Integrating Culturally Responsive and Social Justice Pedagogy: A Case Study of an Online Doctorate of Education Degree Program for Instructional and Professional Leadership

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This narrative case study examines the integration of culturally responsive and social justice pedagogy into an online Doctoral of Education degree program. This study was conducted over four years with two cohorts in a fifty-one-hour online doctoral program that also focused on instructional and professional leadership and presents findings of themes and issues of culturally responsive and social justice pedagogy. Additional findings provided a linking of culturally responsive social justice pedagogy with urban education issues found in EC to 12th-grade school settings to ensuring support of students and faculty when examining topics about race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status, and providing the needed knowledge, skills, and dispositions for instructional and professional leadership.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, urban education, pedagody, social justice, online instruction, case study, professional leadership

INTRODUCTION

> Doctoral Student:
> We often hear about the concept of culturally responsive and social justice pedagogy. So, I want to learn what this means and discuss this topic with a connection to my practice.

> Instructor's Response:
> In this online doctoral program, you will investigate the professional concepts of culturally responsible and social justice pedagogy by investigating research-based information and by identifying instructional practices that can be applied in both professional development sessions and instructional practice.

According to Musu-Gillette et al. (2016), classroom environments in American schools have experienced an increase in the cultural diversity of their student populations. This demographic shift has caused a frequent dialogue exchange between students and their professors in higher education courses. As indicated by Rhodes and Schmidt (2018), this type of instruction provides an asset pedagogy because

of the inclusion and consideration for each student's background and cultural identity. Banks (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1995) were early to establish a conversation regarding culture as a significant instructional concept to be considered by educators for classroom instruction. Other educators such as Rhodes (2015), Harmon (2012), and Milner (2011) have joined the conversation to support the inclusion of culture into the instruction and development of educations so that they can incorporate this concept into the classroom practice with children.

Although our schools in the United States are connected to an accountability reform system where instructional standards have reduced curricular initiatives and teachers are responsible for teaching-to-the-test, educators should incorporate a lens of culturally responsive and social justice pedagogical initiatives into their practice to assist in crafting school environments that are collaborative, fair, engaging, and humane. As educators reframe initiatives to include the concept of culturally responsive instructional practices with the inclusion of social justice pedagogy, it requires the rethinking of all constituents to embrace a mindset shift. In classroom settings that exist across this country, a myriad of cultural backgrounds are found and should be accepted as the funds of knowledge students bring to school settings that will broaden perspectives and advance acceptance (Hutchison, 2020; Folk, 2018; Moll et al., 1992).

We have found that the incorporation of culturally responsive social justice pedagogical concepts are mainly offered by educators who have intentionally learned to use these practices in their classroom instruction. The preparation to acquire this learning and application is often found in graduate-level courses that are taken by overextended educators who prefer online educational opportunities rather than the traditional face-to-face instructional format. The researchers designed an online doctoral degree program and investigated the learning and application of culturally responsive social justice pedagogy to respond to the need to offer educational degree requirements in an online delivery format. We needed to determine how to frame and present this concept through an online delivery format that focused on ideas that assisted our students in learning to develop their capacity to use culturally responsive teaching in their practice. As the instructors-of-record for the courses that included culturally responsive teaching and social justice concepts, we used the following question for this study: What are the perceptions of Doctoral of Education (EdD) students regarding the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy with social justice themes and issues in an online EdD degree program in Instructional and Professional Leadership?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study reviewed research that linked to 21st-century educational issues that are vital for academic achievement among school-aged learners and to instructional approaches that produce success and sustainability that can be found with online instruction. Reframing the Doctorate in Education degree to be offered online required a critical lens that considered both the learner and the instructors providing the instruction. Kebritchi, Lipschueta, and Santiague (2017) found that in online instruction, the learner is concerned about the understanding of course requirements and expectations, technology readiness, and fair participation while the instructor-of-record is concerned about the format delivery transition from face-to-face to an online platform, time management, and teaching style. Redesigning the educational doctoral program to include an online focus, integration of equity and social justice framing, and inclusion to provide knowledge, skills, and dispositions in instructional and professional leadership required ongoing research and assessment. Fortunately, the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) provides models, professional development, and general support for such endeavors (2019). Nevertheless, connecting the needs assessment from the local community, the university, and CPED regarding the implementation and practice of such a degree also requires ongoing research snd investigation.

