
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: This paper focuses on ways to engage students in culturally diverse classrooms. Four different modalities that allow teachers to assess and develop culturally proficient practices are introduced. Effective student engagement practices as they relate to classroom instruction are also outlined.

Keywords: Cultural Proficiency, Student Engagement, Diversity, Differentiation.

Introduction: Culturally proficient educators mindfully and intentionally engage in their own professional learning to develop communication skills that enable them to better offer access and equitable learning and engagement opportunities for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The key concept of cultural proficiency is that learning begins with us as educators understanding our assumptions. As a result, we can retain those that are productive and reshape those that impede our ability to be effective when working with culturally diverse students.

Cultural proficiency as defined by Lindsey (2012) is an *inside-out* approach that fosters an institutionalized belief system that focuses on what students can do as opposed to deficit belief systems that concentrate on what students cannot do. Culturally Proficient schools, teachers, and educators challenge themselves to examine deeply held assumptions that serve as barriers to current educational policies and practices that negatively impact students. The outcome is to develop core values that serve and guide educators in lowering and eventually eradicating individual and systemic institutional barriers to student learning and student engagement (Quezada, Rodriguez-Valls, & Lindsey, 2016).

A question we begin with when seeking to become culturally proficient educators is how to define student engagement and what it means to engage students in 21st century culturally diverse classrooms. This paper seeks to address this initial question by focusing on innovative pedagogies and practices. We introduce four modalities that can assist teachers to move forward in developing culturally proficient student engagement practices in their curriculum and in their pedagogical practices. This allows us to fully engage students in our schools and classrooms, with a particular focus on culturally diverse students both in-and-out of classroom and school programs. Effective student engagement practices as they relate to classroom instruction are also outlined.

Student Engagement: Marzano, Pickering & Heflebower (2011) profess that student engagement “happens as a result of a teacher’s careful planning and execution of research-based strategies” and have defined student engagement as “a combination of both short-term attention and longer-term engagement.” They believe that engagement results when students answer in the affirmative to the following questions: “How do I feel?”, “Am I interested?”, “Is this important?” and “Can I do this?”.

As a result of our work with hundreds of teachers and students over the years, we’ve identified and agreed upon four modalities for student engagement that align with existing research (Piowski, 2016).

1. *Making Connections*-Creating a Spark
2. *Significance*-WHY is my learning important?

3. *Creating Classroom Community-Who needs WHAT?*
4. *Self Efficacy-Ownership of learning.*

Each modality is accompanied by classroom “look-fors” and possible strategies. The student engagement strategies identified are differentiated based on the student diversity of the class (Piowlski, 2016). Below we briefly discuss the four modalities. Table 1 provides a summary and accompanies the description of each modality by including the key indicators of what a classroom community should “look like and feel like” as well as possible strategies that teachers can use to enhance student engagement.

Modality #1: Making Connections-Creating a Spark: Creating a spark to ignite the enthusiasm for learning requires the impetus of the personal connection. A teacher’s knowledge of their students (families, culture, beliefs, values and background) and what interests them are a catalyst for engagement in curriculum standards. Standards are the expectation of what students need to know and be able to do given the content provided. The research-based strategies and supports utilized are the roadmap. If a student is unsure of the direction or is not motivated to strive towards the destination, that is an obstacle that many teachers are unable to move their students past. It is through sharing a clear learning target and a specific destination (expectations) with a connection to their prior academics and lived experiences, that educators are able to guide students to the learning destination. The variables in this journey are multiple perspectives, opportunities, and academic strengths and weaknesses.

Relevance: Making learning relevant in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms where student and teacher experiences are different is extremely important; teachers need to recognize the sensitivity that they must have when planning and instructing. According to (Classroom Culture, 2013) the four areas of cultural awareness that teachers need to keep at the forefront of their practice are:

1. An asset-based view of youth and unfamiliar identity groups
2. A commitment to avoiding and challenging stereotypes
3. A sense of openness and cultural humility
4. A willingness to let students define their own identities

Marzano and Pickering (2011) address the necessity of making connections to students’ lives, this includes encouraging culturally responsive application of knowledge. Not only is making connections essential to the initial “buy in” of student engagement in learning, it has also been highlighted as an important assessment indicator. Taylor, C., Kokka, K., Darling –Hammond, L., et al., (n.d) argue that when students are able to connect knowledge to their own lives, it has a positive effect on both engagement and student performance. For example, when a student in California’s Central Valley can make a connection with the feud between Shakespeare’s Capulets and Montagues as being similar to the gang violence within their neighborhood, such a meaningful and illuminating connection needs to be encouraged and acknowledged rather than dismissed as irrelevant. Lindsey and Arriaga (2016), share that educators either open or close doors to student access of achievement; they explain that to open doors to student access means that “student’s cultural experiences are valued and viewed as assets rather than deficit experiences” (p. 21).

Capitalizing on the knowledge a teacher has purposefully gained about all students and building instruction around that prior knowledge, enables meaningful and relevant connections with the concept. Providing this equitable framework will guarantee that opportunity and access to quality teaching is available to all students.

Differentiation as A Form of Cultural Proficiency: As a teacher, one needs to focus on what is being assessed. If what is being assessed is the ability to compare and contrast, then what differentiation is being provided for various learners to demonstrate that ability? Will all students be required to read two texts and use a Venn diagram? Such a method of assessment, while seemingly adequate for most,

manages to sideline those with writing needs, spatial recognition needs or even fluency needs. Such students may have fully mastered the ability to compare and contrast, yet will not be able to demonstrate that understanding given the method of assessment. There are other strategies that can allow them to show their proficiency. Highlighting text in different colors to show the similarities and differences could be an alternative. A concept sort is another, where a student listens to the two texts to compare and contrast the topic and is not hindered by their reading fluency. Differentiating content, the learning process and the assessed product will allow *all* students to succeed. Equitable access to concepts and assessment will not only ignite the spark but build excitement for extended learning.

