates critical reflection, social justice, and critical questioning and analyses into culturally responsive teaching as meaningful ways of improving student learning.

Key Words: Social justice, Culture, Equity, Education, Political knowledge, Social change

Significance of the Study

Since schools are charged with the overwhelming responsibility of preparing the next generation of students in the United States with increased diverse populations, teacher education programs must arm teachers with transformative pedagogy of culturally responsive teaching that incorporates social justice component in order to enhance critical thinking and knowledge of diverse students. Therefore, culturally responsive pedagogy must advance beyond a patchwork of cultural additives and sensitivity where students simply consume knowledge without the ability to critically examine inequalities. Culturally responsive teaching must empower students to see contradictions and inequalities in society so that they can “develop intellectually and socially in order to build skills to make meaningful and transformative contributions to society” (Milner IV, 2017, p. 10; see also Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor, 2018; Garlen, Kuh and Coleman, 2017; Howard and Rodriguez-Scheel (2017)) Gay 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009. In this paper, I argue that students will benefit more from the concept of critically responsive teaching that interrogates injustice, enhances academic achievement, engages students through discussions, facilitates critical thinking, and meets the needs of diverse student population because as Howard and Rodriguez-Scheel (2017) have pointed out, culturally responsive teaching “is more than a simplistic way of teaching a pre-packaged curriculum unit, but rather is connected to a more progressive and socially conscious mindset about culture, learning, and diversity” (p. 6).

Literature Review

Muniz (2019) in a 50-state survey of teaching standards found that all the states of the federation have included cultural responsive teaching competences in their teaching standards in varying degrees. In her study of literacy among Mexican and Native Hawaiian students, Almaguer (2019) argued that educators should link principles of learning with cultural realities of children, families, and communities on literacy because minorities and English language learners do better academically in schools where teachers use culturally responsive teaching than in schools where teachers do not use such a method. Specifically, Larson et al. (2018) in their research found that the use of culturally responsive teaching together with proactive behavior management practices resulted in positive student behavior. Mackay and Strickland (2018) explored culturally responsive teaching with the use of student-created videos in an at-risk middle school classroom and found that such an approach connected students to school and home context which enhanced their learning and created student voice. In examining the readiness of prospective teachers for culturally responsive teaching using Culturally Responsive Teaching Readiness Scale, Ozudogru (2018) reported that prospective teachers she studied were ready for culturally responsive teaching. Rhodes (2017) in her research found that there was regular or frequent use of culturally responsive teaching practices by adult English language classroom teachers and that Culturally Responsive Teaching Survey (CRTS) is “a reliable, uni-dimensional scale which yielded positive correlations with multi-cultural knowledge and teaching skills.” (p. 45). In her research, Hammond (2015) examined the relationship between culture and cognition and tells us that a person’s culture can program the brain to process data. She argues that culturally responsive teaching is a natural partner for neuroscience in the classroom because it encompasses the “social-emotional, relational, and cognitive aspects of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students.” (p. 4). In another study, Eglash, Gilbert, Taylor and Geier (2013) discovered that culturally responsive approach was very effective in “integrating math education into urban after-school contexts” (p. 600). In an ethnographic study from a Newcomer school in Texas, Hansen-Thomas and Chennapragada (2018) concluded that it is not only important to use culturally responsive teaching method in the classroom but absolutely necessary to avail teachers with culturally responsive teaching strategy in multicultural classrooms in Newcomer School settings. Using a 20-item Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey on English and Math teachers from a high school with a diverse student population in a rural school near to a large urban city,

