Becoming Culturally Competent: Adapting Education to Contemporary Social Norms

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Abstract: *The rise in public awareness regarding the importance of cultural proviency is traced through a brief historical overview of pivotal events in the American educational system. Then two important levels of analysis, administrative and teacher-student, are used so as to show how cultural profiency can be integrated into the educational system. Finally some simple recommendations are provided.*

1. Introduction

The historical background shows that the structure of the U.S. society was formed by the immigrants from various cultural backgrounds (Wenze, 2004). The definition of "melting pot society" is often used to reflect the character of the U.S. society. That definition used to refer to how minorities had to remain silent and be assimilated to the dominant culture.

When the Civil Rights movement occurred in 1960s, transformational change occurred in many sectors of U.S. society including education (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008). Since then, the non-discrimination act has always been one of the main issues in U.S. society. One of the first movements in educational field started as having interracial schools and classrooms. The cultural integrations in education became more significant when President Clinton introduced the No Child Left Behind Act started in year 2000. With the policy, minority students of low socioeconomic family are more encouraged to attend school. The educational trend nowadays is focusing on cultural proficiency (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). Cultural proficiency is the ability to see the differences in cultures and respond positively and affirmingly.

It is essential for educational leaders to create and retain culturally competent environment in schools. There are many issues and challenges for administrators to concern in both academically and emotionally. This paper

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presents possible ways to improve cultural proficiency in schools through the structure of administration and student-teacher approaches. It also includes the importance of the issues, solutions, and possible limitations.

To become culturally competent, the school needs supports from not only the administrators but also from other members of the institute such as students and teachers as well (Lopez, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006). The administrators function as policy makers whereas teachers are responsible for designing the culturally competent approaches toward the students. The successful outcome of having culturally competent students will later have a positive impact in the society. In order to meet cultural proficiency standard, administrators should formulate policies that include the aspects of; developing cultural consciousness, recruiting multicultural staff, participating in multicultural community, designing academic curriculum that promotes cultural proficiency, and formulating discipline that decrease the likelihood of having minority students fall in to the stereotype.

2. Administrators

Previous research showed that one of the effective approaches to start promoting cultural proficiency is by confronting personal and professional resistance (Arredondo et al., 2008). This approach is the same as how psychotherapy has to begin with disclosing the person's issues. It is essential for the administrators to conduct workshops among staff members and teachers that encourage them to confront personal cultural resistance. According to the study, the resistance can be divided into three categories; xenophobia resistance, unexamined privilege, and pseudointellectual resistance.

Xenophobia resistance has a character as fear of foreigners with the belief that they are lawless (Arredondo et al., 2008). Unexamined privilege is the unintentional act of being classist, racist, and sexist behavior. Pseudointellectual resistance is the general assumption of particular race based on the interaction from previous experience. The finding of personal cultural resistance will help the administrators as well as the staff members gain insight regarding their

attitude and beliefs toward people of other cultures. On the other hand, there might be a limitation in the workshop in a way that people might show result that follows social conformity since it is quite likely that people are able to tell what type of result is expected (Aiken & Groth-Marnat, 2006).

Another approach that the school administrators can use is to hire staff members and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds (Vaughn, 2007). By having multicultural staff in the school, it is a role model for students to see that multicultural interaction is a general situation that can be found on a daily basis. Moreover, multicultural staff can be a figure that minority students can relate to.

In order to have a successful recruitment, the human resource department needs to be culturally competent (Vaughn, 2007). It is important that the interviewers avoid seeking whether the interviewees fit the ideal personality according to the cultural norms. For instance, a Japanese interviewee might avoid eye contact and apologize frequently during the conversation without any reasons. Such characters should not be viewed as the lack of self-esteem but rather the personality of a person from that culture. The limitation of this approach is that it might be difficult for some schools to recruit multicultural staff considering the demographic of the local population. The possible solution for this problem is by giving incentive to minority candidates such as housing, health insurance, plane ticket to visit their home country, etc.

Moreover, the administrator should formulate a policy on promoting cultural proficiency through the school curriculum. This approach can be done by including exchange program for students and teachers (Colling & Wilson, 1998), having school routine that promotes diversity (Ming & Dukes, 2006), and participating in multicultural community (Nelson & Guerra, 2008).

Previous research by Colling et al. (1998) showed that short-term international academic exchange program gives students the opportunity to engage in real life multicultural experience. The students have an opportunity to experience culture shock, be a minority, and get to communicate in a second language. This approach helps students developing

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empathy toward minority people and become more open minded. In order to practically apply this program to the school, the exchange program has to be done in a time and cost efficient way. It can be done by having an exchange program to the school nearby where most students are minorities. That way, students can get the experience without having to spend time and money on travelling. The limitation to this approach is that the exchange program might not be long enough for students to develop understanding toward people from other cultures. Some students might get to experience the exchange program only up to the cultural frustration period and become more bias toward the minorities.

Another approach that administrators can do to promote diversity is by fostering cultural competence through school-based routines (Ming et al., 2006). This approach can be done by formulating daily activities that bring multicultural concern to students and teachers. The examples of activities can be one-on-conversations with students from diverse backgrounds or arrange classroom discussions that highlight cultural diversity every morning.

