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Sources of Content for Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the transformation of curriculum content is the most significant part of thinking about how to empower our students from different cultural groups. What is the content that should be delivered to the diverse student population in ESL classrooms? How can teachers achieve the academic success of diverse students? The most powerful resource for teachers is the textbook. Are there other sources of content that can be used in the classroom for diverse learners? The article below explores the sources of content other than the textbooks that create strong foundation for multicultural curricular content.

Key words: multicultural curriculum content.

Introduction

It is not new that the empowerment of culturally diverse students is the fundamental aim of culturally responsive teaching. Empowerment is achieved through academic success, cultural affiliation and personal efficacy. The discussion of the empowerment of culturally diverse students leads us to the significance of the content taught to them, the content that is relevant to them, that is connected to real life and experiences outside the school. "Content about the histories, heritages, contributions, perspectives, and experiences of different ethnic groups and individuals, taught in diverse ways, is essential to culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2010). There are several sources of multicultural curriculum content. The discussions about the curriculum content, as the most essential aspect of a multicultural curriculum is developed further by Geneva Gay (2010). Below will be discussed textbooks, standards and literary books as sources of content for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Main Text

Textbooks as multicultural curriculum content

Textbooks together with workbooks and teachers' guides are the most widely used sources in language teaching, although computer-based technologies and multimedia instructional resources are being increasingly introduced. As Cortazzi and Jin (2011) suggest "Textbooks can be...

- a teacher
- a map
- a resource
- a trainer
- an authority
- a de-skinner
- an ideology' (p. 199).

As Cortazzi and Jin (2011) further explain, like teachers direct students, textbooks similarly instruct them about English-speaking countries. In the sense of 'a map' textbooks provide teachers and learners with structured paragraphs with language and culture aspects to be learned. Textbook is a resource: a set of materials and activities from which the most appropriate or useful items will be chosen. Other parts may be briefly dealt with or ignored, and supplementary material will often be brought in by the teacher, because the textbook is unlikely to cover everything' (p. 199).

In the sense of 'a trainer' textbooks and teachers' guides serve as explanations for less trained teachers. Teachers can acquire cultural knowledge from them. Revealing their training capacities, a textbook can be seen as 'an authority.' The information is treated as a fact, reliable, and valid. In-experienced teachers in some cultures never view it critically.

As 'a de-skinner,' Cortazzi and Jin (2011) claim that for many professional teachers' textbook reliance causes negligence of creativeness and a fault-finding approach to teaching materials.

Finally, textbook as 'an ideology' is characterized by acknowledging 'that it reflects a worldview or cultural system, a social construction that may be imposed on teachers and students and that indirectly constructs their view of a culture' (Cortazzi & Jin, 2011, p. 200). De Castell, Luke, & Luke (1989) perceive textbooks as a sort of cultural politics, as they may contain elements of social, political, cultural, and economic reality.

English language textbooks in the past had a European focus and a poor design, included no authentic materials, were author-dominated and culturally unconscious (Risager, 1991). They were published mainly in the UK and the USA. However, today they are more market-centered, culturally responsive, design-rich, focused on nonnative learning situations, published by local publishers and encompassing no artificial materials.

Karen Risager (1991) stresses the genre change in textbooks and identifies that 'in the 1950s and 1960s they were dominated by the kind of realistic fiction, in the 1970s and 1980s they are rather mixtures of ultra-short (realistic) fiction (mini-dialogues) and many types of no-fiction' (p. 182).

The conclusion drawn from Chun-Hoon's (1973) study of effects of the inappropriate textbooks is still up to date. Students feel insulted, ashamed, frustrated by the shallow or negative characterization of their ethnic groups or from their total omission. The recommendation for authors is to direct their center of attention 'to deal with more authentic and substantial human experiences and contextualize specific subject matter skills in more meaningful multicultural content' (Gay, 2010, p. 133). The deficiency of cultural content into textbooks may be defeated by integrating more realistic, contextualized content about history and culture of different ethnic groups into classroom interactions between students and teacher.

Standards

Other influential sources for multicultural curriculum are achievement standards and standardized testing. Standards are 'about what students should know and be able to do at what levels of acceptability, and according to what evidence or measures of success' (Gay, 2010, p.134). The idea of standardization refers to using the same scale for all students to find out the knowledge of content and performance standards, which measures the level of acceptability of the content.