Holmes (2018) found that teachers without training in culturally responsive instruction felt inadequate to meet instructional needs of diverse students. Hernandez and Shroyer (2017) carried out research among Latina/o Student Teaching Interns in Science and Mathematics instruction and concluded that these interns were able to describe and demonstrate culturally responsive teaching methods in science and mathematics in ways that will inform their practice. Milner IV (2017) analyzed research articles in the areas of mathematics and English language arts on the subject of culturally responsive teaching and came up with the suggestion that one of the explanatory constructs of culturally responsive teaching is that “students [should] develop a critical consciousness and that they move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it” (p. 9). Similar studies by Harding-DeKam (2014) in elementary mathematics classroom found tremendous improvement in mathematics scores for students whose teachers used culturally responsive teaching method because culturally responsive constructs in mathematics allow students to make personal connections to mathematics content. Unfortunately, New America Project (2019) has outlined eight teacher competences that promote culturally responsive teaching, none of which includes social justice which is the central theme of this article.

Introduction

In this article, I examine the place of social justice in culturally responsive teaching and argue that culturally responsive teaching is connected intimately with social justice education because culturally responsive teaching encourages students to think critically about social issues and engages them in meaningful activism to produce positive social change. Culturally responsive teaching pays attention to asynchronous power dynamics and imbalance in the distribution of power in society and seeks to make public and explicit the inequitable distribution of institutional and systematic power along racial lines. Unlike traditional teaching which promotes top-down approach driven by standardized outcomes, culturally responsive teaching interrogates the distribution of power and focuses on the development of authentic relationship between educational institutions and the community it serves.

What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Geneva Gay (2010), defines culturally responsive teaching as, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for [students]” (p. 31).

In this article, culturally responsive teaching is examined as an educational practice and I argue that cultural responsive teaching constitutes the foundation of educational justice for all students because it conceptualizes the connection between education and knowledge; education and the social, economic and cultural environment of the learner, and creates the space needed for discussing social change. In its true practice, culturally responsive teaching enhances students’ cultural awareness, develops students’ leadership skills, and creates change. While traditional teaching emphasizes academic knowledge without any attention to systemic inequality, culturally responsive teaching is “unapologetic in its aim to dismantle structures of injustice” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 1). This article therefore is intended to outline not only the transformational power of culturally responsive teaching but also the nexus between culturally responsive teaching and social justice education. This is to say, the article will show how culturally responsive teaching provides students not only with information and skills, but with the disposition to think, to inquire, to judge, to question, to communicate and to advance the goals of social justice including the capacity for students to examine public policies critically (Hale, 2018, p. 9). The article will also show how culturally responsive teaching endows students with the ability to be involved in civic transformations as active participants in the fight for social change. In other words, culturally responsive teaching establishes concrete links between the curriculum, classroom instruction, and the social, cultural, and economic environment of the learner, as well as show concern for the integrity of student experiences.

It has been shown by numerous studies that social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional well-being are important in student learning (Muniz 2019; Almaguer 2019; Mackay and Strickland 2018; Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor, 2018; Ozudogru 2018; Rhodes, 2017; Garlen, Kuh and Coleman 2017; Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015; Gehlbach 2014). As individuals, we are affected by our environment, because we are linked closely to the demands of our daily lives. In which case, as members of families, peer groups and classrooms located within the larger context of schools, neighborhoods and communities, learners

