

Shifts in Conversation: How Culturally Responsive School Climates are Changing the Way Educators Think About Meeting the Challenges of Diversity

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Abstract

Increasingly diverse student populations and accountability demands are two of the most critical and defining challenges for K-12 public schools in the 21st century. Meeting the needs of culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse (CLED) students is not a contemporary issue. Educational institutions have recognized, to varying degrees, the inequities in education for this population as far back as the Civil Rights Era (Gorski, 1999). In recent years, however, the rapid growth of minority and immigrant populations in public schools in combination with accountability-era transparency has intensified the pressure on schools to eradicate educational disparities for diverse student populations. This paper examines the change over the past two decades in the rhetoric and research regarding how teacher preparation programs, schools, and classroom teachers should foster culturally responsive practices. The author highlights encouraging approaches for teacher preparation programs and school systems to use in planning to meet the needs of all students.

Keywords: cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity; cultural competence; culturally responsive schools; equity pedagogy; school reform

As the demographics of student populations in K-12 public schools across the United States continue to change dramatically and educators are pressed to meet accountability demands, teacher preparation programs, school systems, and classroom teachers continue to struggle to meet the needs of their culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse (CLED) students. However, shifts in ideas about the meaning of diversity, in the focus and organization of teacher preparation programs, and in the roles teachers play in the academic achievement of their students have promising implications for moving educators in the right direction when it comes to culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, a shift in perspective from the classroom to the school system in terms of where critical changes should occur makes transformational change a real possibility for educational leaders wishing to make progress when it comes to rectifying educational inequities.

Consequences and Context of Educational Inequities

Millions of students suffer life-altering consequences as a result of inequities in education.

Hispanic and African-American students drop out of school at much higher rates than their white peers (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). Culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse (CLED) students and low socio-economic students consistently perform worse than their peers on standardized assessments, causing achievement gaps to persist among these students, particularly in secondary grades (Terry & Irving, 2010). CLED students are overrepresented in special education, which can cause them to lose valuable instructional time in classrooms depending on how often they are pulled out of general core classes (Terry & Irving, 2010). Additionally, these students are underrepresented in gifted education (Terry & Irving, 2010). Such misidentifications and mismatches between ability level and level of instruction can lead to “low academic achievement, low expectations, decreased motivation and involvement in schools, increased placement in lower or vocational tracks, and limited postsecondary and employment opportunities” (Terry & Irving 2010, p. 118). Consequences such as these coupled with a population of increasingly diverse learners makes the issue of combating inequities in education even

more pressing. This not only affects school leaders, but also schools of education which must work towards transforming the status quo within schools while fostering cultural competence in the next generation of teachers.

While the research findings above indicate a dire need for serious reform in public schools, education systems appear stagnant, foundering in the area of how to equalize the playing field for underserved populations despite numerous efforts over the years to do so. While the demographics of students filing through school hallways change every year, the typical teacher greeting them at the classroom door remains white, female, and middle class (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Students in high-poverty and high-minority schools are consistently taught by teachers with less experience, less education in the content they teach, and less qualification to teach than students in wealthier schools and school districts (Peske, H. & Haycock, K., 2006). In fact, students in high-poverty and high-minority schools are twice as likely to be assigned a novice teacher as students in wealthier school districts (Peske, H. & Haycock, K., 2006). In secondary high-poverty and high-minority schools, students are far more likely to be assigned to teachers without a degree in the subject they teach (Peske, H. & Haycock, K., 2006). Thus, while many education leaders lament the difficulties of meeting CLED students' needs, many also continue to assign the least qualified teachers to teach these students. Education leaders also regret the high turnover rates of novice teachers, yet many systematically continue to place new teachers in the most challenging settings to endure trial by fire in their nascent years.

These discrepancies between school cultures and the clients they are tasked with serving do not persist for lack of effort to understand how to resolve them. However, it appears that the focus of past research and the points of origin for where and how to implement change have neglected the scope of the issue. Fortunately, the notion that reform must happen at the systems level, rather than solely at the classroom level, is gaining prominence in the research (Gay, 2004; Terry & Irving, 2010; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Shifts in how we define diverse populations, as well as in how we think about preparing new teachers and training veteran teachers, have provided more substance for potentially transforming school cultures.

Diversity

As might be expected, the increasing impetus to address the needs of diverse learners has resulted in the evolution of the concept of *diversity*; from a term used to refer to minority populations to a more mainstream term used to define differences between people in society in general. For example, in a 1995 study on the impact of formal diversity coursework or training and exposure to working with diverse student populations on pre-service teachers, the term *diverse* referred to "student differences related to gender, ethnicity, cultural, language, or socioeconomic status" (Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill, & Yee, p. 73). Since then, the term has grown to include differences in areas like sexual orientation, age, disabilities, political affiliation, and religion. The Education Alliance at Brown University defines diversity as "variety or heterogeneity; in populations, variety based on cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious differences (among others)" (Trumball & Pacheco, 2005). Thus diversity itself has become a term that can be used to define all students in the collective. Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) explain that using the term *diverse* to refer only to those populations in the minority is misleading and "perpetuates a norm of separation and inequity" which reinforces the idea that the dominant group is somehow "normal" while those who are different are "not normal" (as cited in Trumball & Pacheco, 2005, p. 13-14). Since all students can identify with multiple groups of various gender, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, and socio-economic backgrounds, diversity applies to all students (Trumball & Pacheco, 2005).