The theoretical framework for this study originated from Freire (1970), Dewey (1997), Gay (2010) and Giroux (2014), and although each theory provides unique connections to critical pedagogical methods; but, collectively they add a strong theoretical foundation that recommends continued probing

regarding equity and culturally responsive pedagogy. Each also suggests that current educational practice serves the interests of those in power and merely contributes to issues in urban education, equity, and social justice (White, 2015).

Kincheloe et al. (2012) suggest that the traditional delivery and practice of instruction in classroom settings tend to contribute to the continuation of issues connected to equity and social justice. Although the number of online graduate programs has increased, a limited amount of research has been conducted and reported to inform educators about the effectiveness of this delivery format that also considers components of culturally responsive pedagogy that includes a social justice view. To convey evidence of the importance of this type of instructional delivery that includes a lens of culturally responsive pedagogy with a connection to social justice, this article presents findings from a study that investigated perceptions of doctoral students regarding this instructional practice.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a cohort-based online Executive Doctor of Education degree program in Professional Leadership with an emphasis on Social Education and Social Justice that is designed to accommodate the schedules of overextended professionals. According to Allen et al. (2015), online graduate programs in higher education settings have experienced a growth from 3.5 million students to 5.8 million students. With on-track program enrollment, a participant can complete the degree requirements, including the writing and the defense of the doctoral theses, in four semesters and two summer sessions. The program provides research and applied educational skills for educators grappling with real-world academic needs in school settings. The 51-hour credit program that is 100% online consists of fifteen online courses, a six-hour thesis requirement, and a variety of experiences that include personalized mentoring and coaching, attendance and presentation participation at state and national conferences, and academic leadership development skills.

Critical qualitative research was used in this study to inform the application of culturally responsive teaching practices and social justice inclusion through a lens that ensures the examination of issues in education that are tied to power and privilege, ultimately leading to advocacy and activism. The concept of *critical* is increasingly questioned in this age of "educational reform;" nevertheless, critical implies questioning, investigating, and challenging in terms of equity and social justice to lead to critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Education researchers make the process and investigation their own and adapt questions, procedures, methods, and strategies throughout the experience.

With this study, critical qualitative research methods were implemented before, during, and after this project. This research assumes issues of equity and social justice in teaching, research, and service that challenges traditional approaches through bricolage, subjectivity, and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Critical qualitative research informs education through a lens that ensures the investigation of issues in education are often tied to power and privilege, ultimately leading to advocacy, agency, and activism (White, 2015). Critical qualitative educational research also highlights the need to cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions for active citizenship in the 21st century. This methodology borrows from many other qualitative research methodologies; however, what distinguishes it from other methodologies is its orientation on social justice and societal transformation (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). The research question for the study is: What are the perceptions of Doctorate of Education (EdD) students regarding the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy with social justice themes and issues in an online EdD degree program in Instructional and Professional Leadership?

This critical qualitative investigation used a case study approach to collect participants' understanding of the inclusion of the use of culturally responsive pedagogy, with a social justice context, in their instruction and educational settings. As Creswell (2013) stipulates, a case study is a bonded system that assists in the understanding of a process as in this study investigating if participants understand the concepts of culturally responsive teaching. This case study reports findings over four years from a purposeful sampling procedure (Creswell, 2013) of nine participants representing four members from

cohort one and five members from cohort two. The selection was based on participant availability to join both individual and focus group interview sessions electronically.

Data collection items included interviews with member checking, and a collection of student-submitted artifacts that were narrative responses to assignment prompts of various inquiries related to culturally responsive teaching practices that were submitted and graded by the professors through an electronic platform. Over the data collection period, two forty-five minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant along with one focus group that included the nine participants. The first interview for cohort one was conducted during enrollment in the second semester of their program and the second interview was conducted during enrollment in their final semester of the program. The first and second interviews for cohort two were conducted by using the same semester schedule as for cohort one. The second interview for both cohorts asked participants to provide examples of culturally responsive pedagogical trends they used in their practice and to describe the changes their students were noticed using in their engagement, discussion exchanges, and academic responses as a result of this teacher-led instructional practice.