are influenced by culture, shared beliefs, values, and norms. It is by understanding the influence of these interacting contexts on learners that we can enhance learning effectiveness. Teachers, as cultural brokers must have clear conception of how “cultural backgrounds of students and how differences in values, beliefs, language, behavioral expectations can influence student behavior, including interpersonal dynamics.” (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015, p. 21; see also Milner 1V, 2017). Indeed, the more teachers understand these facts, the better they will be able to facilitate effective teaching and learning interactions in their classrooms. As a factual matter, in order for teachers to be effective in contemporary classrooms, there should be “concrete links between the curriculum, classroom instruction, and the social, cultural, and economic environment of the learners” (Maiga, 1995, p. 209). Therefore, to be successful, teachers have to make classroom instruction more compatible with the cultural orientations of students (Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor, 2018; Milner 1V, 2017; Lew and Nelson 2016; Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) believes that culturally responsive teaching “is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes [to students]” (p. 20). In which case, culturally responsive teachers view culture as strength which can be leveraged effectively to enhance academic and social achievement of students. Numerous studies have shown that, more-often than not, culturally responsive teachers are grounded or should be grounded in pedagogical practices, teaching conceptions, and social relationships that enhance learning experiences (Muniz, 2019; Holmes, 2018; Hansen-Thomas and Chennapragada, 2018; Mackay and Strickland, 2018; Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor 2018; Smith, Ralston and Waggoner, 2018; Allen, Hancock, Starker-Glass and Lewis, 2017; Howard and Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Hernandez and Shroyer, 2017). Culturally responsive teachers relate the curriculum to students’ backgrounds; establish connections with families; understand students’ cultural experiences; establish connections with local communities; create shared learning experiences, and recognize cultural differences as strengths on which to build programs. Culturally responsive teachers understand the non-apolitical nature of learning and equate education with freedom and liberation (Hale, 2018), therefore, they help their students to understand their roles as change agents in society. They inspire, motivate, instill values and knowledge; they nourish racial pride and the need for equality in their students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In her critically acclaimed book, Ladson-Billings (2009) describes eight teachers she identifies as successful

teachers of African American students that she came across during her study. Some of the interesting characteristics of these teachers which she discovered were: that they use culture as a vehicle for learning; they have strong focus on student learning, and they are creative. Also, they develop cultural competence and cultivate sociopolitical awareness in their students. To cite a few examples, she tells us about a teacher who used cultural music as a vehicle for teaching poetry to African-American students and this method helped her students to perform better than students in other schools where this was not the approved method of teaching. Another teacher invited artists to her classroom by creating “artist or craftsperson-in-residence” program that enabled members of the community to share their cultural and artistic experiences with students in the school. In a different classroom, the teacher encouraged her students to use their home languages while learning the standard language leading her students to be fluent in both languages (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Other researchers have testified to similar positive results in different subject areas (Myers, 2019; Holmes, 2018; Hansen-Thomas and Chennapragada, 2018; Mackay and Strickland, 2018; Rhodes, 2018; Mackay and Strickland, 2018; Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor 2018; Smith, Ralston and Waggoner, 2018; Howard and Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Hernandez and Shroyer, 2017; Garlen, Kuh and Colman, 2017). The reasons why teachers who practice culturally responsive teaching are so successful include the fact that they are enthusiastic about their work; they show enormous respect for parents, and they understand the duality in which minority students operate. However, the overriding quality of culturally responsive teachers is that they use culture as an essential part of the school experience. Given their dispositions, these teachers have very few discipline problems in their classrooms; their class attendance are among the highest and their students tend to score at the highest percentile on standardized tests in their classes (Milner IV, 2017; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Because these students experience academic successes, they develop critical competence and critical consciousness. This is perhaps why Gay (2010) came to the conclusion that African American students perform better in schools where teaching is filtered through student experiences, but advises that to teach in a culturally responsive manner, teachers must have courage, confidence, and competence. Almost every study without exception on culturally responsive teaching, tells us that successful culturally responsive teachers are responsive to the needs of all children; they care and value each child; they begin with common ground but celebrate the unique contributions of every child; they use multiple teaching and learning strategies to engage students in active

learning that encourages the development of critical thinking, problem solving and performance skills, and indeed, these teachers are able to adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual students (Howard, Overstreet and Ticknor, 2018; Milner 1V, 2017; Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers make good teaching choices by eliciting, motivating, engaging, supporting, and expanding the intellectual abilities of all students (Hammond, 2015; Brockenbrough, 2014; Eglash, Gilbert, Taylor, and Geier, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching is good for all students because in culturally responsive classrooms all students are valued, and their contributions are recognized.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Social Justice: The Missing Link

