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China M. Jenkins
Department of Public Partnership & Outreach, Texas A&M University, Institute for Instructional Engagement & Development, Houston Community College, chinajenkins@tamu.edu

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It’s the Right Thing to Do: The Voices of Seven White Culturally Responsive Professors

China M. Jenkins
Department of Public Partnership & Outreach, Texas A&M University
Institute for Instructional Engagement & Development, Houston Community College

Abstract: This study explored the motivation of White educators to become culturally responsive, their processes of transformation and how they transformed self and pedagogy as a result.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, transformative learning

Introduction

The rising enrollment of native and international students of color is changing the population demographics of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). As the students of these PWIs continue to become more diverse, the challenges associated with teaching diverse students tend to rise (Colbert, 2010; Haviland & Rodriguez-Kiino, 2009; O'Hara & Pritchard, 2008). For example, according to Museus, Nichols and Lambert (2008), the racial climate on college campuses influenced both positive and negative experiences and resulted in distinct outcomes for students of color. In response to such issues, universities have turned their efforts to creating various diversity initiatives to aid in the retention and academic success of students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Educators should consider sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, abilities, and many other characteristics that impact the teaching and learning process in their classrooms (Gollnick and Chinn, 2002). These considerations for effective teaching require pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive to the diversity among adult learners (Richards, Brown, and Forde, 2007). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) coined the phrase culturally relevant teaching to explain a “kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture, but also to use students’ culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions and conceptualize knowledge” (p. 314). Educators who practice culturally responsive pedagogy can have a positive influence on the lives of their students, especially students of color, because they develop alternate pedagogies to complement the educational experiences of their students (Canniff (2008), Gay (2000), and Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

A widely established theme in the scholarship of culturally responsive teaching among scholars of various races is the magnitude and the necessity for White educators to embrace culturally responsive pedagogy because of the negative impact that hegemonic Eurocentric ideologies can have on students of color or different sociocultural backgrounds (Blum, 2000; Canniff, 2008; Sleeter, 2008; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Since it has been established that educators are influenced by their own sociocultural history in the teaching process (Alfred, 2002), and noting the history of power, domination, and privilege among White Americans, it is essential to understand what motivates White professors of education to be culturally responsive in their teaching. Hence, the goal of this study was to examine the motivation and transformation of White culturally responsive professors of adult, K-12 and higher education in predominately White institutions.

Purpose
Noting the growing diversity among college and adult learners, and the need for professors to be culturally responsive in their teaching practices, the purpose of this study was to examine the motivation to become culturally inclusive and the transformational experiences that created this motivation and shaped their development. Additionally, this study examined how their experiences influenced their teaching practices in the classroom. This study did not only investigate how White educators deal with the issue of race in their classroom, but also other differences such as, but not limited to, class, gender, nationality, and language. Many White scholars, such as Canniff (2008), Gorski (2008), and Sleeter (2008), have made great strides in the area of developing culturally relevant teaching practices, thereby adding to the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. Since the majority of higher education professors are White, it proved useful to study culturally responsive White professors to add depth to the body of literature on teaching diverse populations in higher education.

**Research Questions**

In examining the motivational and transformational experiences of culturally responsive White education professors and how their experiences influenced their practice in the classroom, the following questions were investigated:
- What motivates White educators to be culturally responsive?
- How do educators transform into culturally responsive teachers?
- How do educators practice culturally responsive teaching in the classroom?
- How do educators perceive the impact of culturally responsive teaching on their students?
- What are the challenges associated with culturally responsive teaching?

**Methodology**

This research was conducted as a basic qualitative study; the goal of the investigation was to expand the limited data concerning experiences of academicians whose voices can enlighten others about the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in adult and higher education. This study examined the constructed meanings of the connection between their motivations, transformational experiences and the way they teach for diversity using culturally responsive practices. One of the biggest assumptions made as a foundation of this study was that those professors whose scholarship focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy or critical studies also practice within their classrooms the principles they advocate.

The pool of potential participants was narrowed to those who are considered to be in the center of their field, well published, and among the most cited in the literature. Scholars in the fields of adult, teacher and higher education who are widely accepted as experts based upon the reputation of their scholarship on culturally responsive pedagogy and/or critical pedagogy were selected and interviewed. Meeting this qualification helped to establish and confirm that the participants were knowledgeable of the theories, practices, and concepts concerning pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching and were, therefore, suitable for the study.

**Findings**

There were seven participants in the study: three men and four women. Their ages at the time of the study ranged from the late fifties to the late sixties. Six of the seven participants were born and raised in the United States. The professors’ fields of study are generally in adult education, educational leadership, educational psychology and teacher education.

The participants were motivated to be culturally responsive primarily out of their strong
convictions about education; in particular, the belief that it was their moral obligation to be culturally responsive in order to create a better society. In addition, the influence, collaboration, and support of like-minded peers inspired and encouraged them to grow in cultural responsiveness. As the professors changed in their understanding about sociocultural differences and equality, their pedagogy transformed to match their values.

