

Investigation of Culturally Responsive Teaching: Undergraduate vs. Graduate Experiences

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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 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 minority 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 initial purpose of this study was to identify and describe the experiences of students related to the presence or absence of culturally responsive teaching. After the collection of data both undergraduate and graduate student experiences at Mississippi State University were compared.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research is culturally responsive teaching (CRT). While this is not a theoretical framework, Gay (2010), reported that 5 important areas that must be addressed to equip teachers with the essential skills to teach in multi-cultural classroom: 1) developing a culturally diverse knowledge base, 2) design culturally relevant curricula, 3) demonstrate cultural caring and build a learning community, 4) build effective cross-cultural communications, 5) and deliver culturally responsive instruction, (Brown, 2007; Vincent and Kirby, 2015).

Methodology

Focus group methodology was used to collect the qualitative data from both undergraduate and graduate students at Mississippi State University. The focus group collection method was chosen due to the ability to gain common experiences from student groups on campus as it pertains to CRT 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 8 focus groups conducted with 39 participants from various majors across campus. Participants were recruited through email by Holmes Cultural Diversity Center. Purposeful and snowball sampling were also used to maximize participation. The focus groups were semi-structured and held at the campus diversity center and various College of Agriculture and Life Sciences buildings to help provide familiarity to the participants. In total there were always three researchers in the room to moderate questions, observe participants, and transcribe. A facilitation guide was used for each focus group to help maintain consistency; however, there was room for the moderator to ask follow-up questions 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 the researchers on this project to validate the themes. The overarching research question was: Are there similarities between undergraduate and graduate student experiences around culturally responsive teaching?

Results

A total of eight focus groups were held between Fall 2017 to Fall 2019 with 39 total participants, undergraduate (n=28) and graduate students (n= 11). Some demographics of the participants

included mostly minority students (n=21) and a majority were females (n= 21). While there were some major differences amongst undergraduate and graduate CRT experiences, there were more commonalities that arose when theming occurred. Based on the questions asked, participant responses were themed under three general areas *including caring attitude, connecting the content, and presentation of instruction*. All three of these overall themes directly connect to Gay's (2010) CRT essential skills for diverse classrooms. In general, *students want a teacher who cares about them* both in the classroom and the life they have outside of the classroom. One graduate student (P-1-MF-G) stated, "I have a great advisor, and I am really thankful for her because I think had it not been for her, I may not still be here." Participants *felt cared for in the classroom* when professors knew their name, assisted them in course work, showed interest in the diversity in the room, and gave relevant examples that related back to students. Participants' *feelings of being cared for outside the classroom* included professors taking extra time to help with assignments, inquiring or being sensitive about personal issues, sending events that students may be interested in, checking on students outside of class, and mentoring. This theme correlates with an instructor's ability to demonstrate cultural caring and build a learning community so that all students feel comfortable to engage in the classroom. Students expressed on several instances that *connecting the content* engages them in learning and they become less likely to shut down in a classroom. It should be noted that when a teacher did not make the content relevant students felt like they didn't want to be in the class, and they shut down as a learner. This theme relates to the second identified skill an instructor needs to have, which is designing culturally relevant curricula. Within this theme, one undergraduate student (5-1-WF-UG) stated, "I have a couple of professors who are really good about when they give examples they'll draw from other countries." Graduate students identified these connections as giving examples of minorities who have been pioneers in the field that they are studying for representation. Lastly, graduate students and undergraduate students spoke about the importance of the *presentation of instruction*, which directly falls under the delivery of culturally responsive instruction. In every focus group, students conveyed that professors who read from PowerPoint slides made them shut down as learners. The following are quotes from both undergraduate and graduate students, "I think I stopped going to his class, because he's a professor that teaches from the PowerPoint" (P-2-MF-G).

Conclusions/Discussion/Recommendations

It is important to note that while there were similarities amongst the undergraduate and graduate students there were also differences. After coding and peer debriefing it was noted that graduated students were more aware of micro-aggressions amongst instructors and students on campus. Undergraduate students were less likely to harp on situations after they happened, or they didn't tend to notice or remember the situation at all. Overall these results can benefit all educators as we practice CRT techniques at universities. By going the extra mile inside and outside the classroom, connecting the content, and presenting with more than just slides, students have suggested that they would be engage more with the course content.

When culturally responsive teaching is not utilized by educators, learners tend to disengage and keep to themselves which does not build an effective learning experience. To follow-up with these focus groups the researchers intend to conduct classroom observations of instructors, identified by the participants, who display positive CRT techniques. These observations will help to further explore and describe culturally responsive teaching to provide vivid examples for not only our own postsecondary instruction, but also in the preparation of our pre-service teachers.

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