Luke Callahan - #3
Cultural Responsiveness Assignment

Introduction

Through conversations and prior knowledge of the educators interviewed and observed for this assignment, there is a level of respect and authentic desire to understand cultural diversity that exists. However, if an opportunity to promote cultural responsiveness does not present itself naturally in the classroom, the educators must be taken at their word on how they might approach a culturally diverse learner.

For this assignment, I needed to make the assumption that answers given in the interview portion were authentic as I was unable to capture any major cultural responsiveness in practice in the classroom through my observations. The makeup of the district where both educators are employed would be considered minimally diverse. Both educators were more than willing to discuss their cultural responsiveness surrounding diverse learners. The practice, however, couldn't be witnessed in depth by my observations. Some of the curriculum ties discussed were having the the ability to bring guest speakers into the classroom for cultural perspective, making authentic connections through a cultural lesson or relying on a team of teachers to brainstorm when a situation arose where a diverse learner needed support. These were just a few of the ideas shared by the educators on making connections.

As referenced by Educator B in the interview portion of this assignment, a relatively new Global Scholars Program is available to students at the high school. Through cultural immersion trips across the world, students and teacher chaperones, visit foreign countries to dive deeper into a better understanding of the world around them. There is also a very small foreign exchange program at the high school level, that exposes students to various cultures closer to home. Although important and impactful to those involved, these remain small, infrequent opportunities for most students, including the teachers I interviewed and observed.

Also, a major component of professional development taking place in this district, which also happens to be impacting Educator B, is the concept of Universal design for learning [1] (UDL). As will be shared in the interview and also a small taste in the observation, supporting unique learners is taking shape in the classroom. Easy to understand, but more difficult to implement, UDL was discussed as a real opportunity for Educator B to provide differentiated instruction to diverse learners.

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[1] Universal design for learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. Watch the video below to get an overview of UDL.

As I have come to witness, not just in my dealings with the teachers interviewed and observed for this assignment, but with the teaching profession as a whole, in today's day and age, it is necessary and nearly a requirement that teacher's provide differentiated instruction to every child. Providing a free and appropriate public education requires not only having a successful impact on diverse learners in terms of cultural significance, but on every other measurable and quantifiable data coming out of the classroom through standardized tests and teacher observations. Teachers have a difficult task of realizing all students are unique learners and must be culturally responsive. They must also work within the constraints of large classroom sizes, where individual learning opportunities aren't always available.

Interviews

"With the cultural makeup of the district, particularly the students who are in my classroom, there are fewer moments of exposure to diversity than many districts across the state," said Educator A when asked to discuss demographics in the classroom. Educator A continued, "I see a good deal of students in my classroom and get a chance to know each one. However, being an educator, I simply look at my students as unique learners. I really do."

"Trusting in my ability is key. I have been working on getting solid PD (professional development) and have been trying to give students a voice. Sometimes I need to allow myself some time to listen more to students with diverse backgrounds or cultures. It's a role I am willing to play and give the student the task of teacher and myself the student," said Educator A. "There are a few students in particular that I have been able to size up pretty quickly, but they are strong supports at my school. I work with some great teachers, and if I need help with a diverse learner as you call it, I have my team to bounce ideas off of."

"We often bring in diverse speakers or members of the community and our students (at the high school) have opportunities to visit foreign countries and dive deep into the culture of the country they are visiting," said Educator B. "Does this (visits to foreign countries in a school setting) impact my teaching? I think it may bleed over into a better foundation for topics that arise in our curriculum and in lessons I teach. I think the value add is in having well-rounded students, capable of understanding the world around them, even if they aren't surrounded every moment by many different cultures here at home," Educator B said.

When asked about any particular curricular developments that would enhance cultural responsiveness or assist diverse learners in the classroom, Educator B stated, "I've been looking into the UDL movement and I am finding this fascinating and eye opening in the way people learn." Educator B continued, "with technology in particular, for students

who may have different learning styles or backgrounds, UDL supports different ways to ensure that students know the material. I take this as a chance to give different ways to learn and share what they know, but I am still working this into my daily routines.

Observations
Observation of Educator A on Wednesday April 15, 2015 from 12:00-12:45 pm

Immediately after lunch, a classroom of students were engaged in an activity with Educator A leading the discussion. After being broken up into groups of five, students began to brainstorm on the assignment. Educator A reminded students a second time how the activity would work and that a check-in with each group on this collaborative project would take place. There were written notes on the whiteboard as helpful reminders and each student had access to a Google Chromebook for the research portion. After observing a quick check-in with the first group, a second group, all girls, had two students off task, Educator A was quick to remind the students of their goals for the classroom and received some feedback on a new piece of software, available on a website, that students were looking into for the assignment. Educator A thought is was a good idea and told both girls that, "Now isn't the time for the research of the software", but that Educator A "would look into the feasibility before the next class."