The professors transformed into culturally responsive teachers when they experienced disorienting learning and teaching encounters that caused them to rethink their beliefs. These disorienting incidents occur periodically over time, so that one is always in a state of transformation. This is in accordance with Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformational learning and the works of Canniff (2008) and Howard (2003), who argue that cultural responsiveness begins with a disorienting event that provokes critical reflection. Critical reflection is foundational to transformation. All of the participants commented that their transformation is constantly evolving. As they age and encounter diverse people and circumstances that challenge their perspectives, the participants experience growth in transformation.

Most of the participants drew upon their understanding of how their background influenced their positionalities and former perspectives about society. In addition, they talked extensively about how much they contemplate and continue to reflect upon their work. The participants articulated a variety of ways in which they measured their curriculum, their multiple realities and that of their students, and the hegemonic system in which they all operate. Furthermore, the professors revealed that they infuse diversity into every course that they teach regardless of the subject. When asked about culturally responsive methods that were used in the classroom, the most frequent response provided was that they sought to bring relevance into the classwork so that the learners could find meaning in what they were studying. Many of the professors note the sociocultural backgrounds of their students and adjust the curricular content to appeal to their interests. They acknowledged the different norms and values present in each class, and they design their classes in a way to accommodate the variety of learning preferences and values.

It has been documented that both learners and teachers benefit from the effects of culturally responsive teaching (Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The participants witnessed student engagement and student appreciation for the way in which they taught. Many of the professors noted that their students expressed valuable learning or validation in the classroom. Because the professors sought to create meaningful, self-reflective classes, some of their students resultantly experienced transformation towards cultural responsiveness. The participants believed they are better people and educators because they chose culturally responsive instruction. In addition, they found satisfaction in the positive responses from their students.

Conversely, the participants expressed that culturally responsive teaching was not always well-received, especially by White students. Almost all of the professors reported dealing with backlash, resistance or hostility from some of their students. Regardless, the general consensus was that culturally responsive teaching was worth the negative feedback because it was the right way to teach from a moral standpoint. This approach to teaching benefited marginalized learners, and it challenged White students to consider issues of diversity.

The findings revealed that there were external and internal challenges associated with culturally responsive teaching. As previously mentioned, the professors often faced resistance from White students, which made culturally responsive teaching challenging. They also endured a lack of support from school administration and their colleagues. This lack of support was due, in part, to administration not recognizing the financial merit in culturally responsive teaching.
Some of the participants mentioned that, because culturally conscious research projects typically do not receive funding, they are not valued by administration. Additionally, while diversity may be nominally emphasized, it is not enforced or rewarded by the administration. These problems have been documented by numerous scholars who noted that cultural responsiveness is neither systemic nor supported within university departments.

Another challenge for the participants was in the design and implementation of a culturally relevant course. Culturally responsive teaching, as per the descriptions of the professors, required much work that was predicated by intense examination of the educator, the curriculum and the learners’ needs. This required having a level of comfort in discussing issues of diversity and time to incorporate lesson plans and new material. Several of the professors mentioned that they customized the syllabus according to the sociocultural makeup of the class. They also related how it takes time and effort to find relevant materials and construct meaningful learning experiences.

The most frequently mentioned struggle among the participants was in dealing with their own White privilege. Most of the professors experienced great frustration because, despite their diligence to avoid marginalizing others, they still sometimes unwittingly act out White supremacy. Many of them are still disturbed by the unearned privileges they receive from other Whites at the expense of people of color. In addition, the professors found that culturally responsive teaching is intellectually and emotionally draining.

**Implications from the Findings**

Educators who choose to pursue culturally responsive practice should find ways to stay motivated in their efforts. The findings showed that some of the participants had encounters that caused them to occasionally doubt their sense of efficacy and lose confidence. Furthermore, the repeated opposition from students, colleagues, and superiors caused them to become weary with frustration. This information confirms that culturally responsive teaching is challenging and it supports the data that shows educators of color face opposition and discrimination from White students. However, it also demonstrates that White culturally responsive educators face some challenges that are specific to them.

Instructors that are charged with creating courses on culturally responsive teaching or other matters of diversity in education should first critically examine themselves, their curriculum, and the needs of their learners in designing a class. As the data demonstrated, a course that is intended to create meaningful learning experiences and which targets the learners’ internal motivating factors has a great chance of keeping the students actively engaged in the learning process and can lead to academic success.

Moreover, there is a strong need for culturally responsive educators to garner support from administration. Administrative support is essential so that cultural responsiveness could become systemic and replace hegemonic structures that are pervasive in university systems. In order to impact professors who are or want to be culturally responsive educators, faculty developers should create a program designed to enhance professors’ internal or altruistic motivations. The research has demonstrated that external motivators may work temporarily with professors who do not want to adopt culturally responsive teaching; however, the data demonstrated that those striving to be culturally responsive are driven by internal factors. Faculty developers should use assessments to ascertain the motivations of the faculty and then create professional development sessions designed to target those motivations.

White educators who struggle with the challenges of being culturally responsive or simply
struggle with understanding the complexities of Whiteness should join or create a support group or an ongoing learning community. A variety of scholars have argued for the need of similar people to gather for confirmation, stability, safety and encouragement. Due to the emotional and academic challenges that culturally responsive educators face, collaboration with like-minded peers would not only encourage them to persist, but it would also promote culturally responsive pedagogy among other colleagues. Peer support and encouragement are vital due to the toll cultural awareness takes on the educators’ emotions and way of life.

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