Modality #2 Significance-Why is My Learning Important?

If educators plan to motivate and engage students from the heart or motivate students towards specific learning targets-engaging students in why what they are learning is valuable is a crucial first step. The why can be addressed by taking the time to connect what is being taught with what students know and what students need to know. One of the most effective ways to teach students how to assess content relevance is to have them pose the question and look for the answer. For example, if the concept is figurative language in an English class, have students come up with ways in which that knowledge can help them in real life. Students come up with scenarios, such as when giving a compliment to someone they like, or describing a significant moment in their lives, or arguing for a cause they believe in, where they can see how the mastery of descriptive language could prove beneficial.

Not providing the “Why” to students and reducing the avenues for them to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency is not only a cultural barrier but an opportunity barrier. If a student does not recognize the importance of their learning, the investment towards optimal learning will be limited (Taylor, C., Kokka, K., Darling -Hammond, L., et al., (n.d)). It is the intentional communication to students of what they are learning, how it will benefit them directly, the strategies they will use and how they will be assessed with differentiated pathways, that help create a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Modality #3: Creating Classroom Community-Who Needs What?

A classroom community is built on the academic and personal assets of students, families and educators. The community of learners is not static, rather it is fluid, meaning that all believe they contribute to the welcoming atmosphere and that as they learn about each other they can draw on each other’s strengths to enhance their learning and understanding of a global society. It is important to create a space where students feel safe to take risks, both academically and socially. A culturally proficient teacher is able to model this behavior by being open and sharing their own ups and downs as a learner (Bathina, 2014). It is an atmosphere of mutual caring respect where students are being supported according to individual needs. This atmosphere goes beyond the evident physical atmosphere, which should radiate the cultural pride of the diversity of student creativity, student supports, anchor charts, student work, and a teacher’s investment in valuing and building an atmosphere that is both felt and seen. It is an environment where all are supported despite their challenges, embraced for all of their gifts and given grace when they stumble. This is the invisible environment that only a teacher who is culturally proficient can build upon.

Marzano and Pickering (2011) assert that building positive teacher-student and peer relations, using effective pacing, physical movement and a teachers’ ability to demonstrate enthusiasm, intensity and humor are essential to creating the optimal environment where student needs are valued. Further, Gay (2010) states that caring with a culturally responsive context automatically places teachers in a kind of different emotional and academic partnership with students. This relationship is anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation that breeds an unshakeable belief that marginalized students not only *can* but *will* improve their school achievement (p.52).

Educators who become culturally proficient are able to not only be honest about their reactions and presumptions about students’ cultural dimensions but can strengthen efficacy by creating learning opportunities that promote the existing diversity within the class (Karns, Lindsey, & Myatt, 2011). An

environment must be fostered where students understand what they need to learn in various content areas as well as what their classmates need to be supported. In such an environment, there is an emphasis on equity and not equality, where each student gets what they need with acceptance and support from the classroom community.

Modality #4: Self-Efficacy-Ownership of Learning: Encouraging students to self-regulate their learning and behavior requires structures and expectations where they are invested in their achievements and can evaluate what is working for them while making necessary adjustments to what is not. It is ownership of one's own learning that promotes students' investment in success, and enables them to be metacognitive about the curriculum and the strategies they are using. When students clearly understand what they are learning and why it is important, and are then provided choices in how they will gain that knowledge, there is growth in ownership and self-efficacy. It is recognized that the importance of self-efficacy through teacher modeling, providing effective verbal feedback, and student tracking of their learning progress supports students' ability to advocate for their learning (Marzano and Pickering (2011). Students who understand what type of learner they are and the type of learners their classmates are, gain an understanding of the support needed to not only expedite their progress but also that of their fellow classmates.

Students who can not only express their thoughts in terms of what they understand and are able to do but can also explain what they need to overcome learning obstacles are functioning at a high level of self-efficacy. A student who can explain, for example, that they are really good at recollecting important dates from history but are unable to put the events into a cohesive narrative and need help with creating timelines and transitions, is engaging in metacognition and self-monitoring and can advocate for specific targeted help. Teachers can provide supports, questions and modeling to students, which would allow them to develop self-monitoring strategies and the ability to advocate for further understanding to fill in the gaps needed to deepen their critical thinking on a topic. It is that ability to reflect on our learning and actually be able to act on that reflection where self-efficacy can be considered transformational.

Conclusion: This paper provides a discussion on what it means to be a culturally proficient teacher that can fully engage students in our classrooms and particularly with culturally diverse students in order to ensure that all students are learning to their optimal potential. The focus includes what it takes to close teachers' cultural proficiency gaps through the four modalities. Each provides insightful activities that provoke reflection and action—a process through which teachers will adopt a more humanistic pedagogy where they refuse to engage in practices that dehumanize while they effectively transform, through their democratic pedagogy the “ugliness of human misery, social injustices, and inequalities” (Macedo, 2012; Thiong'o, 1994, p.3). We believe that a deeper understanding of what classroom and student engagement should “look like and feel like” are important factors and that classrooms must be organized to meet the culturally and linguistic student needs while creating a welcoming learning environment; and that curriculum and instruction must reflect the backgrounds, prior academic knowledge, and lived experiences of students.

We define student engagement from a broad perspective; by seeing how culturally proficient teachers make connections in order to increase student engagement and self-efficacy as well as how teachers and students make meaning by answering the “why” of learning. Student engagement was discussed through a cross-cultural and critical thinking perspective, integrating relevance in order to further engage culturally diverse students in today's schools and classrooms.

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