The administrators can also promote cultural proficiency by formulating policy on community participation in both public and private (Nelson et al., 2008). According to Nelson et al. (2008), community participation is divided into two categories; public events and private events. Each type of event has advantage in a different aspect. Public community events allow teachers and students to have real life experience with people from diverse cultural background. They get to see the actual lifestyle and the surroundings of the community. However, public community events usually give the general view of cultural diversity at the surface level.

On the other hand, private community event often give teachers and students less impression than the public one (Nelson et al., 2008). Since private community event is usually held at the institute, teacher and student often miss the opportunity to experience the real surroundings of the place. However, private community event gives more opportunity to experience cultural diversity at the profound level. Since private community events often include guest speakers who specialize in cultural study, students and

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teachers can have the opportunity to interact with the experts.

The administrators should keep in mind that minority students of certain ethnicities often being labeled negatively (Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008). The impact of this problem often leads to the issue of unfair penalty. Previous research showed that teachers often give harsher punishment to minority students whose ethnicities are negatively labeled. At the same time, some students of certain ethnicities also develop negative traits that are labeled in their ethnicities (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). The reason is because students at the adolescence stage are searching for their identity. The role model of some ethnicities are often in a negative profile such as how African American rappers often represent violence, drugs and sex. Because of this, students of some ethnicities often adopt the negative role models as their identity.

It is essential for administrators to formulate a policy that will help eliminate negative behavior among minority students whose ethnicities are often labeled negatively. According to the study by Day-Vines et al. (2008), the Youth Together Program in Skyline High School in Oakland was an effective solution to this issue. The program allows the administrators and minority students whose ethnicities were labeled as prosocial to discuss about unfair disciplinary procedures at the school. At the same time, the school counselor also works together with the administrators and the students to help them reaching the compromise. The school counselor helps students refine their problem solving, personal advocacy, self-management, empowerment, and social competence skills.

3. Teachers-Students

In order to have culturally competent at school, it is necessary that teachers attempt to infuse culturally relevant interactions among the students in the classroom and during the school hours (West-Olatunji, Behar-Horenstein, Rant, & Cohen-Phillips, 2008). According to the study by West-Olanji et al. (2008), the use of cultural relevant lessons helps African American students improve the level of achievement. The reason is because cultural relevant lessons

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give minority students the opportunity to relate their ethnicity to the subject. Moreover, the lessons allow teachers to analyze the logic of students' critical thinking based on their cultural background.

Another approach that teachers can use to promote cultural proficiency is by including topics related to cultural diversity in the classroom (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux, & Baeza, 2006). This approach can be done especially in literature class by choosing the text books that include cultural diversity topics (Drucker, 2003). That way, students can gain more insight about other cultures. The research also showed that the use of cultural diversity topic in ESL class help increasing the level of attention among international students and therefore it leads to the increase in academic achievement.

Moreover, teachers should encourage minority students to participate more in the classroom (Guerra & Nelson, 2008). There are several reasons why minority students tend to give less opinion in the classroom. One apparent reason is because of language barrier. Another reason is because of the absence of relationship between the conversation topic and their lifestyle. It is essential that teachers should help providing the opportunity for minority students to interact with classmates. One way is to start the dialogue that allows minority students to express their ideas. For instance, teachers can begin the conversation about Christmas and New Year celebration in Anglo American culture to the whole class and then ask minority students whether their culture have any celebrations that are similar. By doing this, minority students can participate in the class with the related topic that will give more insight to the classmates as well. Moreover, teachers can also use this skill to develop cross cultural relationship with students, family, and the community.

However, teachers should keep in mind that students of the same minority race might not be equally familiar with their culture (Koehne, 2005). The reason is because each student has different length of time of being in the United States and therefore their point of view over the subject might vary. Because of this, the discussion topic should be carefully selected to each minority individuals.

Another approach that teacher can use to encourage cross cultural participation is by using activity that group students from different cultural background together (Guerra et al., 2008). This activity will allow multicultural students to discuss about their similarities and differences in lifestyles within the assigned group. Once the students realize that there are certain similarities in each person regardless of cultural background, they will become less biased against classmates of other cultures.

In order to have a successful culturally competent relationship among students and teachers, it is essential that teachers have insight about characteristics of people of other cultures (West-Olatunji et al., 2008). Teachers should learn how to approach students of other cultures and share this information to students in the classroom. That way, students will learn what is expected and how to approach people of other cultures. For instance, students from Asia will learn that low context communication is accepted in the U.S. whereas American students will learn that avoiding eye contact is a part of Asian Culture.

In conclusion, cultural proficiency in schools can be achieved by the collaboration of administrators and teachers in formulating school policies. The success of becoming culturally competent involves the support from administrators, teachers, students, and community. The ultimate goal of promoting cultural proficiency in schools is to have culturally competent students who will carry this idea to make change in society in the future. There are several obstacles that might be encountered such as time constraints, budget constraints, lack of community support, *inter alia.*

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