

Meeting the Needs of the Diverse Learners in a Charter School in North Carolina

Kimberly M. Jones-Goods, Ph.D.

North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University
College of Arts & Sciences
Department of Liberal Studies
1601 E. Market Street, Greensboro, NC, 27411, USA.

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the culturally responsive teaching and learning practices at a K-12 public charter school in North Carolina. The major goals of the study were to explore (1) the effective culturally responsive teaching and learning practices implemented in a classroom in a charter school in North Carolina (2) the way teachers analyze their own sociocultural experiences in order to remove cultural biases from their classroom in a charter school in North Carolina and (3) the ways in which teachers create an educational environment that is inclusive of all students in a charter school in North Carolina? The findings of this research study do not provide an educational model or program for public, charter, or private schools to generate culturally relevant or culturally responsive practices. The findings do support the research that teaching in a culturally responsive way is a moral and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: Diverse learners, charter school, teachers' perceptions, culturally responsive teaching and learning practices

Introduction

The American public education system is undergoing massive challenges because of its increasingly multicultural and diverse socio-economic student population. The cultural diversity of America's schools has increased dramatically and will increase even more in the future. One-third of all students currently in public schools are culturally and linguistically diverse; by the year 2035, children of color will represent the statistical majority; by 2050 they will make up 57% of all students; and by 2050 Whites will no longer be the majority population in America (Nieto & Bode, 2012). These statistics are problematic because the majority of American students are being taught by mostly Euro-American female teachers (Trent, Hoffman-Kipp, & Lopez-Torres, 2000). Although the diversity in the student population has rapidly increased White teachers continue to make up the majority of the teaching profession. White educators possess very limited intercultural experiences to bring into the classroom that will provide students with the knowledge and skills to become academically successful (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001). The increasing cultural diversity of students requires a reconsideration of what an effective culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies looks like at a K-12 charter school in North Carolina.

In this study, the culturally responsive teaching and learning experiences of teachers in a charter school in North Carolina were analyzed. Today, all schools face an increase in the population of racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse students while continuing to adoption the traditional eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy. Charter schools, like traditional public schools, struggle with meeting the needs of their racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse student populations. Sheridan (2006) stated there is a cultural gap in many of the nation's schools as a growing number of educators strive to better serve students from cultures other than their own.

Research on culturally responsive teaching tends to focus on regular public schools. Sleeter (2012) emphasized the need to educate parents, teachers, and educational leaders about what cultural responsiveness means and looks like in the classroom. Research into the teaching practices of charter school teachers is minimal and the topic requires more investigation.

This research will bridge the research gap by focusing on the teaching and learning experiences of teachers at a selected public charter school in North Carolina that has a student body of 50% African American, 49% Hispanic and 1% that categorized themselves as biracial or more than one race. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are effective culturally responsive teaching and learning practices in a classroom in a charter school in North Carolina?
2. What ways do teachers analysis their own sociocultural experiences in order to remove cultural biases from their classroom in a charter school in North Carolina?
3. What are the ways in which teachers create an educational environment that is inclusive of all students in a charter school in North Carolina?

Context of the Study

Charter schools and schools of choice were a part of a larger school reform of the 1980s and were created to meet the specific needs of students. In order to address the issue of traditional public schools underserving a racially and ethnically diverse student population, some reformists looked to the creation of charter schools as the answer (Anyon, 2005; Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Payne & Knowles, 2009). Finn, Manno, Bierlein Palmer, and Vanourek (1997) reported:

[Charter schools] respond to frustrations, demands, and dreams that the regular system - for whatever reason - is not satisfying. In that sense, they are consumer oriented, and their consumers include parents, voters, taxpayers, elected officials, employers, and other community representatives (p. 488),

Charter schools were originally designed to provide choice and a competitive pedagogical edge for public schools (EdSource, 2013). As a result, charters are not bound by many regulations that apply to traditional public schools (EdSource, 2013). This freedom may give insight into the overwhelming interest in charter schools, as 32 of the 37 states that adopted charter school legislation by 1999 report over 2,000 of them remain in operation and are attended by roughly half a million students (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). Although the effectiveness of charter schools remains undetermined, these entities are as popular as they are contentious and operationally complex (Russo, 2013). Charter school proponents contend the competitive pedagogical edge and choice offered by these schools will force traditional public schools to improve the quality of curriculum and feel this can be done through revolution and equity. Charter school detractors are apprehensive that charter schools could not only cause racial and economic segregation, but reduce resources that would otherwise be available to traditional public schools (Ertas, 2007). Charter schools are categorized as “semi-private” choice programs that are “neither clearly public nor clearly private” (Metcalf, Muller, & Legan, 2001, p. 4). Additionally, they have been characterized as “quasi-public schools” that straddle the boundary between public and private settings as they are operated by parents, community leaders, educators, and a host of others (Vergari, 1999, p. 389; Witte, 1996, p. 161).

