Strategies for Cultural Awareness of Teachers in Training: An Action Research Project

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Abstract

Using an action research model six graduate students examined their own cultural awareness during a semester-long field experience course in special education. The instructor of the course facilitated the study as lead researcher. The students were all credentialed teachers in local schools. These teacher-researchers examined and reflected on their own culture and the culture of their students. They developed and taught a five-day unit and completed a teacher work sample while studying culturally responsive teaching strategies. At the conclusion of their field experiences the teacher researchers responded to a series of questions with prompts regarding (a) their cultural awareness and demonstration of cultural competence, (b) the use of student-centered planning and instruction, and (c) the use of a variety of strategies representative of culturally responsive teaching. From themes identified in their responses a checklist of culturally responsive teaching strategies will be developed for future teacher-researchers taking the field experience course. Culturally responsive teaching is based on Vygotsky’s socio cultural theory that suggests that learning is mediated through culturally meaningful activities.

Keywords: Special education, teacher education, culturally responsive teaching, action research, teacher research

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 Characteristics of students’ communities, families, schools, and the unique characteristics of the students themselves represent key cultural contexts that can lead to effective culturally responsive instructional planning and assessment. With the ever increasing diversity of race, ethnicity, language, and abilities of student populations in public schools it is not surprising that current literature reflects this need (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Shealey & Callins, 2007; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Therefore it is essential that teacher education programs prepare future teachers to become culturally responsive and to be able to make instructional decisions based on their own cultural self-awareness and sensitivity to other cultures.

 Culturally responsive teaching is based on Vygotsky’s socio cultural theory that learning is socially mediated and occurs when students participate in culturally meaningful activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as

acknowledging and understanding the influences of race, culture, and ethnicity in teaching and learning, and using the cultural experiences, perspectives, traits, and contributions of different ethnic groups as instrumental tools for teaching academic and social knowledge, values, and skills to diverse students (p. 619).

She believes that it is critical for teachers to become mindful of their own cultural socialization, and how it affects their attitudes and behaviors toward other cultures.

 In this action research study, six graduate students in a special education program reflected and reported on their growth in understanding culturally responsive teaching practices and their own cultural awareness and sensitivity to other cultures during a capstone course of their field experiences. The six students will be referred to as teacher-researchers for the remainder of this paper. All six teacher-researchers taught in local schools as special educators or general educators. As a culminating aspect of their action research project the teacher-researchers responded to a series of questions regarding (a) their cultural awareness and demonstration of cultural competence, (b) the use of student-centered planning and instruction, and (c) the use of a variety of strategies representative of culturally responsive teaching.
Action research methodology provides an excellent tool for general and special educators with a practical yet systematic research method to investigate their own teaching and their students’ learning in and outside the classroom. It is also a valuable tool for both teacher-educators and K-12 educators to gain access to contexts, people, and knowledge. Teacher-educators may use this non-traditional research method as a model for their students so that as new teachers the candidates are able to study and analyze classroom practice to develop a deeper understanding or a plan for action or change (Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007). In this case, the instructor modeled the action research process for the teacher-researchers.

Pine (2010) defines action research as a process that concurrently involves inquiry into a problem while taking action to solve the problem through a recursive, nonlinear cycle of questioning, planning, and acting, observing, and reflecting. He believes that action research can make a meaningful difference in the lives of teachers and their students with special needs as it is rooted in a concern for social justice. The teacher-researchers engaged in a recursive cycle of questioning, planning, acting, and reflecting throughout the semester. They received instruction on culturally-responsive teaching (Campbell-Whatley & Key 2004; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008) and discussed what experiences contributed to their growth in cultural competence.

Method

Participants

Six teacher-researchers and the course instructor participated in the action research project. All six teacher-researchers were female, four were African-American, one was Caucasian and one was Chinese-Mexican American. Each of the teacher researchers taught in a public school in the region. The course instructor who was a female Caucasian acted as lead action researcher.

