

# **CULTURAL DIVERSITY TRAINING AND THE PRESERVICE TEACHER**

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## **Abstract**

*Methods of training the preservice teacher are examined in an attempt to meet the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student composition. The practical solutions of Critical Literacy, Culturally Responsive Teachers, and Professional Action Groups are pondered to determine their possible effectiveness in the development of a teacher's readiness to confront the challenges of a culturally diverse classroom environment. Each approach seeks to disrupt a teacher's preexisting value system and replace it with one of greater scope. It is not a question as to the necessity of these approaches being utilized in the training of teachers, but in the higher educational systems actual implementation of these training applications.*

## **Introduction**

“Change is the only constant,” said the famous Greek philosopher, Heraclites of Ephesus (553 BC-475 BC). This reality is experienced every day of our lives. Sometimes change causes anxiety, and other times it causes excitement for the endless possibilities that lie ahead. What is most important, however, is that when acknowledging a changing circumstance, one is equipped to manage the various obstacles that change inevitably presents. In our society, the teacher is the one normally engaged to introduce a changing world to the developing student. It is our hope that the teacher is well prepared for this vital task. However, what if it is the student that is changing and the teacher that needs to be developed? This is the question that is being asked by many professionals concerned with the cultural competence training for the preservice teacher. This paper will explore three separate approaches that seek to enhance the perspective of teachers that a culturally diverse world requires.

## **Classroom Composition**

According to the North Central Regional Educational Library (NCREL), “demographic diversity in the United States is increasing rapidly. By the year 2020 minority students will represent nearly one in two school children, changed from one in four in 1984” (cited in Weddington & Rhine, 2006, p.39). In contrast, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports, “there is a growing disparity between this changing student demographic and the cultural and socio-economic background of their teachers. Recent statistics show that while 84.3 percent of teachers were white, only 59.5 percent of the students were” (cited in Weddington & Rhine, 2006, p.39). Weddington and Rhine (2006) conclude, “Teacher education institutions are therefore charged with the responsibility of preparing future teachers with understanding of difference and sensitivity to how the cultural and socio-economic background of their students impacts their students’ educational experience. This is particularly important when the backgrounds of their students are different than theirs” (p.39).

Parameswaran (2007) suggests that preservice teachers are usually unaware of the finer points surrounding diversity and multicultural education. Often they are from a white, middle class background and have preconceived ideas about what cultural differences mean and how they impact the classroom environment. Weddington and Rhine (2006) believe the need for cultural competence is understood, and although most schools have some type of classes of this nature offered, the traditional approach to teaching diversity is lacking when it comes to dealing with issues such as white privilege and institutional racism.

### **Practical Solutions**

According to Brown (2007), schools and teachers are confronted with finding innovative ways to work with students that are culturally and linguistically diverse, thus the need for multicultural training. Brown (2007) states, "As a result, educators are trying to develop a closer fit between students' home cultures and the culture of the school" (p.57). Erickson (cited in Brown, 2007), reflecting on school success, referred to this type of teaching as culturally responsive teaching or CRT. Gay, in further study, (cited in Brown, 2007) purports that culturally and linguistically diverse students would be more successful if the teaching environment was more respecting of the students' home culture. Brown (2007) said according to Gay, "Part of the responsibility of teacher training programs is to prepare preservice and inservice teachers to work effectively with students from CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) backgrounds" (p.58). Gay (cited in Brown, 2007) acknowledges there are "five important areas (i.e., developing a culturally diverse knowledge base, designing culturally relevant curricula, demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community, building effective cross-cultural communications, and delivering culturally responsive instruction) that need to be addressed when preparing teachers to work with the diversity in their classrooms" (p.58). Weddington and Rhine (2006) emphasize that individuals and social groups are constantly changing and responding to their environments. Weddington and Rhine (2006) support teacher preparation experiences that respond to this vibrant nature. They developed PAG's, Professional Action Groups to "to develop the dispositions and skills necessary for teachers to work within these dynamic environments, [and] we supplemented our curriculum with community-based experiences that allow students to interact with diverse others outside the classroom experience" (p.39).

### **Critical Literacy**

According to Ira Shor, a writer on empowering students, (cited in Parameswaran, 2007, p.51), suggests an understanding of critical literacy is paramount to provide a multicultural educational training experience. By this, power symbols can be acknowledged and questioned. The observation and following alteration of traditional power structures will be reflected in the classroom environment for growth to occur. Freire (cited in Parameswaran, 2007) states, "In order to provide an environment where students can actually question existing structures of power in society, the stratified hierarchical relationship between students and teachers need to be re-examined" ( p.52 ). To accomplish this environment, Parameswaran (2007) recommends that the syllabus and skill assessments be determined by the non-traditional power source, the students. It is also very important for the students to be encouraged to express ideas and opinions, even if not mainstream; more can be learned when faced with non-traditional viewpoints.