The current study was conducted in a charter school in North Carolina. The concept and first use of the term *charter* originated with a professor named Ray Budde in a conference paper presented in 1974 and later published in 1988 that suggested schools could conceivably create their goals and set their own policies. Small groups of teachers, Budde asserted, could be given contracts or “charters” by their local school boards to explore innovative pedagogical techniques (Connor, 2011; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). This concept was further expanded by the American Federation of Teachers president, Albert Shanker, in the late 1980s (Vergari, 1999). The first public charter school legislation was not introduced until 1991 in Michigan (Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2013).

Charter schools in North Carolina. The history of the North Carolina charter school movement dates back to 1996 when the General Assembly approved the Charter School Act (CSA) which allowed any individual or organization to apply for a school charter. Once the charter legislation passed in North Carolina, thousands of parents withdrew their children from traditional public schools and enrolled them in charter schools because they believed their children would be better served in a new, innovative environment (Lewis, 2009).

North Carolina’s first charter school opened in the 1997-1998 school year (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; F. Brown, 1999; McNiff & Hassel, 2002). North Carolina’s original charter school legislation included a provision that capped the number of charter schools authorized by the North Carolina State Board of Education at 100 (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; F. Brown, 1999; McNiff & Hassel, 2002). The charter school cap has since been lifted.

Critics envisioned that charter schools would lead to “cream skimming” and elitism but did not account for the Black and Hispanic flight from traditional public schools. Charter school students were expected to be the White, bright, and economically advantaged (Vergari, 1999). However, many racially and ethnically diverse parents who were dissatisfied with the traditional public school methodology of instruction chose charters as a means of providing an alternative to learning for their children. According to data from the National Study of Charter Schools from 1996-1998, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, on average, charter schools enroll a larger percentage (22%) of Black students than all public schools (16%; Vergari, 1999). The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2013) at Stanford University published the National Charter School Study in which the executive summary reported that since 2009 the proportion of Hispanic students in charters has begun to approach the proportion of Black students. Charter schools enroll a lower percentage of White and Hispanic students and a higher percentage of Black students (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). North Carolina charter schools tend to follow the national trend of enrolling a higher percentage of Black students than in traditional public schools (Noblit & Corbett, 2001). The percentage of Black students in North Carolina charter schools (48%) is disproportionately higher than the percentage of Black students in North Carolina public schools statewide (31%; Noblit & Corbett, 2001). The appeal of charter schools could be linked to the fact that these schools are allotted a certain degree of flexibility because they are not held to the state laws that govern local school districts (Dunklee & Shoop, 2006). Supporters of these types of schools are quick to point to the flexibility that enables these schools to be more innovative when it comes to addressing the needs of students (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005).

According to NC Senate Bill 8/S.L. 2011-164, North Carolina limited the number of charter schools that could operate in the state to 100 until 2011 when the General Assembly lifted the cap. Currently, the law allows for varying levels of teacher certification at charter schools. The previous bill required at least 75% of teachers to be certified in kindergarten through fifth grade and at least 50% in Grades 6 through 12. NC Senate Bill 337 removed those requirements and now requires at least 50% of charter school teachers in North Carolina to be certified. NC Senate Bill 337 also requires that charter schools reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition in the area in which the school is located.

Theoretical Framework

Since this study is focused on the teachers' perception of culturally responsive teaching and learning experiences in a racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse charter school, Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory was utilized as the basic framework for the study. According to Vygotsky's (1978) the constructivist framework holds that effective learning unfolds in the direction of culturally appropriate practices. In order to provide an ideal learning environment, children should be allowed to construct knowledge that is meaningful for them. There must be a connection with what is learned and students' own culture. This is important, as educators are facing even greater pressures for students to succeed.

Method

The participants for this phenomenological study consisted of six (6) teachers from a K-12 public charter school in North Carolina (Table 1). Creswell (2014b) suggests a sample size of 5-25 participants in order for the results to be valid. All participants consented to participate in the focus groups. Creswell (2014a, p. 4) stated that qualitative research is an inquiry approach in which the inquirer: (a) explores a central phenomenon, in this case culturally responsive teaching and learning; (b) asks participants broad, general questions starting with how or what; (c) collects detailed views of participants in the form of words or images; (d) analyzes and codes the data for description and themes; (e) interprets the meaning of the information by drawing on personal reflections; and (f) writes the final study report that includes person biases and a flexible structure.

Three semi-structured focus group interviews were used to collect information on the perception of culturally responsive teaching and learning in a K-12 public charter school in North Carolina. The interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes and took place at the school site. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes. Transcripts were coded for themes and edited in order to focus on discussion and statements that directly related to the teachers' perception of culturally responsive teaching and learning. Member checking enabled each participant to review, check, and confirm the narrative data to provide measures of validity and reliability.

The selection of teachers was based on a convenience sample. Creswell (2014) outlines a convenience sample as one in which respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability (p. 158). The study site was a K-12 charter school located in North Carolina that was selected based upon specific criteria.