Procedure

The classroom settings of the participants varied. Three settings were in elementary schools: One was a special education tutorial class for students in inclusive classrooms, another a special education self-contained class for students with moderate disabilities, and the third, a special education self-contained class for students with multiple disabilities. Three settings were in middle schools: One was a general education math class, another a special education tutorial class for students in inclusive classrooms, and the third a special education resource language arts class for students with mild-moderate disabilities,
The lead researcher met with the teacher-researchers once a week for 8 weeks. The teacher-researchers received instructional materials and lectures on culturally responsive teaching (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Kuykendall, 2008; Kea & Campbell, 2004; Shealey & Callins, 2007; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Participants developed a special education teacher work sample and a unit of five-day lesson plans. During field experiences the lead researcher observed each student teacher implement her unit and gave her feedback at least 3 times. Much of the feedback centered on culturally responsive teaching. At the conclusion of the field experiences, the teacher-researchers completed a structured questionnaire that included a description of culturally responsive teaching and topics with associated prompts (see Appendix).

The instructor asked to the teacher-researchers to respond in writing to the questions within each topic. They were reminded that action research involves a recursive, nonlinear process and not to worry about getting correct answers. The series of questions were based on the instructional materials presented throughout the semester and during lectures in the initial class meetings. The series contained the topic headings on cultural competence, student-centered instructional planning, bringing the community into the classroom, strategies for climate and grouping, and suggestions for school-level cultural competence. The written responses of the six questionnaires became the data sets.

**Results**

The instructor (lead researcher) looked for patterns across the six data sets and coded items from the teacher-researchers’ written responses to questions regarding their cultural awareness and culturally-responsive practices. Two themes were identified from their responses: (a) Awareness and competence and (b) culturally valued knowledge. Each of the teacher-researchers wrote about their growth in cultural awareness and sensitivity. They indicated that they experienced an increasing awareness of the similarities and differences between their students and themselves as they gained a deeper understanding of their roles as culturally responsive teachers. They related their ability to infuse student-centered strategies based on culturally valued knowledge in their initial lesson plans or in their revised lesson plans. Their abilities increased as they focused on the contextual factors of their students’ communities, schools, classrooms and the unique characteristics of their students.

**Awareness and competence:** The first theme generated from the data was awareness and competence. This theme emerged from the first and second topics on the questionnaire: ‘Cultural Competence’ and ‘Demonstrating Cultural Competence’. The topics were adapted from the works of Cartledge and Kourea (2008) and Gay (2002). Other potential themes were noted in the data but these
two topics were most prevalent. The instructor asked the teacher-researchers to write about how they had grown during the semester in terms of their cultural competence and how they demonstrated that competence through their instruction and assessment. Teacher-researchers were asked to reflect on how their own culture was similar or different from their students. If they responded that they did not have a feel for cultural competence during this process, she asked what steps they could take to increase their competence and infuse it into their future interactions and instruction and assessment.

Cartledge and Kourea (2008) point to the cultural competency of teachers as a factor in creating culturally responsive classrooms for students with disabilities. Cultural competence involves an understanding of one’s own culture as well as the culture of one’s students. It is also the understanding that our judgments of students are filtered through our own beliefs and biases (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). The teacher-researchers also learned that teachers who lack sensitivity to cultural differences may misinterpret the behavior of students which can lead to underestimating the academic potential of their students (DSU Student Teacher Assessment Instrument, 1998).

Teacher researcher # 1 is an elementary general education teacher who is African American. She teaches in a school with a population that is 99% African American. She wrote the following about cultural sensitivity: Her appraisal of her awareness and competence is related in the following:

In the future before I judge students for acting inappropriately I will review their behavior within their cultural context. When I was teaching my unit I had a little boy who was aggressive and liked to start fights. None of the faculty understood why he behaved in this manner. After reading the prompt (Promote student engagement to counteract cultural dissonance, i.e., teacher beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling are at times incompatible with the beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling of students from racial/ethnic minorities).