Without squashing the idea brought to the table by the student, Educator A successfully took "student voice" and redirected the students back to the activity at hand. It was a seemingly win-win scenario.

The last group Educator A checked in on was culturally diverse. There were no tell tale signs that Educator A wasn't as actively engaged in responding to the needs of these learners as the other students. If anything, this particular group seemed the most affable of the groups and on task the longest during the activity. Enough so that there was some time for Educator A and the students to dive into the material at a faster pace, with some small-talk mixed in. With the faster pace, it was clear to see that better results were to be had by the students in this group than in other groups. Many of the individuals and groups needed more nudges and reminders throughout the 45-minute observation and the teacher did show cultural responsiveness.

As my time ran out, students were continuing to work independently, then as a group, and finally soliciting Educator A's feedback on an as needed basis. There was a solid "hum" in the classroom of authentic conversations that were leading to the completion of the activity. Educator A remained impactful with their "nudges", which varied on the different groups assigned.

Observation of Educator B on Wednesday, April 29, 2015 from 2:00-2:30 pm

In a small group setting in a computer lab, Educator B worked with students, individually on a revising a writing assignment. The students working with Educator B, had submitted late or poorly worded assignments and were being given final chances to correct and fix their writing project before the final revision was submitted. Educator B went from student to student, making eye contact, making sure students were on task and working individually with the problems each student faced. After about 15-minutes, Educator B provided a quick break for students to stand and stretch. It was a little difficult to reign the students in and bring that back into the fold of the assignment.

As was discussed in the interview, I was curious to see if any UDL approaches could be observed, but don't believe there was any true opportunity. Students were working on physical paper corrections, while some students worked within their Google Drive accounts to access the changes to their writing. Educator B did mention at multiple times that students would be able to connect with Educator B on the shared Google Doc to make corrections, after the class was complete. After checking in with one student, who was relatively quiet during my observation time, the student confirmed that Educator B was responsive to emails saying, "you can expect, at most, one day for a response." This small touch by Educator B could have a successful impact on diverse learners, who may not always feel inclined to speak up in class, but do provide deeper insights and thoughts in a digital medium like email. This concept of offering multiple approaches to interact with and teach students promotes differentiated instruction.

Students were continuing to work on their edits and changes as my time expired during the observation.

Reflection

As a final reflection, the connections made between what the educators stated in their personal interview and what they brought to their respective classrooms during the small observation window were evident, even if on a smaller scale. In Educator A's scenario, it was enjoyable to see the comments made during the interview, surrounding the importance of student voice in supporting diverse and unique learners and the role reversal that can ensue when a teachers provides the student to be the leader in the classroom. The students during the group activity had a seemingly better idea on how to help complete the assignment and were given "voice" and felt respected by Educator A, who acknowledged the group's request, but redirected them back to the activity, telling students that the website would be researched before the next class. As an aside, after checking in with Educator A, the recommended software website was not a good fit, and equally important was that this information was relayed to the students.

For Educator B, the mention of differentiated instruction through UDL was exciting to hear, but in the observation, there wasn't the room to explore a UDL option for the completion of the assignment. Still, when a powerful mindsight from a teacher includes the workings of UDL, the fireworks are never far behind. Educator B did support and offer multiple pathways (handwritten and digital) to complete the assignment and support came by both in-person and through digital connections made outside of class.

When I look at the observation scenarios, I think both educators could be seen as strong facilitators in a constructivist philosophical approach. Students were active participants in their learning, being guided by a facilitator. Specifically in Educator B's interview response surrounding UDL, there was at least the inclination to be an adaptive force in the classroom, looking for varying ways to support diverse learners and enhance cultural responsiveness as well.

Even more exciting was the seemingly strong ties both educators had in the incorporation of a writer who influenced constructivism, as well as a hardcore pragmatist...John Dewey. As we discussed in our course this semester, a major take away from Dewey was the "human experience" and that these experiences define us as a people. When we think of what defines the word experience, we might suggest thoughts and ideas we have learned in the past. However, as we now know, experiences are a much more dynamic concept, which relies on our future and deeper thoughts. Through the use of voice, differentiated instruction, UDL and more, both educators vai interview and observations, could be seen facilitating the critical thinking skills of their students, which in return has a positive impact on diverse learners.

If the classes of the educators interviewed and observed were dynamic, which I believe they are to be, I think Dewey would be proud to see students researching, working in groups, being given "voice", freedom to test their ideas, be critical thinkers, all the while being respectful students.