In America for culture-oriented teaching the initiative of NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) to impose penalty on the US states 'where there were significant disparities in the performance of students from different ethnic, racial, cultural, social, and linguistic groups' (Gay, 2010, p. 137), was an important step forward, but not much practical realization followed. Most states and standardized tests in the US are colorblind. The wordiness of state standards and NCLB is attractive, but the enactment in practice is problematic.

Standards determine the content for textbooks and what teachers teach, but the awareness and sensitivity towards this issue should make teachers keep their creativeness and control over what they teach, how they teach and how students are assessed. Likewise, there is no one best method for teaching all students, there is no right curriculum design and assessment procedure for all students. Using varied curriculum content and designs, resources, teaching methods and techniques make better opportunities for diverse students to achieve success.

Literary books

Literary books are one more influential source of content. 'It also is a powerful way to expose students to ethnic groups, cultures, and experiences different from their own to which they may not have access in their daily lives. Multicultural literature can help students cross cultural borders and improve understanding of insider and outsider perspectives on cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity' (Gay, 2010, p. 142). Povey (1968) points out that second language reading and literature can both be used as culture teaching tools, but they are different things. Keeping in mind the difference between literature and reading, teachers can refer students of beginning and lower-intermediate levels to readings and students of upper-intermediate and advanced levels to literature.

Great effort and expertise are required from a teacher to teach about culture from literature. It requires knowledge and thorough understanding of literature by teachers. In Stephen Crane's 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' there is a drunken gunman who challenges an officer of the highest rank in the army to show his supremacy over him, but when he understands that the opponent is with his bride and unarmed, he quits out of the sense of fair play. Valdes (2001) focuses on teacher's skills regarding the issue and comments: "understanding these unspoken values and presenting them to second language learners is an absolute requirement for the teacher" (p. 141).

The same can be said about the topic of humor. For diverse students it may be complicated to understand why a native English teacher is laughing. If the teacher explains what the foundation for humor in English-speaking countries is and what is unexpected, strange and unsuitable in the situation, he/she will greatly assist the students' understanding of the phenomenon.

Wilga Rivers (1983) has said: "Our students need literature, poetry, music, and other artistic manifestations, not only of a literate elite, but also of the common people in oral traditions, folklore, the arts of the people, the history and stories that make small pockets of cultural identity unique" (p. 33). Advice for teachers is to acquire a deep insight into the culture and use multiple resources to teach in a culture-sensitive way effectively to students of diverse cultures, ethnicity, and race.

Conclusion

Based on the above considerations it is straightforward that curriculum content is an instrument for enhancing culturally diverse students' attitudes, capabilities and experiences. A curriculum should be meaningful for students to make it possible for them to reach the curriculum goals. Meaningfulness implies admitting rightfulness of diverse cultures' contributions and historical heritages.

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ნინო თვალჭრელიძე

რეზიუმე

კურიკულუმის (სასწავლო გეგმის) შინაარსის ტრანსფორმაცია რომ ერთ-ერთი მნიშვნელოვანი ნაწილია კულტურული მრავალფეროვნების წარმომადგენელ სტუდენტთა გაძლიერებისთვის, უდავოა. რა შინაარსი უნდა მივაწოდოთ სტუდენტთა მრავალფეროვან ჯგუფებს ინგლისურის, როგორც მეორე ენის სწავლებისას? როგორ მიაღწიოს მასწავლებელმა სტუდენტთა მრავალფეროვანი ჯგუფების წარმატებას? ყველაზე მძლავრი რესურსი მასწავლებლისთვის არის სახელმძღვანელო. არის კი სხვა რესურსები კურიკულუმის შინაარსისთვის რაც შეიძლება რომ გამოყენებული იქნას საკლასო ოთახში კულტურული მრავალფეროვნების წარმომადგენელ სტუდენტებთან? მოცემულ სტატიში ვიკვლევთ რესურსებს, რომლებიც არ წარმოადგენს სახელმძღვანელოს და რომლებიც იქნება ძლიერი ფუნდამენტი მულტიკულტურული კურიკულუმის შინაარსისთვის.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მულტიკულტურული სასწავლო პროგრამის შინაარსი.