

Contextualizing Teacher Education Emphases for Classroom Diversity

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Abstract

Nominal attention has been dedicated to standards of best practice that local teachers should demonstrate in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. The CREDE standards address the gap and emphasize five transnational, universals of best practice for CLD students/families. However, recent research indicates that teachers practices indicative of the most important of these, contextualization, are among the least robust of those observed. Necessarily, future research is needed to unpack these findings. In the interim, we argue that teachers' critical reflection on their own socialization is essential to the fundamental understandings necessary for standards-based practices with these students and families.

Introduction

Today, about one in four children in the United States arrive at school from immigrant families and live in households where a language other than English is spoken (Samson & Collins, 2012). NCES (2014) further reports that the number of Hispanic students enrolled in United States (U. S.) schools between 2001 and 2011

increased from 8.2 million to 11.8 million students, and their share of public school enrollment increased from 17 to 24 percent.

Notwithstanding these demographic trends, recent research and analyses indicate that little attention has been afforded to the essential content knowledge, skills in practice, and alignment to appropriate standards that local teachers should demonstrate in order to prove effective with the fastest growing populations in their classrooms (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012; Samson & Collins, 2012). Some conclude that system-level changes are needed in the ways that teachers are educated to deliver appropriate practices for students who are struggling with content and/or literacy development in English (Samson & Collins, 2012).

Ironically, the need for teacher education that is responsive to such trends among students and families has been recurrently and fleetingly addressed since Gloria Ladsen Billings originated the term culturally relevant pedagogy almost ten years ago (Ladsen-Billings, 1995). In fact, standards for teaching efficacy with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students have been developed and tested across a wide variety of nations, school systems, and teaching contexts. In a prior edition of this journal (Murry, Herrera, Kavimandan, & Perez, 2011), we detailed these uniquely, cross-national standards developed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) at Berkeley (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Dalton, 2007; Yamauchi, Im, & Mark, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The CREDE standards, also known as the Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Learning, feature persistent, systematic classroom observation, and facilitation and may be annotated as follows:

- contextualization – connecting school to students' lives;
- language development – nurturing academic language;
- instructional conversations – teaching didactic & dialectic interchanges;
- joint productive activities – teacher and students producing together; and
- challenging activities – advancing complex and critical thinking.

Arguably, the most culturally (and linguistically) relevant of the CREDE standards is contextualization since, like biography-driven instruction or BDI (Herrera, 2010), this standard prompts teachers to explore and pre-assess what CLD and other students already bring to the lesson. Essentially, who they are, what they bring, and how they learn best, is each a function of their biographies. In turn, the student's biography is mostly a product of her/his socialization in particular cultures and in dominant languages of socialization (typically those of the home and school). Critical aspects of these biographies include: (a) funds of knowledge (from sociocultural heritage experiences), (b) ways of knowing and learning (from culture and from previous schooling); (c) prior knowledge (from previous academic learning); and (d) language

literacy (from the home and school language systems) which may reflect emergent bilingualism.

Instruction that builds upon the biographies of these students (that is contextualizes the teaching), inter alia, incorporates at least three crucial characteristics. Axiomatic, are purposive strategies that invoke students' existing schema while relating them to new knowledge to be processed. Another characteristic is the incorporation of activities and realia that prompt connections between students' biographies and the content of the lesson (including community-based experiences). Finally, contextualized teaching necessitates affirmation of students' learning, especially through tangible outcomes (i.e., essays, diagrams, e-books).

Findings of Research

Constructively, recent multilevel modeling (MLM) research strongly indicates that teacher education, which is CREDE-aligned and emphasizes biography-driven instruction, yields effective teaching practices for CLD and other students as observationally-assessed via a culturally responsive teaching inventory (Herrera, Perez, Kavimandan, Holmes, & Miller, 2011; Murry, Herrera, Miller, & Fanning, n.d.). These effects are more discernably robust for teaching that purposively incorporates instructional conversations and joint productivity.

