Three Principles for Culturally Relevant Teaching

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This week we are hearing from the Multnomah County Partnership for Education Research (MCPER). This post is by MCPER Co-Directors Nicole Ralston, Assistant Professor at the University of Portland (UPortland), and Jacqueline Waggoner, Professor at the University of Portland. Today’s post is written from the researcher perspective. Stay tuned: Thursday we will share the practitioner’s perspective on this research.

Why this Research

While our schools are becoming increasingly diverse, with the numbers of students of color in our schools continuing to grow, the number of teachers of color in our schools has remained stagnant, making up less than 20% of the teacher workforce.

Similar to the national outlook, in David Douglas School District specifically, approximately 39% of the students are White while 90% of the teachers are White. A district of around 10,000 students, 76% of whom are economically disadvantaged and 45% of whom are English Language Learners, this district has seen the student demographics change significantly over the past decade — in 2004, 65% of the student population was White.

While recruiting and retaining teachers of color is a top priority in David Douglas, the district could not wait for the demographics of staff to catch up to the demographics of students. In keeping with the district’s mission of Learn, Grow, Thrive, they wanted to know how to make the educational experiences for their diverse students even better — starting now.

What the Research Examines

David Douglas posed this problem of practice in one of their routine partnership meetings with the Multnomah County Partnership for Education Research (MCPER). MCPER is located at the University of Portland, and is a research-practice partnership between Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), the School of Education at the University of Portland, and the six public school districts in Multnomah County, including David Douglas. Knowing the promising research base on culturally relevant pedagogy, this was where the district wanted to start. Together, the partnership entities began investigating culturally relevant pedagogy and what specific practices might be most high-leverage to meet the academic needs of the changing demographics in David Douglas. What the district needed was a comprehensive literature review of research on culturally relevant pedagogy, and a summary of best practices emerging from that review of research.

What the Research Finds

Our lit review identified themes and actionable suggestions for educators across research on culturally relevant pedagogy. Consistently across the growing research base, culturally relevant pedagogy stresses building relationships and community in the classroom. Students need to know and feel that their teachers care and understand them. Students engage more and respond more positively in classrooms when they believe teachers demonstrate care and provide a relevant and effective learning environment. Teacher’s knowledge of cultural diversity, including integrating ethnically and culturally relevant content in the curriculum, and delivering the instruction in an understanding way, are imperative to students’ academic success.

To accomplish this, our lit review identified the following research-based strategies for teachers:

- Gain an understanding of cultural differences that impact the lives and learning of students. Seek to understand these differences and reflect on how one’s own differences impact teaching and learning. It is important to talk about race and associated differences in order to make connections with students of color. When this is absent, it interferes with building trusting relationships, as students may believe their teachers do not understand them.
- Walk into the neighborhood where students live, striving to see the strengths of these communities. Immersion into the culture and the communities where students of color live is critical for the acquisition of cultural-responsiveness skills. The benefits of this experience include exposure to varied cultural backgrounds, family structures, interpersonal relationship styles, and perspectives on discipline, time, traditions, and holidays.
- Value students’ culture, heritage, and experiences. Bring this information to life in the classroom! Shape curricula around your students and reflect on course materials, texts, and practices to ensure cultural relevance with diverse groups of students. This helps make positive connections with students and increase student engagement. Student self-esteem and self-confidence also improve.
Implications for Practice

Instruction is more effective when teachers develop a knowledge base about cultural diversity and include ethnically and culturally diverse content in the curriculum. Teachers are more effective when they communicate that they care and when they focus on building relationships with students, families, and the school-community. Additionally, student engagement, teacher effectiveness, and student outcomes can improve when teachers are able to respond to ethnically diverse students and their differences with varied instructional and behavioral approaches that match the culture (see here, here, and here).

The literature review discovered that culturally responsive teaching overwhelmingly can help strengthen student-teacher relationships and improve student achievement. While these results were not necessarily surprising to the district, they reinforced existing efforts, opened an avenue for more rich discussions, and lead to the development of future action items. The district is starting to implement new initiatives and has many ideas for the coming school year as a result of the findings of this work. Come back for Thursday's blog post to hear more from David Douglas Curriculum Director Brooke O'Neill.

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