Culturally Responsive Teaching in Diverse Classrooms in DR Congo

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ABSTRACT

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is essential for addressing cultural inequalities in diverse classrooms, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where ethnic and linguistic diversity presents unique educational challenges. This paper explores the theoretical framework of CRT, highlighting its significance in promoting equity and inclusion in education. It examines the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity in DRC and its implications for teaching practices. Key components of CRT, such as building cultural competence and creating inclusive classroom environments, are discussed alongside the challenges of implementing CRT in resource-constrained settings. Through case studies and best practices, this paper demonstrates how CRT can enhance student engagement and achievement, fostering a more equitable and effective educational landscape in DRC.
Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Diversity in Education, DR Congo, Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity, Inclusive Education

Introduction to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Adopting practices that are culturally responsive helps resolve issues related to cultural inequality such as racial and educational achievement gaps, stereotypes, biases, and discrimination. Culturally responsive practices help to ensure that educational content, activities, teaching methods, and expectations are relevant, accessible, and meaningful to students from cultural backgrounds [1-4]. Because of the increasing concentration of cultural diversity in classrooms and the need to prepare these students for the future, it is necessary to redefine good teaching practices to include students of all cultural backgrounds [5]. These students who are holding on to their culture and values. A deficit perspective assumes that students of color have failed because they do not have the characteristics of white, middle-class students [6]. A critical perspective also seeks to ensure that students of color achieve at higher levels by addressing academic gaps, but by understanding the context and characteristics of the students, parents, and communities. The third perspective, culturally relevant pedagogy, pushes for higher student achievement but recognizes that all students are contributing to the classroom as part of their learning process [7-10]. Culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to develop and support students of color in schools by improving their confidence and performance, not by changing who they are [11]. Overall, culturally relevant pedagogy challenges low academic expectations and is rooted in the need to develop student knowledge to equip them for participation in economic stratification, empower them politically, and overcome oppression. Teachers have become more and more aware of the fluidity of cultural interactions. Today's educators are faced with the ever-growing responsibility of taking cultural issues seriously while working with culturally diverse students. Teachers are supposed to be professionals that handle individual and social issues with their professional knowledge. They are people who reflect and understand their societies as they assist in shaping those societies [7, 8]. In this regard, teachers should acknowledge their students' particularities, which could include their social backgrounds, family life, traditions, and religions. Teachers also need to keep in mind that, in the different contexts they inhabit, their students' identities are often associated with their cultures [12]. In these circumstances, one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to empower all students to deal with cultural diversity in a fair and respectful way, enhancing opportunities for everyone to develop skills in how to be, to manage, to understand, and to cope with the complexities of an unpredictable, changing world [13]. The main objective of this paper is to reflect on Culturally Responsive Teaching, to understand its theoretical framework, and to examine how it can assist teachers to work successfully in culturally diverse classrooms [14].

Definition and Principles

Culturally responsive teaching, simply put, is the development of the comprehensive perspective of ourselves as members of a culture, inquisitive about other cultures, and deeply connected to students' sense of self [8]. This view

of teaching requires a clear knowledge base about students that includes their various cultural, personal, and individual backgrounds [1, 3, 10]. Additionally, it requires that we deeply, not just superficially, actually care and are invested in our students getting their needs in order for them to learn and grow beyond their current level [15]. I personally have always thought about it this way, as teaching that uses diverse students' cultures as lenses for viewing education, learning, and interactions with the school experience [4]. Culturally responsive teaching uses students' cultures as springboards for teaching academic content and for developing and achieving educational goals, particularly critical and creative thinking skills [16-20]. I believe that the primary focus of culturally responsive teaching is to create a classroom environment in which both teachers and students learn from the influences of ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, race, religion, language, and other cultural dimensions, and are motivated by the differences. For me, the term "culturally responsive teaching" first came to light in 1994 in the foundational text by Geneva Gay titled "Mythbusters: 12 Myths about Culturally Responsive Teaching [21]." I had already been immersed in work related to cultural diversity and teaching as my master's thesis had focused on perspectives of African American students on their experiences in general education classes in a large predominantly white university [22]. Throughout my career before coming to the university, I had identified as a teacher serving culturally and educationally diverse students, so the term resonated with me, sparking my interest in the work [23-26].