This iterative research used Multilevel Modeling via the SPSS Mixed Method procedure to examine the impact of the curricula aligned to transnational standards on teachers' observed best practices with CLD students, as measured by the Inventory of Situationally and Culturally Responsive Teaching (ISCRT). Despite some variability, over 110 participating teachers in 37 U.S. schools demonstrated statistically significant improvements in their delivery of effective pedagogy for ELLs and other students, across a wide range (18 of 22) ISCRT indicators.

Regrettably, this research on practicing teachers further indicates that teachers' practices indicative of contextualization are among the least evident and robust of those observed (Murry, et al, n.d.). At least two observations render these findings remarkably ironic: (1) Since the original evidence for, and conceptualization of, culturally relevant/responsive teaching, not much seems to have changed about teachers' fundamental readiness for classroom diversity. (2) Despite efforts to differentiate teachers' professional development and to align their education to standards for instruction in diverse classrooms, their practices remain least indicative of the standard of best practice that is most fundamental to culturally responsive teaching – contextualization for students' biographies.

Accordingly, future research is needed to unpack what factors prompt these two, historical and ongoing ironies of teacher education for cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Are teachers' own socialization experiences and perspectives in a particular culture so dominant, so omnipresent, that it overrides their teacher

education? Must teachers' curricula and instruction transcend good content, theory/ research based methods, and even standards for culturally relevant/responsive teaching? In what ways? What elements are missing or ineffective? Does a disconnect exist between teachers' professional development experiences and the realities of postmodern classrooms? What can be done to enhance parallels? Can teachers know their students, realize their assets (e.g., cultural, academic, and cognitive) and maximize their potentials unless they resurface and re-experience their own biographies? Are we, as teacher educators, ready for the challenges of such education?

Future Directions

We respectfully cajole that teachers' critical self-reflection on their own biographies is pivotal to both culturally (and situationally) responsive teaching, and to contextualization in practice. Whether we are ready to teach critical reflection to school educators is a function of our willingness to accept the challenges of this brand of capacity building.

To begin, widespread confusion remains about what reflection is and is not (Liu, 2010). Similarly, terms for the target capacity tend to be used interchangeably, such that introspection, reflection, and critical reflection are often treated as synonymous. We maintain that reflection is validity testing and that teachers benefit most when they reflect upon critical incidents. Essentially, critical incidents encompass any materials, contexts, events, or interactions that generate psychological discomfort or conflict. They may range from reading opinions with which one disagrees, to lessons that do not yield anticipated results (especially those involving CLD students and/or families). Three sequential steps are then focal to critical reflection on these critical incidents. Assumptions are inherent to virtually all critical incidents, just as they are to much of the craft of teaching. What did I assume this passage of text was going to recommend? How did I assume the parents were going to react? Therefore, teachers should be taught to begin with assumption checking. That is, what assumptions did I make in response to this critical incident and can I specify what they were? The latter action makes the assumptions explicit and actionable.

The assumptions identified are recurrent patterns in cognition that simplify our capacities to manage all of the thousands of sensory inputs we receive and manage each day. However, these processes are prone to oversimplification, especially in our interactions with cultures, languages, and contexts different from those with which are accustomed. Reflection, therefore, encourages teachers to test the validity of assumptions in practice against countervailing evidence, such as: others' perspectives, the reactions of others, theory, research, best practice standards, and similar data.

Ultimately, the source of our assumptions is our own socialization in a particular culture and dominant language. This socializations informs what we believe, what we should expect, how we should respond to situations, and more. Yet, as validity testing (reflection) will often reveal, these products of our own socialization often misinterpret, oversimplify, and/or exacerbate differences in culture, language, contexts, and perspectives. Therefore, critical reflection encourages teachers to locate the sources of errant or misguided assumptions in their own contexts and patterns of socialization in order to understand how the patterns influence their affect, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and recurrent reactions in practice with CLD students and families. Progressively, iterative patterns of this critical reflection build teachers' capacities for more inclusive, constructive, effectual, and advocative practices in diverse and complex teaching environments, especially contextualization. For more information on building teachers' capacities for critical reflection on complex practice consider the reference list to follow, especially the following helpful resources (Berghoff, Blackwell, & Wisehart, 2011; Herrera & Murry, 2014; Liu, 2010; Murry, Herrera, Kavimandan, & Perez, 2011).

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