

Cultural Diversity: Inclusive Learning for Culturally Diverse Learners.

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Abstract

Amalgamation of rich heritage and deep rooted traditions of India are represented as a rainbow of socio-cultural diversity in terms of language, customs and tradition. Recognizing cultural diversity of India as a greatest gift, NCF-2005 draws attention towards the need to plan and deliver education in a manner that takes into account their unique characteristics and builds on the same to achieve inclusive goals of education. This paper attempts to highlight that a culturally responsive teacher is potentially placed to plan and execute appropriate teaching strategies which adequately accommodates diverse abilities and beliefs. It is assumed such an accommodation is most likely to promote inclusive socialization directed towards learning to get along well with other. Concluding part of the paper deals with the design and transaction style of teacher education program at secondary level which enables the pupil-teachers to rethink their beliefs. A planned interaction with a group of teacher educators and students training to be teachers revealed that due emphasis on affective domain adequately cultivates culturally responsive teaching skills. It provides an opportunity to conceptualize that being different does not mean that one is better than the other.

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Culture, as we understand it, can simply be described as a set of norms that lay down a standard for acceptable behaviour of a society. Culture is learned throughout life as one participates in family and social networks (Gollnick & Chin, 2006). Cultures have several components, including values and behavioral styles; language and dialects; nonverbal communications; and perspectives, worldviews, and frames of reference (Banks, 2006).

Terry & Irving (2010) elaborate that “Cultural practices are shared within a specific group and may or may not be shared across groups. It is important to recognize that cultures are always changing because individuals, groups, and the surrounding environment are always changing.” Culture can be described as totality of thought processes, belief systems and behavioural patterns of a community, handed over to them by previous generations. (Pai, 2005). Language, as an integral tool to communicate, helps members of the community to establish, assert and maintain their identity as individuals and as a group.

Foundation of each child’s early development is deeply influenced by the unique traditions and rituals of the society that one is born into. Each culture has different language skill, thinking and negotiating skills. In present times we witness multiplicity of cultures spread across a wide spectrum. Developmental advancements and economic ‘push and pull’ factors have paved the way for increased interaction between people from different cultures. Amalgamation of different cultures represents diversity in terms of ability, hope, aspirations and potentialities. It becomes obligatory for any cohesive and progressive society to put in place such systems that orient its members to acknowledge diversity and facilitate nurturance of diverse potential to aim for a socially sustainable world.

An overriding goal of education is to groom children in such a way that they become capable of shouldering responsibilities of their adult life with confidence. Education systems rely heavily on language to communicate thoughts and develop knowledge base of children. At the same time Pattanayak (1987) rightfully reminds that “Communication is not passing of information, but involves conceptualization of concepts and experiences, of identification and classification, of argumentation and assertion through correct language”. Cultural and linguistic diversity makes educators’ task challenging enough. Educators need to factor in diversity in their teaching strategies to aim for enabling learners to develop proper attitude towards the fellow beings and contribute meaningfully to the society they live in.

Recognizing cultural diversity of India as a greatest gift, NCF-2005 draws attention towards the need to plan and deliver education in a manner that takes into account their unique characteristics and builds on the same to achieve inclusive goals of education.

Moving along this narrative, Prof. Yash Pal (NCF-2005) highlights that “specificities matter, that the mother tongue is a critical conduit, that social, economic and ethnic backgrounds are important for enabling children to construct their own knowledge. Media and educational technologies are recognized as significant, but the teacher remains central. Diversities are emphasized but never viewed as problems. There is a continuing recognition that societal learning is an asset and that the formal curriculum will be greatly enriched by integrating with that.” Besides recognizing the pivotal role of the teacher, he also states that “Education is not a physical thing that can be delivered through the post or through a teacher. Fertile and robust education is always created, rooted in the physical and cultural soil of the child, and nourished through interaction with parents, teachers, fellow students and the community.”

Culturally Responsive Teachers

Central role of teacher in educating the child is beyond debate. However the question is ‘what kind of teacher? As we acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students in the classroom, it is equally important to keep in mind that teachers too belong to diverse cultures. A cultural mismatch between teachers and the children they teach can result in uncomfortable classroom experiences for some children and teachers. (Colombo 2005). Home and School, as agencies of education work along a continuum. Any missing link between the two can make the children feel as if they are moving from one world to another.

Research evidence and personal experience remind us that a balanced combination of teaching style and motivational strategies suited to the demands of the learners are decisive in achieving learning objectives. Such an understanding prompts one to assume that a culturally responsive teacher is potentially placed to plan and execute an appropriate teaching strategy which adequately accommodates diverse abilities and beliefs. It is assumed such an accommodation is most likely to promote inclusive socialization directed towards learning to get along well with other. Who is a culturally responsive teacher? What are culturally responsive practices? Attempting to answer such questions it can be said a teacher, who, recognizes differences, appreciates their strengths and is able to factor in the same in her teaching style stands a better chance of meeting the learning needs of the learners.