After reading these prompts I am going to see how his home life plays a role in his behavior. He does not care about school. I feel that this may be because his mother does not show any interest in his school work. When the teacher schedules a conference she never comes. She never checks up on him at school. The child sees that no one at home cares so he has also taken on the attitude not to care.

Teacher researcher # 2 is an elementary special education inclusion teacher who is African American. She teaches in a school with a population that is 99% African American. She wrote the following about cultural diversity:
I have grown in many ways. I now look at cultural diversity in a much clearer glass than before. I was looking at diversity as if it was in a closed box. Diversity extends beyond race and gender. It also covers religion, socioeconomic status, disabilities, sexual orientation, etc. Many of these differences and similarities are seen among my students and me. The ways my students and I are similar include race and religion. We are all black and we are all Christians. We are different because most of my students have experienced a high dosage of poverty.

Teacher researcher # 3 is African American teaches in a self-contained class for elementary-age students with severe and multiple disabilities including several children who were medically fragile. She teaches in a school with a population that is 98% African American. She wrote:

My students and I share very similar cultural backgrounds. All of my students come from low income working class African American backgrounds just as I do. We share the same religious beliefs and live in similar communities. Of course, there is one major difference. All of my students have disabilities. It is hard for me to articulate the difficulty they face every day as a result of their differences.

Teacher researcher # 4 is a middle school resource teacher who is Chinese-Mexican American. She teaches in a school with a population that is 68% African American. She wrote the following about cultural competence:

At the beginning of the semester I was confident in my cultural competence. Yet, as the semester progressed I was required to reflect on the depth of my cultural competence and meeting diverse cultural needs within my classroom, I realized that my cultural competence was not as broad as I had believed. The realization that I had helped my knowledge of culture and the incorporation of culturally diverse teaching grow because it made me more mindful of incorporating cultural acceptance in my classroom.

Teacher researcher # 5 is a middle school special education inclusion teacher who is Caucasian. She teaches in a school with a population that is 97% African American. She wrote the following about cultural competence:

I believe I have become much more competent this semester of the cultural aspects of my teaching. Before hand, I always just did and never realized that at the same time I was addressing cultural diversity through my teaching. This semester has made me much more aware of the cultural
aspects that I place into my teaching in order to address the interests and need of my students.

Teacher researcher #6 is a middle school general education teacher who is African American. The school she teaches in is 98% African American. She echoed her classmates’ responses that she shared family traditions and her race with her students. She also noted the rural aspect of our region and the high rate of poverty.

**Culturally valued knowledge:** The second theme from the data is culturally valued knowledge which encompassed the topics of “Student-centered instructional planning,” “Bringing the community into the classroom,” “Strategies for climate and groupings,” and “Suggestions for school-level cultural competence.” For the topics “Student-Centered Instructional Planning” and “Bring the Community into the Classroom,” the instructor asked the candidates to address sets of strategies that encouraged active learning and student-control during the lesson which also involved the integration of students' strengths, interests, cultures, and styles. These strategies were adapted from the studies of Campbell-Whatley and Key (2004) and Shealey and Callins (2007).

The instructor found a pattern in the data that suggested the common factor of the majority of the strategies the teachers employed involved the use of prior knowledge that their students valued. This pattern underlines the teacher researchers’ emerging understanding that a context for learning is a cultural context (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Shealey & Callins, 2007). When the characteristics of students’ communities, families, and schools, and unique characteristics of the students themselves are recognized by teachers as cultural contexts, the characteristics become the keys to effective and culturally responsive instructional planning and assessment.

Teacher researcher #1 gave an example of a student-centered strategy: During discussions the students were allowed to share personal beliefs and experiences that related to the lesson. S.D. told a story about when she went on vacation. The purpose of the story was to describe the beach she visited and to describe how she felt. While sharing the story she was informing the class of some of her family’s traditions such as going on family trips every summer.