It is because all classrooms contain students from a variety of backgrounds that educators must move away from the idea of "multicultural education" as an addition to the curriculum which supports only some learners towards an understanding that culturally-sensitive awareness and pedagogical practice are matters of ethics and integrity which impact all learners and which should pervade our school systems. The shift in the connotation of *diversity* has important implications for how educators and educational institutions view its significance within the context of school culture, specifically when it comes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Much of the conversation around teacher education programs in the 1980's and 1990's focused on how to incorporate multicultural education into the programs of study and field experiences of pre-service teachers (Gorski, 1999; Sleeter, 2001; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Arguments over whether teacher preparation programs should isolate single courses on multicultural education or infuse multicultural education throughout coursework and field experiences were and still are abundant (Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill, & Yee, 1995; Sleeter, 2001; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). However, early research on the impacts of multicultural education courses on pre-service teachers focused mainly on whether it improved teacher attitudes towards teaching diverse learners (Sleeter, 2001). Most of the studies were action-research narratives published by the instructors of such courses and in such immersion programs, and of those studies that were experimentally-designed, the findings were often mixed on which strategies for incorporating multicultural education into teacher preparation programs were effective (Sleeter, 2001; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Furthermore, there was no research on whether these courses impacted the subsequent achievement of the diverse learners these pre-service teachers taught once they left their preparation programs (Sleeter, 2001).

Ironically, the suggestions made at the conclusion of many of these earlier studies on teacher preparation programs are strikingly similar to the recommendations made in more recent reviews of the literature. However, the explanations for why programs have remained unable to make gains in preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners have somewhat shifted. Earlier research included suggestions such as recruiting more diverse professionals into the education field and de-emphasizing "deficit" theories of CLED learners in schools of education in lieu of more emphasis on critical race and social justice theories (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Suggestions also included increasing research on the sustained impacts of multicultural education programs through following teachers into the field after graduation and engaging in more qualitative research on processes and program-level practices which appeared to sustain the marginalization of multicultural education in

pre-service programs (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). While more recent research makes similar suggestions for improvement, it also indicates that perhaps there are more systematic issues at play among these institutions which are not being addressed, such as "limited experiences and apprehension on the part of faculty" and limited experiences for pre-service teachers to engage with diverse learners (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Sleeter, 2007; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008, p. 342). Perpetuations of the status quo, such as lack of fieldwork with culturally-sensitive in-service teachers (Sleeter, 2007), lack of opportunities for discussion and reflection on observations of injustice in classrooms, and lack of assignments and assessments in schools of education which prioritize the teaching of diverse learners, have become suspect as structures inhibiting progress in teacher education programs (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). The shift in the discussion from a focus on effective models of incorporating diversity training into teacher-preparation programs and how they impact teacher attitudes towards a discussion of possible underlying belief systems that exist within these programs is a step forward. Shifting the focus should allow schools of education to approach their programs from a different perspective, examining the underlying systematic structures which undermine professed goals to improve the training of pre-service teachers in how to teach diverse learners.

Teachers and Schools

Just as the research suggests that teacher preparation programs must shift their focus, so the research on teacher roles indicates the need for teachers to engage in critical reflection of their values and beliefs in order to understand the lens through which they view their students (Banks, 2006; Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill, & Yee, 1995; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Earlier research on school failure to close achievement gaps and improve instruction of culturally diverse students focused mainly on teacher attitudes and pedagogical practices (Gay, 2004). In their review of the literature on teachers' attitudes towards diverse learners, Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill and Yee (1995) included studies which found classroom teachers lacked understanding and preparation in teaching and interacting with diverse learners, studies reporting teachers' bias and

resentment towards CLED students, and even findings of some teachers' beliefs that minorities were to blame for their own poverty (p. 69).

Gay (2004) explains that teachers have often been the brunt of criticism, accused of having low expectations, harboring negative racial attitudes, and engaging in deliberate oppressive practices (p. 210). Studies of pre-service candidates have shown a trend in teachers to "distance" themselves; to avoid talking about racial and cultural inequalities in educational practice. Claiming to be "color-blind," avoiding non-required coursework on social injustice, and believing "race and color no longer influence outcomes for CLD learners" are some examples of these distancing strategies (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). A study of teacher candidates' abilities to incorporate culturally-sensitive approaches in their lesson plans revealed minimal skill in understanding how to do so, often resulting in "contributions approach" methods of "adding" a multicultural element superficially, omitting or limiting assessment and assessment options, and not addressing the needs of ESL populations (Ambrosio, Sequin, & Hogan, 2001; Banks, 2006).