The focus group interview that included cohort one occurred during the final semester of the program for cohort two that also used a member checking process to determine clarification of documented content. It is necessary to note that cohort one remained connected after their graduation by being invited to join ZOOM sessions that provided insight into the elements of the program. Thus, providing a 100% participation rate from cohort one to join the focus group interview with members of cohort two. The interviews focused on participant understanding and application of culturally responsive pedagogy practices in their educational settings that also included social justice concepts.

Data sources were collected, organized, coded, and arranged into logical categories. Following the identification of coded categories, themes were determined, and responses from the data sets were arranged to support the themes. The purpose of this process was to link themes that documented participants' understanding and application of culturally responsive teaching into their practice and to provide a commentary about their learning through an online platform (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

FINDINGS

At the beginning of the study, a doctoral student expressed an interest in learning more about the application of culturally relevant social justice pedagogy. The researchers, who were also the instructors-of-record, found this to be a needed learning topic for the program. The findings from the study, as captured through the two interviews and the focus group, identified themes providing evidence that the learning through an online format was effective by prompting a knowledge and an instructional shift in the thinking and application of culture and its place in classroom settings. Participants provided evidence that the understanding of the concepts used in their learning was used in their instruction. The participants noticed that their students connected to the instructional inclusion of culture by being more interested in reading books and articles about their culture, by engaging in discussions that were culturally-rich, and by feeling comfortable and interested in learning through culture. Other findings suggested an ongoing struggle and commitment among the participants to freely embrace and engage with "urban" education, equity, and social justice in public education, especially in a leadership focus. Identified themes included a focus on a continued achievement expectations through accountability benchmarks and standardized mandated state testing, teacher and administration evaluation processes, a general need for more support for campuses and school districts, and a more inclusive relationship with parents and the general community that surrounds campuses. Additional findings suggested the desire for more program e-learning meeting offerings that would allow for dialogue peer exchanges and with the professors, an expectation for face-to-face meetings during attendance at conferences to develop more relationships, and a desire to enhance more community development among cohort groups.

To support the themes that were generated, we are providing a random selection of captured narratives acquired from interviews and the focus group session from the participants. The following are examples of these participant narratives from the interviews.

Example One

"The academic planning for my 10th-grade social education students is now being developed with the consideration of culture and culturally responsive strategies being at the center of implementing instruction. I have noticed that my students are eager to use the instructional materials I present during instruction, and they are asking so many more engaging questions along with participating more with dialogue exchanges during peer discussions. Recently, I was asked by my campus administrator to share the instructional successes I have experienced during a department meeting. I am finding that the ideas I have learned about leadership are now assisting me in preparing effective presentations to share with my professional peers. It is so interesting to me to realize that I have had the support and mentoring to learn to accomplish this learning and to use this learning in classroom settings through an online doctoral program."

Example Two

"Urban education links to equity and social justice based on the demographics of the students that attend and teachers that work in urban schools. It is evident that students in urban schools experience social injustice and inequity based purely on their socioeconomic, race, ethnicity and gender. Teachers also face the same issues or they open themselves to deal with those issues because their students are dealing with them. It's also an injustice to hire unqualified and inexperienced teachers to teach urban education."

Example Three

"Equity, because the students in urban school districts are not being given the same opportunities and resources as those in suburban and rural school districts. Social Justice, because the majority of students that make up our urban schools are African-American and Hispanics. These students are suffering the most due to the lost budgets and lack of resources."

Example Four

"Urban education links to equity and social justice because there are several implications for a 21st century education, teaching, and learning. However, I will stress the main implication is [sic] the layout in several layers. The real truth is harsh, families are influenced to move from one neighbor to another because of the biases of urban education. It is turning around a circle with no end. That is, a) negative stereotypes about students of color, their ethnic identities and their abilities, b) negative remarks about urban schools from political leaders, c) school's politics about the relationships among students and teachers in urban schools, regarding the students' reputation of being dangerous, and d) the test scores association to urban schools."