Culturally responsive teaching epitomizes the connection between social justice and pedagogy by creating the space needed for instigating social change because culturally responsive teaching equates education with liberation and freedom (Hale, 2018; Milner 1V, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As a result, culturally responsive teachers motivate, activate and teach students how to carry out struggle for equality because as one of the most renowned culturally responsive teaching theorists posits, culturally relevant teachers are “teachers who focus on student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness in their work ...” (Ladson-Billings 2009, p. 157). Sociopolitical consciousness enhances students’ capacity for democratic participation because it makes students to become active and engaged citizens. And through activism, organization and mobilization that translates into student protests, students are able to transform their communities (Camarota and Ginwright, 2007). This type of curriculum has carefully been documented by scholars such as, Hale (2018); Levy, (2013); Chilcoat and Ligon (2000). These scholars have, through their extensive research, given us eye-opening insights into the workings of this type of curriculum which equated education with freedom for African American students. The curriculum in Freedom Schools, as it were, was designed to make students to become a force for social change. The goal of the curriculum was to empower students to critically examine their existing conditions so as to, “gain the knowledge and confidence to activate change, and to prepare themselves to contribute creatively and positively in their communities” (Chilcoat and Ligon, 2000, p. 2). In the Freedom Schools, students were “acquainted with different points of view; to stimulate, challenge, and expand ideas and opinions; to explore possibilities of

community and social improvement through collective decision making; and, hopefully, to effect those possibilities” (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 3). In their classrooms, students received instructions on how to ask critical questions that prepared them for democratic participation and active citizenship. It was not long before these students were able to say in *Seeds of Freedom*:

The reason why we are going to Freedom School is because we feel that now is the time for [Blacks] in Mississippi to join the Movement. Don't you?

As Freedom School students, we are helping in voter registration because we feel that the fight for Freedom in Mississippi must be fought not only by the adults, but by the teenager. And we are here to do our part.

We go to Freedom School because we feel this is the era of changing conditions, and we want to participate meaningfully in that change. (cited in Hale, 2018, p. 116)

As we have seen above, culturally responsive teaching conceptualizes the connection between education and knowledge on the one hand, and education and social justice on the other because as a scholar once stated, “the goal of greater justice is a fundamental part of the work of education in democratic societies...” (Zeichner , 2006 p. 339). Indeed, culturally responsive teaching takes upon itself the responsibility of restoring, “American schooling to the ideal of providing an education for democratic, active, and participatory citizenship” (Hale, 2018, p. 8). Indeed, as one of the leading scholars in this field has noted, students must attain beyond academic achievement and cultural competence, they have to also develop sociopolitical consciousness that would allow them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain inequalities. (Ladson-Billings, 2009). As a practical matter, Chilcoat and Ligon (2000), Levy (2013) and Hale (2018) tell us about a Freedom School programs where the students learned and practiced the art of resistance. In these schools students were allowed to participate in community, critical thinking and political activities using progressive democratic instructional methods. The curriculum included discussions in art, social action, creative writing, drama, newspaper commentaries and projects. Role playing were used in class to demonstrate how differences are often used as the basis for inequality. Students examined public policies critically in order to participate in civic transformations effectively. The students conceptualized and explored different forms of systemic oppression, inequality, and social hierarchy. The curriculum in the Freedom Schools was designed to uncover how power is used to

either frame or distort processes and interactions with the purpose of unraveling, unmasking and critiquing domination and discrimination in society (Chilcoat and Ligon, 2000; Levy, 2013, Hale, 2018). Students were asked to take action together to confront, contradict, and contest inequality and unequal power relations particularly when differences were used to rationalize and justify systemic inequalities, hierarchy and oppression in the society. According to Hale (2018), “Freedom Schools provided an education that facilitated entrée for thousands of young people into the civil rights movement” (p. 8). And Constance Curry (2005) concludes that “Freedom Schools enabled hundreds of young black students to learn their history and legacy and understand activism as a road to social change.” In setting up the Freedom Schools, Charles Cobb, the architect of the Freedom Schools said:

The overall theme of the school would be the student as a force for social change in Mississippi. If we are concerned with breaking the power structure, then we have to be concerned with building up our own institutions to replace the old, unjust, decadent ones which make up the existing power structure. (cited in Hale, 2018, p. 68)

It is critically important to note that culturally responsive teaching cements the connection between social justice and pedagogy and creates the space needed for instigating social change. For example, instead of blaming lack of resources for the poor condition of their school, Mr. Schultz encouraged his students to do something to remedy the situation. First, the students identified the poor condition of their school building as the major problem confronting them and their school. To replace their dilapidated school building, the students worked with their teacher to find a solution. Having clearly identified the problem, they set out to do something about it. As the students brainstormed solutions to their problem, they decided on the following lines of actions: Talk to certain people in the community to make their plight known, publicize their problem through publications in newspapers and magazines, and put pressure on law makers, political leaders, members of the school board, school administrators and staff, and heads of major corporations to come to their assistance. The students used two newspapers for publicity and used newspaper publications as leverage to achieve their goal. They interviewed and petitioned people with power in the community. They wrote letters to legislators and invited politicians to the campus. The students left no stone unturned, including holding press conferences and producing a documentary video. In order to get the much-needed publicity, they wrote letters to the media, to the powerful and to the political elites in the community. Their story

was very quickly picked up by newspapers. People in community and the public began to clamor for answers. During this process, the students were introduced to serious academic work: they learned how to work cooperatively, how to conduct surveys, how to prepare documentations and take photographs. The participants became proficient in writing assignments, data collection and analyses which enhanced their ability to solve mathematics problems. In the final analysis, the students were rewarded with a better school building in the years after, and were given numerous public service awards (Schultz, 2007).

Culturally responsive teaching activates civic citizenship of all students, keeps students awake, and makes them active participants in the fight for social change. In culturally responsive classrooms, civic citizenship and social justice can be achieved because culturally responsive teaching encourages students to be active participants in the fight for change and social justice through social activism such as volunteering, doing charity work, civic missions and civic values. Culturally responsive teaching teaches students how to channel their frustrations appropriately in order to initiate change. It also encourages students' involvement in social development projects through collective action in order to effect change in their own communities. Indeed, by enhancing students' capacity for democratic participation, students become active and engaged citizens. And through activism, organization and mobilization, students are able to transform their communities. We have been given an example of this type of curriculum for African American students in Mississippi that was designed to make students to become a force for social change. The goal of the curriculum was to empower students to critically examine their existing conditions so as to, "gain knowledge and confidence to activate change, and to prepare themselves to contribute creatively and positively in their communities" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 2). Accordingly, the students were "acquainted with different points of view; to stimulate, challenge, and expand ideas and opinions; to explore possibilities of community and social improvement through collective decision making; and hopefully, to effect those possibilities" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 3). Students were taught in their classrooms how to channel their frustrations appropriately to initiate change because culturally responsive teaching encourages students' involvement in social development projects through collective action as a way of effecting change in their own communities. Indeed, by enhancing students' capacity for democratic participation, students become active and engaged citizens.

In a very recent study, Hale (2018) followed a number of Freedom School students in different towns across Mississippi and concludes that, “The student experiences and histories ... demonstrate the commonalities shared among Freedom School participants.... All participants remained committed to movement principles...” (p. 12).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that culturally responsive teaching not only conceptualizes the connection between social justice and education but creates the space needed for discussing social justice, democratic citizenship, and social activism in the classrooms. It does so by “questioning and addressing gender, race, and class inequalities, challenging dominant assumptions about power, leadership, and democracy, and establishing community voice in the process of radical social transformation” (Cuban and Anderson, 2007, p. 146). Culturally responsive teaching makes students aware of both institutional and structural barriers to democratic practice and explores the means through which students can negotiate, challenge, and resist dominant control by teaching students how to use school walkouts, marches, and other forms of civil disobedience to make their voices heard in society (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2007).

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