

Learning-through-diversity: Utilizing culturally responsive instruction to enhance learning

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Abstract

Recent efforts to increase diversity in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) disciplines necessitate the development of suitable curriculum for diverse students by teacher training programs. Unfortunately, the richness that diversity will bring to these academic areas will likely be coupled with a strain on teaching and learning; resulting from the mixing of diverse cultures. This cultural diversity or cultural disequilibrium, as stated by Bergeron (2008), requires teacher training programs to incorporate the aspect of culture into its curriculum in an effort to enhance teaching and learning.

One approach to combating cultural disequilibrium is the enactment of a culturally responsive curriculum. A culturally responsive curriculum creates entry of diverse cultural norms into the classroom thereby narrowing the gap of misunderstanding caused by a mismatch between home and school. A culturally responsive curriculum promotes and allows for diversity in teaching methods versus uniformity promoted by traditional curricula. It validates students and enables them to maintain their self esteem; increasing the likelihood of academic success. As stated by Menchaca (2001), a culturally responsive curriculum is one that allows students to learn from a familiar cultural base through which individuals can connect new knowledge to their own experiences.

Various culturally responsive instructional methods are available for use in the classroom to include the utilization of communication that is culturally and ethnically congruent, inquiry science, experiential stories and group research. Incorporation of such teaching techniques into teacher training programs will aid in the immersion of culturally responsive instruction into STEM classrooms; ultimately enhancing student learning. Enabling and allowing students to learn in a manner more fitting to their cultural norms and experiences enhances learning and content retention. Under the broad approach of learning through diversity, the enactment of a culturally responsive curriculum is an effective approach for learning gains.

Summary

A diverse classroom is characteristic of today's complex classroom. Teacher education programs should be designed to prepare pre-service teachers, traversing to become novice teachers, for today's classroom. Teacher education programs lacking focus on diversity and cultural responsiveness should be refined to incorporate such. Incorporation of culturally responsive curriculum/instruction enhances student learning through association with what is familiar.

As displayed in the poster, the **Cultural Disequilibrium** diagram exhibits the result of a mismatch between the home culture and the school culture. The diagram shows that no interaction or association exists between the home and school cultures; hence, cultural disequilibrium. If the cultures are different and never merge an association is not achieved; resulting in a learning gap or misunderstanding by students. This gap of misunderstanding impedes learning.

In contrast, the **Cultural Symmetry** diagram depicts the merging of the home culture with the school culture. This combination results in culturally responsive curriculum/instruction. The diagram shows that when an unfamiliar culture (i.e. school culture) combines with a familiar culture (i.e. home culture), an association by the student is possible. Research has shown a correlation between relevancy or association and learning; an increase in association or relevancy of content increases retention and learning gains (Bergeron, 2008).

Incorporation of culturally responsive curriculum into classrooms can be achieved through utilization of culturally responsive instructional methods. The poster identifies six culturally responsive instructional methods as:

1. Culturally and ethnically congruent communication – supports bilingual education. Allows students to speak in their home language in the classroom.
2. Inquiry science – active learning. Allows students to utilize association or familiar processes to investigate and solve problems (Haury, 1993).
3. Experiential stories – sharing real, personal stories. Enhances critical thinking and problem solving skills as diverse student perspectives are encouraged and utilized.
4. Group research – working as a team to research and solve problems. Narrows the gap of misunderstanding by promoting dialogue between students of diverse cultures. This dialogue requires an acceptance and possibly an appreciation for cultural diversity as students work to achieve a common goal.
5. Self-selected reading – student choice in reading materials. Allows students to read and learn about a topic in the language of their choice. (i.e. learn more about Science by reading about it in the Spanish version of a Science text). This method increases the likelihood of an association being formed.
6. Thematic units – presenting subject matter according to themes or topics. Enables subjects to be explored for an extended amount of time so that students have more time to find connections or make associations which narrow the gap of misunderstanding. This instructional method enables learning to be more relevant and identifiable. An exploration of holiday traditions by culture is one example of how thematic units aide in the development of culturally responsive curriculum (Gardner, Wissick, Schweder & Canter, 2003).

The poster serves as a visual to enhance ones understanding of culturally responsive curriculum, its effects/benefits on student learning, and how to incorporate it into the classroom. Enabling and allowing students to learn in a manner more fitting to their cultural norms and experiences enhances learning and content retention. Teacher training programs should include culturally responsive instructional methods in their curriculum, in an effort to attain this instructional method's claim of enhanced student learning in today's complex classroom.

References

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