Teacher researcher #4 gave an example of embedding student interest in instruction:

After pinpointing my general goal and writing objectives reflecting the goal, I then reflected on my students’ interests, culture, and learning styles...
to make the unit as accessible and interesting as I could. Through working with my students throughout the year, I know where their interests lie. My students are very competitive, they enjoy sports, they enjoy working socially, and they enjoy hands-on artistic activities. Before I began my lesson, I administered a learning style inventory so that I knew exactly what ways my students learned best. I used all of this knowledge to meet their general needs as a class and each student’s individual needs.

Teacher researcher # 5 used the students’ interests and culture throughout her unit with the use of pictures of cars in compare and contrast, and Barack Obama paragraph in the main idea section.

While teaching my unit I attempted to incorporate diverse cultural material within my lessons and activities. I used real-life pictures of people from differing ethnicities. I made group activities in which different cultures both ancient and present were discussed and traits were used to identify cultures. I also incorporated pop culture that my students are familiar with within sentences I used as examples and on activity sheets such as Cheetos, Renovo, Lil’ Wayne, and Rock of Love.

Several teachers noted that they began to embed student interests and backgrounds into assessments. One teacher researcher stated that she re-evaluated tests when many students missed the same question. She wrote that often students missed the question because they were not familiar with some cultural inference of the question. She gave the example:

When I gave a test on drawing conclusions I had clues in a paragraph about being at a hockey game. A lot of the students missed this question because they did not know anything about hockey. I realized that I should have thought about what the students have been exposed to from living in the Delta. Now I try to make sure the students can relate to stories they are reading on tests.

Several teacher-researchers wrote that they did not fully use the strategies under these topics.

I have not used any of this yet but in the future I will bring in different people to the class as resource persons that student might be able to connect with. I will try to search out people that are different that might share certain qualities as my students. At this age level, students need role models. It helps to show them they are connected in some ways to other people.
My students completed several activities during each lesson. I made sure they were totally involved in each activity whether working individually or in small groups. I did not take it to the next step like I should have; however, if I were to re-teach this unit the instruction that I will present will be characterized by using cultural questions, social gatherings, culturally valued knowledge. There was an instance in one lesson where we discussed another culture’s perspective. We discussed cultures beliefs.

However one teacher researcher did respond to the prompt under Bringing the community into the classroom, “Promote student engagement to counteract cultural dissonance, i.e., teacher beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling are at times incompatible with the beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling of students from racial/ethnic minorities.”

When I first started observing the students that I would be teaching there was a Hispanic girl in the class. Every time I would talk to her she would look down. She never made eye contact with me. One day I asked her why she never looked at me when I was talking to her. She responded by telling me in her culture looking someone in the eye when they are talking is disrespectful. I told her that I was not aware of that aspect of the Mexican culture. After she informed me of this behavior I noticed that the other Mexican students at the school never looked the teacher in the eyes when the teacher was talking to them.

The topic of “Strategies for climate and groupings” contains strategies adapted from the works of Trent, Kea, and Oh (2008). The teacher researchers wrote the following responses:

I used flexible grouping throughout the unit. I always had students in pairs, groups of three, or other grouping strategies. At times, I placed the students into groups and at other times I allowed them to choose their groups. All these different grouping strategies allowed for students to have different learning opportunities with different partners.

My classroom is created to make students feel comfortable and safe. They are recognized for their talents and treated with respect. I do not tolerate bullying, teasing, or any other put-down in my classroom. When students work in groups, they allow each member to share what they have to say without criticizing or complaining.

I have established my classroom in a way that my students feel they are capable of learning and are driven to learn. I have done so by proactive behavior management strategies and never letting my voice raise about a
talking level. I also keep myself mindful of giving abundant positive feedback and allowing my students to share their work with the class. This helps my students feel proud of their work and what they have accomplished. During my unit, at the end of each lesson, I allowed my student to pick a piece of work they were most proud of for the day and share it with the class and tell why they were proud of what they had done.