Importance in Diverse Classrooms

I believe that this is the only model that gives teachers a comprehensive plan to begin to move away from the deficit model that sadly continues to be implemented in mainly diverse schools [18]. Sure, it will be a slow process to work with teachers who are not normally exposed to professional learning and the implications of this model, but I believe that the rewards lie in better students' test scores and infusion of culturally specific methods that give all students the opportunity to succeed [27]. I believe that any support that teachers can get and the steps and strategies presented are great, and I hope more districts choose to explore CRP as an effective tool to manage student behaviors, build self-esteem, and enhance student learning [28]. Culturally responsive teaching in diverse classrooms: In today's multicultural and globally interconnected communities, teachers face increasing challenges as they work to serve diverse populations of students in the United States [29]. This book is for educators who want a practical resource that will allow them to develop their own culturally responsive teaching practices [23]. It will give teachers great ideas for creating culturally responsive lessons, promote critical dialogue about the types of strategies to use with culturally diverse students, present methods of designing lesson and lifestyle reality check-ins that allow students the opportunity to process what they are learning in the classroom, and offer opportunities for reflection on teaching using culturally responsive techniques [30-34].

Understanding Diversity in DR CONGO

The dynamic of diversity in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is polemical [16]. There are four indigenous groups, with others having migrated from different parts of Africa. The largest are the Bantu ethnic groups, and these constitute 80% of the total population [33]. The second group, the Pygmies, are indigenous people of the DRC and make up only 1% of the population [23]. The third group, the Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups, are migrant groups who came to the DRC in the late 19th century [25]. The Bantu and Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups are the major source of ethnic diversity conflicts in eastern and western DRC, with the Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups being the minority engaged in subaltern activities due to being marginalized. Although this study did not identify the majority group, both Bantu and Nilo-Saharan ethnic groups have been involved in discrimination in eastern and northern regions of the country. The fourth group, of which there are very few, are the Luba-Kasai [35-39].

Cultural, Linguistic, and Ethnic Diversity

In International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, such diversity classrooms help in creating balanced, respectful, open-minded, and knowledgeable global citizens who work for peace in the world [40]. In those classrooms, parents and students contribute and nurture a learning environment that respects all people and their physical and psychological safety, trust, care, and mutual acceptance [41]. Such a learning environment acknowledges the increase in the gap between the African and the Western educational system [32, 25]. This gap is referred to as the third-order barrier. The African educational system needs reforms that help students access a curriculum suitable for their individual cultural, linguistic, and knowledge-building stages and which integrates Africentric ideas and perspectives [18]. A culturally responsive teacher must find a way to alleviate the negative impacts of the third-order barriers on student learning [42]. The teacher needs to explore each student's linguistic and cultural contexts, reflect about those contexts, recognize them in the curriculum, and construct and improve teaching practices [43-46]. It is important to understand and value the contributions and uniqueness of each student by invoking effective leadership skills and culturally responsive educational best practices [40]. Diversity is not only a part of life; it is a way of life. It is not a belief, but a way to see this earth's living kaleidoscope. In this world, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity are the norms as people of different cultures, languages, and ethnic groups peacefully cohabitate and interact at all levels [27]. In diverse classrooms, not only the teacher, but also the students from different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups contribute and view the world from uniquely different and advanced lenses [22]. In such diversity settings,

it is the responsibility of the teachers to embrace such diverse classrooms and become motivators and learners themselves to promote their students' academic achievements and advance their cultural and language proficiency without compromising their unique cultural attributes with other cultures [47].

