

Chapter 38

Culturally Responsive Practices in Educational Environments: The Power of Caring and Relationship Building

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ABSTRACT

The current political climate, changes in demographics, and a globalized world call for culturally responsive practices that strengthen the education and development of the future generation of global citizens. The chapter will unfold the meaning of cultural responsive practices in education through the lens of the relational cultural theory (RCT). The discussion will center on the importance of having critical conversations, promoting relationship building, developing cultural competence, and taking social justice and advocacy actions in all educational environments. At the end of this chapter, readers will 1) have a better understanding of cultural responsive practices in education, 2) identify strategies that support meaningful learning environments, 3) reflect on their own cultural competence development, 4) recognize their responsibility in promoting social justice, and 5) identify their opportunities for taking advocacy actions towards more caring and equitable educational environments.

INTRODUCTION

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, there is a growing understanding of the deep and abiding effects of culture and cultural identities (Alfred, 2009; Banks, 2006). This is perhaps most evident in American public schools, which have undergone incredible demographic changes, resulting in growing number of students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. While educational research has demonstrated that the most effective learning environment is one which most closely reflects the

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students' learning preferences and ways of knowing (Guy, 2009), a great challenge exists as predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual teachers strive to overcome the cultural mismatches between their cultural backgrounds and those of their students (Alfred, 2009; Collard & Stalker, 1991; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001). In addition, these teachers face this challenge amid a politicized political climate and increasing globalization. Therefore, we suggest that culturally responsive practices provide the foundation to strengthen the education and development of the future generation of global citizens. This chapter will unfold the meaning of cultural responsive practices in education through the lens of the relational cultural theory (RCT). The discussion will center on the importance of having critical conversations, promoting relationship building, developing cultural competence, and taking social justice and advocacy actions in all educational environments.

RCT provides a social justice lens and plays an important role in exploring how issues of sex role socialization, power, dominance, marginalization, and subordination affect mental health and relational development (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008). Founded on the belief that traditional models of human development left out the relational experiences of women and many minority groups (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008; Jordan, 2001), Jean Baker Miller provides a framework that embraces the notion that meaningful change occurs when we encounter new experiences through interaction with others (Miller, 2008) as opposed to ideals of individualism and autonomy from traditional models (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001). Furthermore, RCT emphasizes relational competency, mutual empathy, and growth-fostering relationships (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008), concepts that will reinforce the present chapter.

While RCT has been utilized in the field of counseling, multicultural education scholars have used similar tenets in the development of culturally responsive teaching theory. Defined as teaching that uses "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to" (Gay, 2010, p.31) students from minority cultural groups, culturally responsive teaching focuses on creating a community built on respect and critical inquiry among all learners (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Strategies toward what Gay (2010) calls culturally responsive caring will also be discussed in this chapter, along with a reflection of the characteristics of teachers who care about all their students. Reflective questions, examples from personal experiences of the authors, and exercises on cultural competence development, social justice, and advocacy will be included in the chapter to promote critical thinking and self-reflection, as well as hopefully generate future advocacy action ideas within the reader's own learning environment. This chapter aims to serve as a catalyst for reflection, discussion, and promotion of caring, supportive, and meaningful learning environments.

At the end of this chapter readers will: a) have a better understanding of cultural responsive practices in education; b) identify strategies that support meaningful learning environments; c) reflect on their own cultural competence development; d) recognize their responsibility in promoting social justice, and; e) identify their opportunities for taking advocacy actions towards more caring and equitable educational environments.

CULTURALLY CENTERED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The influence of culture on learning is a foundation of multicultural education (Banks, 2006; Bennett, 2001) and is exemplified by the assumption that both students and teachers bring their cultural identi-

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