The first criterion was a charter school. The next criterion was the school needed to have a participant pool that was actively interested in addressing cultural responsiveness for the purposes of evaluating their progress toward the goal of increasing the achievement of all students.

The name of the school was altered to give anonymity to the school, leadership staff, students, parents, and the larger school community and as a condition of mutual agreement with the school. For the purposes of this study, the school name was changed to the Culturally Responsive Charter School (CRC). The school has an approximate student population of 500 racially and ethnically diverse students in grades K-12. The student population self reported at 49% African American, 49% Hispanic, and 1% bi or multiracial.

The school has a multiracial and credentialed staff. Twenty-nine percent of the teaching staff have 0 to 3 years of teaching experience, 48% of the teaching staff have 10 or more years of teaching experience, and 23% of the teaching staff have 4 to 9 years of teaching experience. Over 50% of the teaching staff have or were working toward a master's degree and less than 1% were working toward a doctorate.

The analyses of the data showed that 50% of the participants were female and 50%. About 33% of the participants were of Hispanic descent, 67% were African American, or African descent (Table 1). When asked to demonstrate their understanding of effective culturally responsive teaching and learning in the classroom: Teacher B stated: "Effective teaching is when racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse students actively engage in learning and are successful with it because I've decided to do the morally and ethically correct thing and make learning relevant to them." Teachers become culturally competent when they understand how race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, residential status, and cultural experience influence student behavior, performance, and climate (McKinley, 2010).

When asked to describe the ways teachers analyze their own sociocultural experiences in order to remove cultural biases from their classroom in a charter school in North Carolina? A participant expressed the importance of understanding her own culture and that of her students. While transitioning from her native country to the United States she had an admitted difficulty in connecting with American students. Building relationships among students became a priority, but had to be done in a manner that the students would not believe to be superficial. Teacher C stated that developing knowledge about the cultures within the classroom was not simply a learning-based activity. It was important to explore their lifestyles, cultural beliefs, what they ate, and their language. Even an activity such as eating lunch together was used as an opportunity to engage students in culturally-based conversations. All participants stated that as a result of exploring students' cultures, many of the misunderstandings he had disappeared. Teacher C further stated, "The students bring to school with them the stereotypes and misconceptions that their cultures portray onto each other. As the teacher, if we are going to use the most effective strategies in order to teach them, we must educate ourselves about their culture, especially if the research says that being culturally responsive is the most beneficial thing that we can do."

When asked how important it was to create an educational environment that is inclusive of all students, Teacher B discussed the importance of not relying on prior knowledge and experiences with African American and Hispanic cultures because these experiences were not typically representative and did not necessarily match the lives and experiences of the students. The culturally responsive teacher helps students consider that they can maintain high standards of excellence without compromising their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). A major value that is shared by the participants is that "in order to meet the educational needs of children, they must first be able to understand the social, cultural and political experiences of the child." Several participants echoed these sentiments and one stated:

If they [students] don't see this type of investment in their culture. They feel that these experiences are absent or ignored.

Teachers need to know more about the home lives of the children they teach in order to offer the best opportunities for learning (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Cultural responsiveness requires that teachers create a learning environment where all students feel welcomed and supported and are provided with the best opportunities to learn regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Banks, 2013). A participant reflected on this and said:

I want my students to be participants in their learning so if that means that I have to put in extra time to find content and materials that are relevant and engaging to my students, then that is what I do. The first question when creating a lesson is: "Will this lesson meet the expectations of cultural responsiveness?" Am perpetuating the traditional eurocentric curriculum and teaching strategies, although I know that is not what works effectively to meet the needs of my students? At the end of the day I can say with a clear conscience that I am not! The teacher participants in the study all stated they had a desire to be culturally responsive because it was in the best interests of their students.

Conclusion

The study findings suggested that teachers need to fit their teaching styles to meet the academic needs of all students (Banks, 2013). Students will benefit more when teachers are responsive and in tune with who they are and what they need in order to succeed in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Teaching techniques should ideally be congruent with various cultural and ethnic learning styles and emphasis must be placed on student attitudes about race and how teaching can be used as a way to change these attitudes (Banks, 2013).

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Table 1. Participant Demographics

ID#	Racial/Ethnic Identity & Gender	Education	Position at CRC	Years of Teaching Experience	Years worked at CRC
A	M Venezuelan	Master's School License	ESOL Director LEP Teacher	17	6
B	F Black	Master's in Counseling	Student Services Director	17	17
C	F South African	Master's in Education	English Teacher grades 9-12 Teacher Leader	12	5
D	M Black	Master's in Education	Exceptional Children's Teacher (K-12)	5	5
E	M Black	Master's in Education	English Teacher High School, Grades 9-12	6	6
F	F Columbian	Master's in Education	Teacher Middle School, Grades 6-8	14	5