

Understanding the Students You Teach: How Important is Cultural Competency in Student Achievement

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How do Teachers Perceive their Competence, and Its influence on an Education Campus?

Rationale

Cultural competency is essential to meeting the needs of diverse learners. A child's cultural background provides a framework which deserves to be recognized. Cultural relevant teaching involves embracing the experiences and learning styles of students and bridging them to the curricular goals. We wonder why more teachers aren't incorporating culture within their daily instruction. With research stating that ELL learners thrive when topics use their knowledge base, it seems to be overlooked. Perhaps many are unfamiliar that students arrive to class with a specific learning style. This research contributes to the work on cultural responsive teaching by examining teachers' perceptions of their cultural competency influence on student achievement and motivation as an effective academic intervention.

Literature Review

Minority students and their parents endure poor experiences in terms of low expectations and disgust when teachers fail to understand ways different cultures communicate (Morgan, 2010). The enactment of NCLB legislation (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014) highlights the disparities in academic achievement between Black and Latino students. Black males are most likely to underperform; with males more likely than any other group face suspension and expulsion. While Latino males have the highest numbers of high school dropout rates than any other group in America. From a spiral of failure, to alienation; and the inability to offer college prep classes due to remediation in English language courses. In the District of Columbia Public Schools, Black and Latino students underperform by as much as 62 percent of White students' scores. Latino reading proficiency rates at 43 percent, while Black students' rates are at 32 percent. In mathematics compared to their white counterparts, Latino students' proficiency rates are 55 percent, while Black students achieved 37 percent (www.dcps.dc.gov)

Culturally responsive teaching requires that teachers deliberately labor to understand, respect, and seek ways to meet the needs of students from differing cultural backgrounds (Ford, 2010). Furthermore, differences in learning styles can be attributed to a students' cultural norms and values (Morgan, 2010).

Data/Tools/Process

This study was a quantitative non-experimental study of a survey of teachers on a prek-8 campus in the NW quadrant of Washington, DC. The target population of approximately 100 staff members consisting of teachers, teacher assistants, and counselors including social workers. Staff serve in three separate grade levels: early childhood (prek3/4 -kindergarten), elementary (1-5), and middle school grades (6-8) who service the 643 students. The study began in March 2015 and continued until April 10, 2015. The survey was designed using an on-line tool with the construction of questions from a team of teachers from each grade level for clarity. Participants were provided an introduction and explanatory letter defining the terms of culture in context, and the purpose of the survey. Participants were informed that no individual responses would be reported in addition to the disclaimer that the results would not result in new curriculum adoption at Brightwood Education Campus.

Data Analysis

The survey consisted of approximately ten questions, accessible on-line using an embedded link via their district email address. Out of 100 targeted for survey, a total of 40 voluntary responses were received. The grade level of the 40 respondents consisted of: 51 percent were classified as elementary teachers, 24 percent middle school teachers and 24 percent of early childhood educators provided information.

When asked how much do they perceive a student's culture influences student achievement, 37 percent responded quite influential, while 25 stated of tremendous influence, and 15 percent chose somewhat influential, and six respondents didn't answer. With regards to their perceptions of how students' culture is influential to a student's motivation in the context of academics and social interactions, 25 percent of the respondents selected of tremendous relevant, 42.5 percent selected quite relevant, while 7.5 selected not relevant, and 10 percent had no response.

Regarding the staff and counselors' attitude towards their participation in professional development to improve their cultural competency out of 31 respondents; 58 percent believe it would serve them with somewhat significance, and 35 percent reported a tremendous significance in their teaching practice. Overall, most participants reported that they felt professional development with coaching support would assist their cultural competence instruction at 25 percent; while 28 percent would like to attain it through a "pilot" program giving them a chance to offer feedback.

Recommendations

We endorse a *District Cultural Competency Task Force* to empower teachers and counselors towards cultural competency in support of current initiatives. Districts can provide "open sessions" where stakeholders can dialogue. The Office of Data and Research can initiate an in-depth survey of stakeholders and future research could examine teachers' use of cultural curriculum and the growth of their students through portfolio assessments. DCPS can utilize university collaboration for ethnic studies, and make adaptations to the Common Core curriculum. Finally, teacher preparation programs across the United States in urban districts need to impart cultural competency for matriculation.

Bibliography

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