The instructors need to communicate the fluid or dynamic nature of the cultural group. Students should be inspired to dissect the cultural framework that they currently believe to understand.

Parameswaran (2007) states, “Students must be encouraged to explore their own heritage and changes in tradition and lifestyle that they have gone through as a result of changing contexts (pp.52-53). Parameswaran (2007) points out that there is greater variability within a group than group to group. Activities can be useful in demonstrating the questioning of cultural composition.

A historical perspective is helpful when examining variation and changes in the elements of power and dominance in society. Society, by its institutions and structure, infers levels of power and reinforces existing hierarchical groups. Acknowledging institutional racism helps to increase understanding of the unequal division of resources by power.

Finally, Parameswaran (2007) says preservice teachers are guided through, “the phases of blaming the victims, denying that they are members of a particular group, and finally defining a positive white identity for themselves that involves interrupting racist actions and questioning institutions that support racism” (p.53). Acknowledging “white privilege” does not mean you must remain its prisoner (Parameswaran, 2007).

### **The Culturally Responsive Teacher**

Brown (2007) promotes the culturally responsive teacher, or CRT, to be developed as a way of meeting the needs of a highly diverse classroom environment. According to Sparks, “When teachers are given the responsibility of teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse, or CLD backgrounds, their attitudes must reflect an appreciation of the cultural, linguistic and social characteristics of each of their students” (cited in Brown, 2007, p.58). Characteristics of the culturally responsive teacher (Brown, 2007) have been recognized by many researchers; they include, but are not limited to: cultural knowledge, relevance, socio-economic position, personal and community regard, and inclusion. According to Brown (2007), “We see that the knowledge of cultural diversity that educators need goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in ways” (p. 59). Brown (2007) continues, “Teachers must develop a knowledge base for CRT by acquiring detailed, factual information about cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups. In addition, they must develop caring consciousness, communication, and a sense of community within their classrooms” (pp. 59-60).

Culturally responsive teaching is defined by Gay as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. CRT is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have a higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly (cited in Brown, 2007, p.60).

According to Montgomery (cited in Brown, 2007), the classroom environment also needs to establish a readiness to express multicultural diversity. This includes the constant assessment of whether materials and attitudes reflect a diverse perspective to increase the success of the students. Brown (2007) believes culturally responsive schools will develop as administration support CRT trained teachers. Ethnically diverse students should be continually motivated to reach higher goals, not only through academic achievement due to culturally sensitive materials and practices, but by guiding them through the process of success by sharing and utilizing the social power structure of the school itself.

### **Professional Action Groups**

Professional Action Groups, or PAG’s, (Weddington and Rhine, 2006) provide another means for training teachers to have the skills necessary to educate an increasing culturally diverse student

population. The philosophy behind the PAG's grew out of a theoretical framework seeking balance between security and absurdity, normalizing function versus ironic function.

According to Weddington and Rhine (2007) this normalizing function is an approach to meeting a set standard. Traditionally, if you are unable to meet this standard, you either are not trying or lack ability. Many preservice teachers come to the PAG experience with this foundation as their thinking. The ironic function is the belief that there is no perfect norm to standardize to; that there is an ever changing, fluid environment that enhances creativity. However, Weddington and Rhine (2007) state, "We believe that the ironist conception of education provides the freedom for active engagement in the dynamic classroom process, it also disrupts the security and stability afforded by more rigid systems (p.41).

Green says, "This means that one's reality, rather than being fixed and predefined, is a perpetual emergent, becoming increasingly multiplex, as more perspectives are taken, more texts are open, more friendships are made" (cited in Weddington & Rhine, 2006, p.41). Weddington and Rhine (2007) suggest the PAG experience intends to move preservice teachers through a personal growth process in order to open them up to facilitate learning within a diverse population. This pedagogical approach first looks to explore the identity development of the preservice teacher, to see themselves as complex and how this helps them to recognize this complexity in others. After being broken into groups, confrontational readings are used to illicit issues that cause an imbalance to occur in their self-perception. It helps them to notice unequal treatment in schools and institutions. The groups, using collective information, design a service project in the community. This exposure is utilized to gain active, participatory experience in the factors that may impact their future students' lives and abilities, thus increasing understanding.

## Conclusion

It is evident that the need for training techniques in multicultural perspectives continues to need to be enhanced and developed for the preservice teacher. The three approaches presented demonstrate that the preservice teacher normally begins their educational experience with a set value system that requires disruption in order for a new one to be embraced. Part of increasing the student's perspective is to question current structures of power, to use dimensional means of learning, and practical application of these newly developed skills. The world's students are changing and classes are becoming more ethnically diverse, thus inspiring educators to develop their cultural perspective in the way they teach and learn. For in development, change is the only constant.

## References

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