Uncovering Factors that Influence Educators to Use Student Knowledge and Identity to Keep Marginalized Students Engaged

Thesis Summary:

Introduction and Context

The goal of my research was to determine what factors influence educators to use student knowledge and identity to help keep them engaged. In addition to these factors I sought to uncover what was needed to enact this style of teaching in the classroom.

I interviewed four educators that teach in Toronto. All four of the participants had a shared vision of empowering students through cultural referents and 2) a commitment to Equity. By interviewing teachers that use student culture and knowledge in their daily practice, I was able to discover what factors influence educators to consider the individuals in their classroom and teach through valuing student’s various identities (race, culture, gender, etc).

I decided to do this research because using cultural identity is a useful tool for engaging students in the classroom. I wanted to find out what was necessary to enact this style of teaching as well as determine influencing factors. By uncovering these factors, I can determine why some educators may not be using this method. Administrators can gain insight into ways they can support their staff with this pedagogy, for example, through professional development and technology. Educators can learn the various ways that this teaching style is implemented in the classroom by considering the findings.

Conceptual Framework

My research focused on what factors influence educators to optimize the learning of all students in their classrooms. Anti-oppressive education and culturally relevant pedagogy are frameworks that, when combined, can result in the examination of power relations between dominant groups and the Other within the educational institution and it’s pedagogical application in the classroom.

The combination of CRP and anti-oppressive theoretical perspectives enable researchers to determine culturally relevant ways to enable students to see connections between their lives experiences and
how oppressed (i.e. according to race but applicable also to gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) students are situated in education and society.

Research Questions and Methods

My key research questions were:

What factors influence educators to use culturally relevant teaching practices that engage marginalized students?

What do educators need to use culturally relevant pedagogy to enable equitable relations within the classroom and empower students?

What are the limitations and challenges for educators using culturally relevant pedagogy?

My research took a phenomenological approach to a qualitative study. I chose to interview four teachers to examine varied perspectives on what influences educators to use a particular teaching style that values student identity and knowledge in the classroom. The method was comprised of four half-hour semi-structured interviews.

Significant Findings and Why They Matter

Teaching practices that value student identity and the knowledge they possess helps keep students engaged in the classroom. In this study, various factors influenced the use of this teaching style. In addition to these influencing factors, participants indicated various needs that would support these pedagogical practices.

Technology in the classroom plays a huge role with all four educators. By having access to the technology they are able to be culturally relevant in their teaching methods. Technology engages students by remaining current. It provides an opportunity to challenge dominant norms through
representation of marginalized groups and creates an opportunity for educators and students to connect via a medium that is a huge part of youth culture in the present era.

In order to facilitate culturally relevant methods in the classroom, these four educators went above and beyond their call of duty. In addition to using their own technology, these educators invest large amounts of time supporting and getting to know students, in order to incorporate and value their identity in the classroom.

All four educators mentioned their personal experiences as having an influence on their classroom practice. For three out of the four participants, high expectations was a culture they experienced growing up and they transfer these expectations into the classroom. While the data showed that personal experience does influence the use of culturally relevant teaching methods in the classroom, it was also indicated that personal experience is not necessary to be able to create a classroom environment where expectations are set high.

Funding was also a common theme with the participants in this study. Funding influences a culturally relevant teaching style by providing access to resources such as technology, parental engagement, professional development, experiential learning and providing time to get to know students. For example, Pam states:

“So basically, we need to have more money. With the money, we would do those things. Teacher retraining, including technology in the classroom, fields trips, giving the proper support for students so that could be like having a full time social worker, a full time guidance counsellor, bringing in the public health nurse to deal with issues when it comes to health and nutrition, having a proper nutrition program. All those things need money to fund. And all those things, if we had it, would help keep the kids in school.”

This example shows that funding could provide opportunities to support a students’ multiple identities. By considering all the contributing factors to student identity and supporting students where it is needed, students could be more engaged in the classroom.

Student awareness also played a role with all four educators. They described their students using demographics of race, culture, religion, familial status and background. Being aware of student
diversity, influences these educators in their quest to be culturally relevant. For example, Brian mentions:

“Like in Chemistry for example, when we talked about an exhibit, in the class again, half the class is Muslim, there’s an exhibit called Sultans of Science and it was nice to bring that into the classroom where it kind of acknowledges knowledge from other areas that are not Eurocentric in origin. So it’s nice having. I kind of brought that in because a lot of the students were maybe not as accepting of other types of science from other countries.”

In the above example, Brian chooses to give credibility to the knowledge of other countries to provide an alternative to the dominant Eurocentric curriculum. He selects this alternate source of information based on the religion of the majority of his students.

The data shows that there is a need to engage students in the classroom and in the school environment. The word “need” arises a number of times in conjunction with the topic of engaging students. Gaps with student success, particularly with the marginalized students that the participants mention, is a pressing issue to these educators. Structural changes such as allocation of funds and professional development for educators need to take place so we can reach out to these marginalized students.

Implications

This findings of this research is important because administrators and educators can have a better understanding of what is needed to implement this valuable culturally relevant pedagogy into the classroom. The teachers in this study went above and beyond their call of duty to ensure that marginalized student identities are valued. Allocating funding to support culturally relevant pedagogy could help prevent teacher burnout as well as bring about learning environment that supports and engages marginalized students.