Key Components of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Cooperative learning develops constructive interactions because all students are involved and active in describing their knowledge, evaluating new information, and acquiring a shared understanding [48]. A major part of CRS deals with how teachers control their nonverbal and verbal communication so that there is a warm environment capable of fostering student learning [49]. Educational leaders must address issues related to developing and/or adopting effective professional development programs that help in creating a culturally responsive teaching force [50]. Interaction is critical and would be seen not only in the way students work together on projects and problems, which are reflective of integrative learning and cooperative learning, but also between students and teachers (e.g., reciprocal teaching) [41]. Additionally, teachers need to be aware of their students' home-related experiences and values [24]. Such knowledge of each individual provides a pathway for also realizing the students' potential to achieve, and this is crucial for teachers as they marshal instruction whenever they need to individualize content and processes for diverse students [32]. Reflection by teachers on their own culture is an area that has been advocated so that they are conscious of their own values and beliefs and realize how deeply embedded these are in their instructional practices and delivery of the school curriculum [43]. This is especially true when dealing with individuals from diverse backgrounds. In this section, two main components of culturally responsive teaching are defined and discussed as they relate to the concept of culturally responsive teaching [44]. The components are teacher actions and interactions, which reflect respect for diversity and the teacher's expectations of various students, inclusive of those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, an attempt is made to define how these components relate to and affect student achievement [45-47]. These key components associated with culture that teachers need to recognize embrace how learners view themselves as learners, beliefs, values, and interactions, and generalized cultural views of a particular group [44].

Building Cultural Competence

Thus, this research was conducted by an educator who was interested in how she could support teachers in a community described to her by a close friend [48-51]. I learned from my friend that approximately 800 students are entrusted to teachers not only to be literate in three languages, but also to become fully contributing members to their society [52]. Ninety-five percent of students are marginalized according to the world's definition of marginalization. In addition, seventy percent of enrollment is comprised of aggressive orphan street children. I was interested in recurring themes found in the literature to teach students with different linguistic abilities [30]. Since I am not in a position to change the way instruction occurred in the classroom, I wanted to collect from primary Congo Congolese teachers what they valued as being important for positive pedagogy and what they practiced in the classroom. As well, I wanted to seek information from them that they would need to implement a culturally responsive curriculum [33]. I was particularly interested in promoting pedagogy that would increase the participation and motivation of students in the classroom as I understood that motivational strategies are underutilized in Congolese classrooms [53]. I was vested in learning about Culturally Responsive Teaching after a close friend of mine spoke of the many challenges faced by students and teachers in her primary classroom in DR Congo. The school where she has taught for over a decade is a missionary school for children who are "street children." The majority of students come to the school with no understanding of Swahili or French. Swahili and Lingala are the home languages spoken by the students, while French is the official language used in the schools [39]. Students arrive at school with varying degrees of literacy depending upon which, if either, language they speak in their homes [54]. Whether or not the native language is Swahili, all instruction is taught in French by teachers of different nationalities [55]. This research seeks to better understand and provide pedagogical solutions to the challenges of diversity so that individuals from different linguistic backgrounds can access positive educational experiences. The improvement of these experiences will assist the teachers in helping the students realize their full potential and become contributing and productive members of their communities [56-58].

Creating Inclusive Classroom Environments

In terms of equity in school, we see inclusive schools as being those where everyone feels accepted, students and staff enjoy high levels of social cohesion, and members of the school community work collaboratively to support all students [59]. Equity also suggests that students have access to diverse curricula. Creating welcoming and diverse learning environments where diverse approaches to learning are considered and embraced begins with teachers understanding their students and the self [60]. In creating equitable learning environments, teachers seek to recognize, embrace, and reflect the knowledge and the developmental experiences that many children/young people bring to classrooms and to encourage students to do the same with each other [61]. The strategy promises that communities understand strengths in differences, rather than reinforce narrow views and alienation. By cultivating this respect for diversity in the classroom, teachers encourage powerful learning environments by engaging students in meaningful classroom experiences [48]. Addressing the needs of all students in schools today means building

inclusive classroom and school environments that welcome and engage all students [45]. In inclusive classes, learning and teaching are holistic and address the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of every individual. This type of classroom is one where the teacher seeks to understand and embrace the individual students in the class, in search of knowledge of their inner strengths, areas for potential growth, and learning preferences [49]. This type of understanding of the students is accomplished well through the adoption and practice of culturally responsive approaches in teaching their classes [50]. In providing an inclusive classroom and practice, like any other values, teachers can start to build a foundation for effective, enthusiastic, and happy learning experiences for all students. The diversity within the class is seen and used as an asset to make learning a good experience [62-65].