Considering the previous discussion on the research of teacher education programs in adequately training pre-service teachers, one might attribute some of these characteristics to poor preparation. However, the role of training programs in the development of cultural awareness is only a recent connection made in the literature due to the general trend toward viewing teacher ineptitude in meeting diverse learners' needs through the lens of systemic failure (Gay, 2004). According to Geneva Gay (2004), "Equality requires holistic and systemic reforms" (p. 207). Teachers are people too, and as such, experience the world from their own cultural perspectives which in many cases are "incompatible" with the cultural systems characteristic of their students' experiences (Gay, 2004).

Recent research embraces the concept of equity pedagogy which entails cultivating the strengths students bring to the classroom as a result of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences (Gay, 2004). Teachers must explicitly discuss cultural differences and social injustices, rather than avoid the conversation simply because it is uncomfortable (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Terry & Irving, 2010). Teachers must differentiate their instruction to include not only a variety of curricular

materials which capture multiple cultural perspectives, but also a variety of instructional methods and assessments to give students equitable opportunities to succeed (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2004; Terry & Irving, 2010).

Just as teachers are tasked with altering their thinking about their students and incorporating a variety of perspectives and cultures into their curriculum, instruction, and assessment, school leaders should understand teachers as "products of their culture" as well (Gay, 2004). Teachers should not be reprimanded for their lack of cultural competency; but rather should be viewed with the same respect as students and provided with opportunities to improve their awareness through leadership support and professional development (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Furthermore, school leaders should consider subjecting their own school structures to the same scrutiny to determine whether they foster or deny climates of cultural responsiveness and sensitivity (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). If schools engage in practices which result in overrepresentation of CLED students in special education or in low-rigor courses, underrepresentation of CLED students in gifted programs or AP courses, and alienation of some families and communities in favor of practices which accommodate others, then systemic reforms need to be pursued (Gay, 2004; Terry & Irving, 2010). One cannot expect teachers to drastically change their ways if schools do not make efforts to do the same. Through professional development for teachers and the use of cultural proficiency frameworks (Lindsey, Graham, Westphal, & Jew, 2008), schools can face the challenges of identifying where inequities lie in their own schools and make strides towards closing gaps and facilitating culturally-responsive school environments where all students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Next Steps for Leaders and Practitioners

There are a number of steps educational leaders can take to improve the cultural responsiveness of their schools and develop cultural competencies in their teachers. A climate survey distributed to teachers, students, and families is one way to collect data on how comfortable stakeholders feel about the equity in school practices (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Once

this data is collected, education leaders can share it with teachers and begin to promote “courageous conversations” about the barriers to equity that exist within their schools (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Professional development which provides activities for teachers to reflect on their own cultural heritage and belief systems and to discuss their experiences with colleagues; as well as training in cultural competency, domains of awareness, cultural orientations, and categories of racism are some strategies suggested in the literature for beginning to foster culturally-responsive school climates (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007; Trumball & Pacheco, 2005). Vivian Stith-Williams and Phyllis M. Haynes (2007) developed a Resource Manual for Developing Cultural Competence with the support of a grant from the Virginia Department of Education. This manual is a valuable resource for professional development activities grounded in research on culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural theories. An updated curriculum based on this manual and created for Arlington Public Schools is also available (Patton & Day-Vines, 2010).

Developing professional learning communities which focus on issues of cultural awareness would be the next step for educational leaders to take in order to sustain the impact of cultural competency training. These professional learning communities might be tasked with completing audits of their curricular materials for evidence of bias in textbooks (Trumball & Pacheco, 2005); auditing library offerings to ensure a balance of materials representing various racial and ethnic cultures; observing best practices through identifying master teachers who can model them (Hawley & Nieto, 2010); reading articles and print resources on culturally responsive teaching and reporting on them; and researching the communities represented by their students through taking part in community events, visiting local neighborhoods, and inviting family members into the school for engaging in discussion on how the school can help meet their needs (Hawley & Nieto, 2010).

Finally, individual teachers can practice implementing equitable practice in their own classrooms by conducting research into their students’ backgrounds and implementing methods which work for their own students. Creating classroom environments which reflect all learners and engaging in open dialogue about race and culture

in a sensitive way is a more effective and honest approach than engaging in “color-blind” practices which devalue cultural heritage and ignore reality. Finally, using knowledge of learning styles to apply differentiated methods of instruction, holding high expectations for all learners, and involving parents and families of all backgrounds are observable and measurable ways in which teachers can gauge their own development and by which school leaders can gauge the extent to which their schools are making progress in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Banks, 2006; Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Terry & Irving, 2010).

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