

Diversity Education through Creativity

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of why it is important to apply culturally responsive teaching within the classroom, through creativity. Teaching diversity exposes students to a variety of cultural and social groups. This educational experience prepares students to become better citizens, within their communities. Through the creative process, students will examine topics which, both, encompass and promote diversity. Additionally, students will be able to construct their own independent, inclusive environment, through art making; this increase in diversity education relates not only to the race and ethnicity of our students, it also includes religion, economic status, gender identity, language background, and more. Adopting inclusion and awareness around multicultural education and taking a culturally responsive approach to teaching is a benefit to both students and instructors. Not only does creating a better multicultural awareness and inclusive environment help students with different backgrounds and needs succeed, but it encourages acceptance and helps prepare students to thrive in a diverse world.

Keywords: cultural diversity, curriculum, teaching, art, social reconstructionism

Diversity Education through Creativity

Culture is central to a student's learning; Essentially, it plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of students. Through the years, the levels of diversity in and outside the classroom has begun to increase. As a result, instructors have had to prepare their students for an evolving world, and encourage acceptance of those different from themselves. We begin this essay by examining the history of cultural diversity within the classroom environment. The historical roots of culturally inclusive teaching began during the civil rights era, a time where various groups were historically oppressed. The history of culturally responsive teaching or multicultural education traces back to the social action of African Americans, and other people of color, who challenged discriminatory practices in public institutions during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s (Davidman & Davidman, 1997). Among those institutions, specifically targeted, were educational institutions, which were among the most oppressive and hostile to the ideals of racial equality. Activists, community leaders, and parents demanded curricular reform and insisted on the reexamination of hiring practices (Gorkski, 2021). While it took many years of development and reform, education has slowly begun to become more consistent with the racial diversity within the country.

It is important to note there is no right or wrong way to develop a solution for a curriculum focused around culturally responsive teaching. Every instructor must develop a method that fits their individual teaching style. It is best for teachers to begin by developing a positive, personal relationship with each student; instructors could also intentionally group students together allowing for more diverse perspectives to be expressed during lessons. Additionally, collaborating with diverse professionals to include alternative viewpoints is an excellent way to bring diversity education into the classroom. It is important for every classroom

to be culturally responsive to the needs of the students and it is necessary for every instructor to employ an approach that can help every student feel a strong sense of belonging within their school and among their peers. Topics that encompass and promote diversity in the classroom include instructors getting to know their students, practicing cultural sensitivity, and incorporating diversity within lesson plans (Gorkski, 2021). These curriculum solutions encourage and promote students' cultural awareness, enhancing them with a sense of identity, and fostering inclusion within the classroom community.

As instructors, it is necessary to be reminded why diversity and cultural awareness is so crucial in the classroom and that the benefits it has on students in the long-term. Teaching diversity education within the classroom exposes students to various different cultural and social groups, thus, preparing students to develop into better civilians within their communities. While these strategies have, in the past, helped to address and promote diversity in the classroom, much more can and should be done to continue this process (Santucci, 2014). For example, developing an interdisciplinary curriculum focused on diversity and collaborating with other teachers helps to introduce diversity education into the classroom. Having teachers, from other subjects, come together to discuss how culture and diversity is merged within one another's courses is an important way to incorporate these lessons into previously planned curriculum.

Creating an all-inclusive classroom environment where every student feels comfortable and equal helps build confidence and encourages students to participate in group activities, answer questions, and seek skills to help them succeed academically. When children learn about diversity and cultural awareness they are able to develop better social skills, increase their confidence, and become more accepting of people who are different from themselves (Gorkski, 2021).

There are many philosophical approaches to approaching diversity education in a classroom setting. Social Reconstructionism, a method of teaching diversity, is a philosophical approach to education that is essential to transforming a system defined by inequity, issues of quality, and issues of access (Mayne, 2014). In essence, reconstructionism aims to improve all aspects related to the quality of education, thereby creating an environment in which every student can obtain learning results and their achievements can be recognized (Tanner & Tanner, 1980). Additionally, conversational learning, which can be applied within a reconstructionist education system, “is the most common and effective way to begin diversity courses with students” (Harris, 2019).