Challenges and Solutions in Implementing CRT in DR CONGO

Another challenge is the fact that within the DRC, rural-dwelling children are not often included in international assessments because of logistical, financial, and language issues [66]. This does not just signify that the beneficial international educational aid and assistance focus is for the most part on the group of students with whom we are already successful, it hampers efforts for the greater cooperation between educators [67]. The language barriers that persist in the DRC also present a formidable challenge to implementing CRT. There is no unity in the language of TIR instruction because there is no unity in the perception or use of different languages in the DRC [68]. The administration of the DRC has made strides using a switch in policy to utilize six different mother tongues to help expand the reach of School of Excellence, but there is not enough shared harmony in some provinces to determine different languages in the scenarios where this may happen [69]. These are just a few problems that face teachers diligently trying to implement CRT in the Congo [56, 59]. The sad thing is that some of these problems could be easily overcome if only legitimate collaboration between stakeholders was allowed to mature [70]. There are many challenges to implementing the components of culturally responsive teaching in DRC [71]. The biggest issue is the fact that this might be the first time these teachers may have heard of these terms. One of the key components of culturally responsive teaching is the significance of information and information sources to the curriculum. The need to include significant content and examples in a curriculum that are relevant to students of diverse backgrounds, especially to students in the DRC, is extremely important [45]. The stories of the victims of the civil war in DRC need to continue to be heard. Stories about Zimbabweans and other guests needing refugee camps need to continue to be heard as well [72-74]. It is also important to teach students that growth always results from trials and tribulations [72]. These are concepts we need to continue to ensure our students understand. It sounds as if some teachers in the US are searching distantly and dully for diverse materials from which they can replace their existing content. In DR Congo, it is a no-brainer [75].

Resource Constraints

Nominator Representative (Summary). The US Department of State (DOS) Ethical Concerns. In addition, utilizing the entire cultural or social capital of students may serve to make incorrect distinctions between them and their teacher [49]. The CRT debates ensuing any lack of integrity in individual teachers or pre-service preparation programs that connect with students' cultural backgrounds [65, 68, 34]. These challenges are multiplied in a country such as DR Congo where ethnic, religious, and linguistic divides are often other ways to label, limit, and exclude accord much importance to achieving the objectives of elementary education, as well as having substantial experience in teaching methods and the use of the syllabus and curriculum of the rural areas of the DR Congo [72]. Though the teachers were rated highly, the administrators felt they lacked knowledge in contemporary educational issues. However, it should be noted that these educators received a significant amount of praise for their teaching in other subjects as well [55]. Please see the project narrative for further details [73]. Resource Constraints. CRT debaters contend that to be culturally responsive teachers must connect with their students through their cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and other aspects of their students' identities. Often incorporating students' backgrounds into the curriculum is cited. However, in our partner schools, the students' diversity, in the recommended CRT strategies, is not represented in the school or the surrounding neighborhoods [66]. Most of the teachers and students are aligned with a single ethnic, religious, linguistic, and gender group [74]. This situation virtually eliminates the diversity and need for most of the CRT strategies advocated by US CRT authors [75]. Although several of the U.S. based characteristics of CRT may apply to our project in DR Congo, there are two significant factors that need to be taken into consideration when examining how CRT may be interpreted for the DR Congo [76]. The first major difference is the DR Congo's lack of resources to effectively implement many of the CRT strategies found in U.S. classrooms [48]. The second is the nature of the Congolese society and its historical, educational, sociopolitical, and cultural experiences [77-79].

