

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Experiences of underrepresented students

Christien Russell
Dr. Carla Jagger
Abbigail Peterson
Mississippi State University

255 Tracy Dr.
Mississippi State University, MS 39762
(662)325-7834
cjagger@humansci.msstate.edu

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Introduction

Culturally responsive teaching surfaced around the early 1990's and has been more recently studied in the last decade. Hammond (2015), defines culturally responsive teaching as “the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning. Emphasizes communal orientation, focuses on relationships, cognitive scaffolding, and critical social awareness” (p. 15). It is the teacher's responsibility to recognize the cultural differences in a classroom and to respond positively in order to connect with their students (Hammond, 2015). It is important to first understand the student's perspective to identify what the needs are amongst the underrepresented groups in the classroom. This research meets research priority areas of new technologies, practices, and products adoption decision, and sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the experiences of minority postsecondary students related to culturally responsive teaching, and examine the aspects that make students feel included and excluded when culturally responsive teaching is present and when it is not.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995), explain that CRT engages learners while still respecting cultural integrity. This theory includes four motivational conditions that explain the success of an inclusive learning environment between students and teachers; establishing inclusion, developing attitudes, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). These four motivational conditions exemplify the basic interaction and connections that people have with one another (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). If teachers are intentional with the interactions that they implement in the classroom, the four motivational conditions would contribute to student engagement in the classroom (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Methodology

Focus group methodology was used to collect the qualitative data from postsecondary underrepresented minority students at Mississippi State University. The focus group collection method was chosen due to the ability to gain common experiences from underrepresented groups on campus as it pertains to culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. The focus groups also allow the researcher to collect views, perceptions, and the meaning behind each experience (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). There were 3 focus groups conducted with 12 participants from various majors across campus. Participants were recruited by email through the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center and through the snowball sampling. The focus groups were semi-structured and held in at the campus diversity center to help provide familiarity to the participants. Two of the researchers and one individual from the office of diversity and inclusion proctored each focus group. A facilitation guide was used for each focus group to help maintain consistency, however there was room for the moderator to ask more questions to dive deeper into the topic when needed. Transcriptions, audio files, and field notes were all utilized to analyze the focus group results. To help minimize any bias peer debriefing was used by all three researchers on this project to validate the themes. The overarching research question is: What are the experiences of underrepresented students around Culturally Responsive Teaching on Mississippi State University's campus?

Results

A total of three focus groups were held during Spring 2018 and twelve individuals in total agreed to participate. Some demographics of the participants includes, majority female (n=8), majority African-American (n=10) other participants were Asian and Hispanic, and only two individuals indicated English is not their first language. Based on the questions asked participant responses were themed under three general areas including, *feelings of inclusion or exclusion on campus*, *classroom experiences*, and lastly *indicators of culturally responsive teaching*. In general, across campus underrepresented *students feel included* by others' willingness to help and being with like people who hold similar values. Related to feeling included FG1S1 stated, "when I'm around people who even though we may not know each other, we share those same values." Actions that have made *participants feel excluded* involve offensive or insensitive communication, lack of commonalities, feeling inferior, and feeling invisible during group interactions. Related to feeling invisible FG2S4 stated, "sometimes you will speak to people and they will turn their head and won't speak back." While analyzing classroom experiences statements emerged as either inclusive or exclusive behaviors. Participants *felt included* when they were enrolled in major/smaller classes, through engaging or enthusiastic teaching, when teachers build rapport and collaboration in the course, and lastly participants also mentioned feelings of inclusion with minority instructors. Overall *feelings of exclusion in the classroom* were similar to exclusion on campus but also included feeling singled out or being asked to speak for a group they identify with, lack of engagement from the majority population, and lack of relatable examples provided by the instructor. Lastly, participants provided *insights on what culturally responsive teaching (CRT) looks like to them and what they notice when CRT techniques are used*. Participants associate the following attributes to CRT, diversity in the classroom population of both the teacher and students, when teachers try to know their learners and use appropriate examples for learning, and when effective communication is established (i.e. regular office hours, conversations before/after class). Related to knowing your learners FG2S4 stated, "he doesn't just teach from his perspective he teaches from everybody else's perspective." When CRT is not present they notice more hesitation on part of the teacher and students enrolled in the course (i.e. lack of peer-to-peer interaction, insensitivity, feeling inferior), they feel a different energy in the classroom and notice non-verbal communication relating back to hesitation, and at times feel unwelcome or secluded. Related to non-verbal communication FG3S1 stated, "when somebody's face seems more relaxed versus when they are more closed up, their bodies are tenser. I think it is the little things more than overt actions."

Conclusions/Discussion/Recommendations

Overall these results can benefit all educators as we continue to see more diverse classroom audiences. By incorporating simple gestures like using varying examples from multiple perspectives and cultures or building rapport with all our learners we can make strides to a more inclusive environment. When culturally responsive teaching is not utilized by educators, our learners tend to disengage and keep to themselves which does not build an effective learning experience. To follow-up these focus groups the researchers intend to conduct classroom observations of instructors, identified by the participants, who display positively CRT. These observations will help to further explore and describe culturally responsive teaching to help provide vivid examples to not only be used in our own teaching but also in the preparation of our pre-service teachers.

References

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