The last set of prompts came under the topic of “Suggestions for school-level cultural competence” which were mainly derived from the works of Shealey and Callins (2007). In an earlier quote one teacher researcher emphasized that in her future planning and instruction she would keep this particular prompt in mind, “Teachers and other school personnel must increase in their understanding of the integral relationship between culture and social behavior and the need to view students’ behaviors within a cultural context” (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Also under this topic for the prompt, “It may be necessary to develop ways for teachers and schools to emphasize student success based on respect and belief in capability” two teacher researchers wrote:

My students see my sign daily stating all students can learn and they also know that we have NO limitations in this classroom. Our district does however need to develop ways to stress student success and belief in capability.

If we teach students to be respectful of others’ values, interests, likes and dislikes then this will also help each of the students be content with what they are capable of doing. During my unit even before this unit, I often stressed to my students that being respectful of each other and others’ interests was the first step to success. I often stressed that once they have learned to respect and accept each other they will be introduced to learning in a broader way. Also once students learn that they are capable of understanding and comprehending more than they put forth then they will also be more successful than they would be if they did not consider their capabilities.

Discussion

The lead researcher in this action research study drew several conclusions based on the patterns found in the teacher-researchers’ responses to the series of questions with prompts about culturally-responsive teaching practices. Two basic themes were identified: (a) Cultural competence and awareness and (b) culturally valued knowledge. The teacher-researchers wrote in detail about their growth in cultural awareness and competence. They also wrote about how they used culturally-valued knowledge through student-centered planning and strategies for creating nurturing classroom climates and using flexible groupings. Their writings
indicated that they came to understand a context for learning as a cultural context at individual, classroom, and school-wide levels.

Through examples of cultural awareness and competence the teacher researchers voiced the opinion that until the semester of the course they had not given much thought of being culturally responsive. Once they became aware of their own and their students’ cultural diversity they wanted to implement a more responsive method through directions, language, assessments, and class discussions. They wrote that they explained scenarios or gave examples making sure that all of their students could relate to them. They wrote of becoming more flexible to student needs, realizing that lessons do not always have to go as planned in order for them to be successful. In addition, they cited instances of being aware that their judgments of students filtered through their own beliefs and biases.

Most of the teacher researchers saw similarities with their students’ cultures through the rural aspect of the region and through family traditions and in three instances, race. Socio-economics represented the primary difference noted by the teacher researchers other than the three instances of differing races. One other difference noted by one of the teacher researcher involved the fact that she was not disabled while her students’ disabilities severely impacted their lives.

The second theme, culturally valued knowledge, appeared to be easily grasped by the teacher-researchers over the topics of student-centered planning and culturally responsive teaching strategies for students, classrooms, and schools. Teacher researchers wrote either about currently using or planning to use student-centered instructional planning. They wrote of ensuring that all students are actively engaged in the lesson and creating lessons that are interesting and fun for students. Student strengths and weaknesses were taken into account when planning lessons so that all students experienced some level of success.

All of the teacher-researchers noted they wanted classroom and school climates in which students feel safe and want to learn. They wanted also to use flexible groupings patterns in classrooms to encourage student interaction and support cooperative learning which is culturally responsive. When going over lessons or having discussions in class, teacher-researchers related that they connected the lesson as much as possible to the students’ lives. They realized that culturally responsive teaching involves strategies based on specific information from their students’ community, school, and classrooms as well as the specific information on students unique to the students themselves.

Several strategies under the theme of culturally valued knowledge were not addressed by all or most of the teacher-researchers, but it is important to note them as needing more attention in future studies. It is necessary that teachers understand
how they can promote student engagement to counteract cultural dissonance. Through understanding student behavior by understanding the student’s culture teachers can bring a balanced perspective to their teaching and into their classrooms. Additional strategies to support this one are the promotion of student-controlled discourse and at the school level, the promotion of cross-cultural competency and inter-group understanding in the classroom and community. In future studies these concepts will be made more transparent through lectures and readings.