Professional Development Needs

Research has shown that teachers are willing to teach in diverse classrooms and that they do so willingly and with high levels of concern for their students [80]. However, they often lack awareness of their own beliefs about diversity and their resulting actions [39]. A classroom would ideally be a setting where teachers can understand and respect the nature and impact of the cultural diversity amongst their students [81]. With this in mind, many teachers and researchers do, in fact, challenge the racial hierarchy and class assumptions that have long been a part

of school culture in the current digital era. Regardless, it appears that tensions remain among all students. Teachers are generally not well-prepared to teach in culturally diverse classrooms [65, 66, 76]. Teacher education programs typically assume that almost all students are from the majority culture and therefore fail to adequately equip most teachers to effectively teach students of diverse backgrounds [56]. Almost all institutions of higher education worldwide offer teachers inadequate preparation for addressing cultural diversity [58]. In contrast, professional development programs for in-service teachers, perhaps because they are so numerous and varied, have yielded somewhat better results [70]. Regardless of where or how they prepared, however, no teacher has fully addressed the cultural diversity needs of all their students [80, 65, 66].

Best Practices and Case Studies

This chapter is based on interviews and observations of teachers in two Congolese schools [44]. While middle school and secondary school students endure lectures, assignments, and exams like students in many other countries, their daily experiences of using and interacting with their curricula diverge significantly from those faced by their peers in many other countries [76, 77]. To effectively teach our students, we must understand what makes them the students they are and what challenges come with their student role in their cultural contexts [82]. The cultural aspects of these students include ethnic identities, home languages, and values that can deeply affect students' plans for the future; their perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and their peers; and their academic performance and experiences of race, class, and religious, gender, or other intersecting identities [83]. Navigating the line between respect for local culture and conforming to international standards is a challenge educators face throughout the world [36]. Teachers in the DR Congo share similar challenges, and their student body is similarly diverse [84]. This chapter explores elements of diverse cultures in the DR Congo and some of the strategies teachers can and do use to embrace their students' experiences and help them learn multiple curricula [54]. A culturally responsive approach emphasizes culturally specific content and context, teaching skills that affirm students' cultural identity, and developing rich relationships that offer students specific support and thereby affirm their complex identities [48]. Teachers are experts in teaching the underprivileged [56]. Keeping children at the center of all instructional processes offers a promising view of future possibilities in a world of educational debate and controversies as to which curriculum should be pursued. Such offers a unique contribution to the educational debate in the Congolese context, advocating for culturally diverse atmospheres to be used and interact with [84].

Successful Implementation Examples

There is a growing body of examples in the education literature that also illustrates Culturally Responsive Pedagogy [85]. I write about my own experiences of traveling in DR Congo while encouraging my students to research the varied climates and landscapes of different African countries [79, 56, 77]. Le Floch-Dejours provides pre-service elementary teachers with a range of examples of CRT in math, science, social studies, and language arts [85]. African studies and education scholars Kinyanjui and Kambutu show the interconnections in a pedagogical approach where geography is infused with history, literature, and culture. Students' big questions determine group projects [86]. Home-grown knowledge is equally important as scientific facts [87]. Each group role-plays problems that may arise, such as differences in values, priorities, cash crops, climate change, indigenous rights, etc. We are thankful to these authors for providing concrete examples of praxis in the fight for social justice and the full inclusion of all students from all backgrounds [88]. Remember "the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." Greetings to my dear readers. We have illustrated our key concepts with instructional strategies that were being used in our geography classroom at the time of our data collection [49]. We do not, for one moment, suggest that these strategies are the only ways to respond to cultural diversity in our classrooms [46]. The classroom contains mini-brain banks of innovative pedagogy by teachers who creatively exploit their students' prior experience wherever their students are academically [53]. Then, as new topics are introduced, students from the previously-owned culture become press-ganged, grateful third-party experts (subsidized by the class teacher) to help with instruction, learning, and assessment [83-88]. Any child with knowledge can participate and engage the class in debate [81].

CONCLUSION

The implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Democratic Republic of Congo is crucial for addressing the educational needs of its diverse student population. Despite challenges such as resource constraints and the need for professional development, CRT offers a promising approach to enhance student learning and engagement. By recognizing and valuing the unique cultural backgrounds of students, educators can create more inclusive and effective classroom environments. The success stories and best practices highlighted in this paper underscore the potential of CRT to transform education in DRC, promoting equity and preparing students for a globally interconnected future. Continued efforts in professional development and resource allocation are essential for the widespread adoption and success of CRT in the region.

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