Advocating aligning with research on effecting instructional practices, Aziz emphasizes that “Culturally responsive practices are specific educational practices, instructional strategies, team processes, and curricula content which have been established by research

to increase the achievement of culturally diverse students. We are culturally responsive when we adjust how we teach to the needs and experiences of our students.” More often than not we are influenced by stereotypes and form opinions about children’s’ academic ability. For example its common to hear that boys do well in sciences than girls or a child coming from a deprived section of the society cant not achieve much . Such assumptions lead teachers to plan their pedagogy based on what students cannot do and leave little chance to understand more about their students’ strengths and abilities. Learning is a continuous process, it is important to know the kind of experiences children bring into the class room by learning about their culture. Knowledge of students’ background, interests and experiences helps the teachers to plan culturally responsive practices. Providing opportunities that allow students to utilize their strengths like mother tongue, personal interests can get them more involved and maintain their motivation in learning activities. Assignments and learning activities that allow the students to share their language and culture with others in the classroom keeps the students connected and build healthy relationship with the teacher.

Culturally Responsive Teacher Education Programe

Teacher education programs (TEP) are going through some challenging times. Concerns are expressed with regard to quality, access, delivery and maintenance of standards. However this paper is limited to bring out the potential of TEP to orient pre service pupil-teachers to become culturally responsive teachers. An interaction was planned with students of B.Ed program to reflect upon their experiences of School Internship programme. Most of them reported in the negative, so far as experiencing joy and creativity in teaching based on their orientation and expectations of teacher education curriculum. Instead they experienced that a teachers’ job was testing, evaluating, reporting and accountability. Coming face to face with such realities points towards the need to rethink the way teacher education programs are being transacted. Reflections of the students further revealed that primary focus of curriculum transaction is the cognitive domain. Psycho motor domain too is considered to some extant but action with regard to nurturance of affecting domain was not noticed.

It is reassuring to note that NCTE curriculum framework 2014 recommends incorporation of components potentially inclined towards nurturance of affective domain. Such a nurturance enables the pupil-teachers to rethink their beliefs. Learning to understand and acknowledge differences adequately cultivates culturally responsive teaching skills. Transacting curriculum in a manner that allows for cultivating interpersonal values and

empathy, constructively expressing and regulating feelings provides an opportunity to conceptualize that being different does not mean that one is better than the other. Teacher educators should aim at establishing healthy relationship with pupil-teachers to sharpen their social skills and facilitate their movements away from the stereotypes.

Pointers for Teacher Educators

- **Suspension of Judgment:** Our normal way of thinking divides, organizes and labels. Because our egos become identified with how we think things are we often find ourselves defending our positions against those of others. This makes it difficult for us to stay open to new and alternative views of reality. It is hard to listen when we are engaged in a heated battle about "who's right and who is wrong. By attempting to suspend Judgment we open the door to see other's point of view. A space between our judgment and our reaction creates climate of trust and safety. As we learn that we will not be "judged" wrong for our opinions, we feel freer to express ourselves. The atmosphere becomes more open and truthful.
- **Active Listening:** The way we listen, has a lot to do with our capacity to learn and build quality relationships with others. When we are able to suspend judgment and listen to diverse perspectives we expand and deepen our world view. It is the act of listening that allows for integration and synthesis of new insights and possibilities. When we listen deeply we are willing to be influenced by and learn from others. Listening involves developing our ability to perceive the meaning arising both at the individual level and within the group.
- **Inquiry and reflection:** Learning how to ask questions with the intention of gaining additional insight and perspective. Inquiry is aimed at eliciting information where as reflection leads one to inspection of information and possible relationships. Structuring questions like "I wonder...", "what if...", helps one to gain greater awareness into our own and others' thinking processes and the issues that separate and unite us. Creating pauses to reflect enables one to identify assumptions as well as open the door for new ideas and possibilities.

Conclusion

Developmental advancements and economic 'push and pull' factors have paved the way for increased interaction between people from different cultures. Amalgamation of different cultures represents diversity in terms of ability, hope, aspirations and potentialities. A discourse on accommodating multiculturalism in education is an acknowledgment of the existence of diversity on one hand as well as the need to nurture

the diverse potential for a socially sustainable world. Culturally responsive TEPs with due emphasis on affective domains have the potential of orienting pupil-teachers to understand that cultural differences exist but differences do not mean deficits. A conscious effort is required to adopt a positive approach to build on student's strength rather than attributing student's difficulty to upbringing or social environment.

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