This action research study on cultural awareness is part of an on-going cycle that takes place in a capstone field experience course in special education. Initially the lead researcher developed questions and prompts about culturally responsive teaching strategies taken from current literature. After considering the patterns found in the teacher-researchers’ writings in this study that list of questions and prompts will be recast into items for a checklist of culturally responsive teaching strategies. The checklist items will be composed of the strategies that can be readily understood and easily used by teacher researchers participating in future studies. The checklist will be revised and updated through reviews of the literature and the reflections of teacher researchers to come. Although terms such as culturally responsive teaching may change teacher preparation will continue to involve cultural self-awareness and sensitivity to other cultures made evident through effective instructional practices.

References


Appendix

The structured questionnaire used in the study includes a description of culturally responsive teaching and topics with associated prompts.

Please respond to the following questions inserted under each topic. If any question isn’t clear to you, attempt to clarify it for yourself and answer it accordingly. Action research involves this very generative, iterative process. Keep your answers brief but concise and specific.

Cultural Competence
How have you grown during this semester in terms of your cultural competence? How is your own culture similar to your students? How is it different? How did you demonstrate competence in your interactions with your students and in your instruction and assessment? If you did not have a feel for cultural competence during this process, what steps can you take to increase your competence and infuse it into your future interactions and instruction and assessment?

- Understanding of one’s own culture
- Knowledge of other cultures
- Understanding that judgments of students are filtered through one’s own beliefs and biases
  Gather both qualitative and quantitative data to assess individuals, the class as a whole and yourself.

Demonstrating cultural competence

1. Which of these factors did you use? Give specific examples. If you did not use any, which will you use in the future? Give specific examples.
   - Personalize learning and assessment for each student by using knowledge about the culture and family background of each student.
     - Consider students’…
     - Origin, education, relationship styles, family discipline strategies, traditions,
     - Views of time and space, religion, food, health and hygiene, history.
   - Participate in on-going dialogue with students, families, and community members on issues important to them.

Student-centered instructional planning

2. Which of these factors did you use? Give specific examples. If you did not use any, which will you use in the future? Give specific examples.
Students’ strengths, interests, cultures, and styles are highlighted through the use of a variety of strategies
   - Instructional planning includes the involvement of all students in a democratic classroom environment.
   - Students are encouraged to understand and make important decisions about their own learning.
   - Students’ strengths, interests, cultures, and learning styles are highlighted through the use of a variety of strategies
   - All students are actively engaged in learning.
   - Instruction characterized by the use of culturally mediated cognition (questioning), culturally appropriate social situations (gatherings, groupings), and culturally valued knowledge.
   - Multicultural content is incorporated into the curriculum so that the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of various cultural groups are represented.
Bring the community into the classroom

3. Which of these factors did you use? Give specific examples. If you did not use any, which will you use in the future? Give specific examples.
   - Promote student-controlled discourse. Conversations allow insight into ways that speech and negotiation are used in home and community.
   - Promote student engagement to counteract cultural dissonance, i.e., teacher beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling are at times incompatible with the beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling of students from racial/ethnic minorities.
   - Assess by interviewing and reviewing data.

Strategies for climate and groupings

4. Which of these factors did you use? Give specific examples. If you did not use any, which will you use in the future? Give specific examples.
   - Establish a classroom climate in which each student feels he or she can learn and wants to learn.
   - Use flexible grouping patterns including techniques that emphasize cooperative learning.
   - Provide instruction on roles in cooperative groupings; Group heterogeneous by race, gender, and ability when possible; Low pressure, student-controlled learning groups assist in the development of academic language.

Suggestions for school-level cultural competence

5. Which of these factors did you use? Give specific examples. If you did not use any, which will you use in the future? Give specific examples.
   - Teachers and other school personnel must increase in their understanding of the integral relationship between culture and social behavior and the need to view students’ behaviors within a cultural context. Cartledge and Kourea (2008)
   - It may be necessary to develop ways for teachers and schools to emphasize student success based on respect and belief in capability.
   - It may be necessary to develop ways to promote student engagement through co-development of curriculum and learning activities.
   - Ensure state, district, and school-wide professional development opportunities for school personnel.
   - Promote cross-cultural competency and inter-group understanding and collegiality in the classroom and in the larger community.