Rather than the classroom existing as a space for traditional instruction, or a teacher relaying information to students in a passive style of learning/instruction, Dean P. Vesperman (2020, p. 8) explains in the description of conversational learning, that the act of teaching and the classroom needs to exist as a fluid space. “Teaching and learning are not monolithic activities with predetermined outcomes,” states Vesperman (2020, p. 8). In order to eliminate this monolithic relationship, classroom discussion must exist. Creating discussions within the classroom, rather than traditional instruction, creates a “powerful instrument for developing critical thinking skills, teaching content, and increasing tolerance” (Vesperman, 2020, p. 8). Our curriculum encourages students to learn, create conversations, and reflect about different diversity within the classroom thus, promoting cultural awareness through various art forms.

Creating a conversation over aspects of diversity and cultural awareness taught during a student's education is the goal and focus of this paper. Our target audience is educators and like-minded peers who have an interest in addressing issues centered around culturally responsive

teaching within the art room. Having a classroom that is culturally aware of diversity empowers students to maintain their cultural integrity, while also succeeding academically. The following paragraphs discuss a course workshop that further explores how to promote diversity and inclusion in the classroom environment.

Curriculum in Practice

Diversity Education through Creativity is for grades 6–12 and is specifically catered to promote cultural diversity through art making. The curriculum is implemented in the form of a 15-week creative expression workshop with a focus on concrete poetry. Topics that are taken into account in this workshop are race, ethnicity, language, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and culture. The workshop focuses on each topic for 2 weeks, and the final week is dedicated to exhibition planning and set up. Each workshop takes 90 minutes, during which the participants will create concrete poetry using words, letters, colors, typefaces, combined with images to portray and express personal stories around the topics of the workshop.

This curriculum will help participants generate, conceptualize, and relate artistic ideas to societal, cultural, and historical contexts and develop a deeper understanding of culture and diversity. The workshop allows the participants to express themselves freely, observe others' perspectives and gain an understanding and respect for backgrounds different to theirs. Moreover, the class will serve as a culturally diverse community where multiple ideas are exchanged, and cultural diversity is promoted through art. Poems and words provide readers “with specific insights into individualized, personal human experience and linguistic expression.” (Hanauer, 2003, p.69). When combined with visual arts, it helps stimulate minds and emotions, which not only increases awareness and engagement but also strengthens motivation to reduce discrimination and support diversity (Morris, Urbanski, & Fuller, 2005). By

reflecting on diversity, identity, culture and experience of each student in class, we take the first step of validating differences. This validation and understanding in the classroom can lead to making a difference in our communities, our society and in an entire generation. Furthermore, the curriculum would benefit teachers in terms of developing better communication with the students. The teacher would understand the students background, which helps them create a more positive and inclusive teaching environment.

Assessment and Reflection

Narrative assessment is an essential part of this curriculum. The primary purpose of the assessment is to determine the effectiveness of the workshop and the teaching method as well as uncovering sources of resistance, hidden biases and diversity barriers through the assessment process (Harrison-Bernard, Augustus-Wallace, Souza-Smith, Tsien, and Casey 2020). Therefore, every two weeks, after each topic is completed, narrative assessment and reflection are required. The narrative assessment is in the form of a list of questions and prompts for the participants such as “What have you learned today?” or “What did this activity reveal to you?” This type of assessment ensures evidence of participants’ learning and offers them a way to express their learning. The final week is dedicated to an exhibition of the artworks along with a panel discussion and a collective reflection. By the end of the panel discussion, the attendees are invited to take part in a participatory piece and reflect on what they have learned from the exhibition and the panel discussion by writing it in one sentence on a wall chalkboard.

Conclusion

Educator Mantzicopoulos (2006) stated “children spend many of their early years, the years in which identity and self-concept are formed, in school. Here they develop a sense of self, based on their interactions with teachers, peers, and curricula, that can have lasting impact.” (pg. 53) Through this curriculum, teachers can help students develop a multitude of valuable attitudes and transferable skills such as acceptance, inclusion, and equality. (Katz, Porath, 2013) In turn, this will help address issues like religion, economic status, gender identity, and more. For these reasons, this curriculum is necessary. Implementing reflective and conversational learning at a young age is essential in order to prepare our students to enter into adulthood and be comfortable within diverse, multicultural environments. (Katz, Porath, 2013) Creating a curriculum that pushes students to generate, conceptualize, and relate artistic ideas to societal, cultural, and historical contexts develops a deeper understanding of culture and diversity. The *Diversity Education through Creativity* workshops allows participants to express themselves freely, observe others’ perspectives and gain an understanding and respect for backgrounds different to theirs, which develops diversity skills in a classroom environment, that can be applied externally, in real world contexts.

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