Example Five

"Urban education links to equity and social justice by being the pivotal ground zero for change. If we are to achieve true equity for access to quality education for all students, this needs to focus on schools where there is a lack of resources and where teachers and administrators are tuned in with their students. Then, we will begin to see justice across all levels."

The following are examples of these participant narratives from the focus group.

Example One

"Education in any setting in important, but in communities of color, there are many opportunities for growth and much-needed improvement. Teachers need to have sufficient training and school administrators should be in tune with their specific students' needs, whether individually or as a whole. Resources have to be adequate to ensure successful learning and academic achievement."

Example Two

"Urban education is something I feel really strongly about, mostly because I believe it is the greatest potential for impact that I can have as a teacher. I also believe quite strongly that urban education and those students enrolled in its schools are misunderstood in terms of both behavior and ability. There are preconceived notions about what an urban ed school, teacher and student look like, and I would like to begin to change these misconceptions."

Example Three

"Students in an urban setting are also the future U.S., and they are currently struggling and suffering the negative consequences of biases and stereotypes. For example, it is common to find the following terms when describing urban education: the size, the diversification of students attending the schools, structure, inadequate funding, poor administrative decision, underdeveloped counseling. Therefore, much more attention is needed from scholars, educators, and policymakers in an attempt to assist urban students."

Example Four

"I believe that urban education is necessary because of the inequities in the public education system. In a perfect world, we might not need to address urban education. I see urban education as a great need in communities that have a high minority population or impoverished communities. Students in these schools are often misunderstood and deserve the best education that can be offered. Compared to suburban schools, there is a stark difference in family life, support, and educational understanding. If we want "every" student to succeed, it is necessary to address urban education."

DISCUSSION

An EdD in Instructional Leadership focusing on equity and social justice within a curriculum and instruction framework has great potential in higher education for the 21st-century to serve the overextended professional. Such a program in an urban, suburban, rural or otherwise cultural setting can offer much regarding knowledge, skills, and dispositions for current educators. The teaching, scholarship, and service opportunities are truly limited only by the lack of effort. In addition, the stresses and expectations of the overextended educator do necessitate a rethinking of the delivery format of programs and courses. The decision to offer a degree program in a 100% online delivery format, with as much opportunity to develop and build community engagement by using a variety of electronic tools as program students and faculty choose, can enhance active learning and the capacity to offer instruction that centers on culturally responsive pedagogy.

Integrating culturally responsive and social justice pedagogy into an instructional and professional leadership doctoral program can be daunting with the many challenges in EC to 12th grade and higher education settings and leadership positions. Nevertheless, addressing such issues within an urban education context is much needed. Likewise, a degree that is offered 100% online and focuses on integrating these ideas and concepts within instructional leadership in schools can help provide a needed context for educators, students and the community in the 21st century. Findings suggest an ongoing threat to the commitment to urban education, equity, and social justice within current trends in public education; yet again, there is much critical hope for awareness, advocacy, action, and application to transform public education into an action that embraces equity, social justice, and culture. It is this vital reason that educators and students design ongoing investigations by addressing curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the "broad view" of education through questions such as the following:

1. What issues unfold in making sense of "urban" education in instructional and professional leadership?
2. How does culturally responsive and social justice pedagogy connect to instructional and professional leadership?
3. What are the implications given the current directions of public education?

4. How does awareness, advocacy, activism, and assessment play into effective instructional and professional leadership?

CONCLUSION

Several themes emerged from the study that should be considered for the future success of such programs that include integrating equity and social justice within urban public education as a focus for doctoral students in the 21st century. Integrating social justice constructs that are centered around shared collaboration and community engagement in an urban context; addressing the ongoing struggle and commitment to urban public education, equity, and social justice in public education; and enhancing critical hope for awareness should be a platform for professional learning. In addition, effective strategies used to enhance EC – 12 grade students academic achievement and capacity and awareness, advocacy, action, application, and assessment to enable transformative change should also be on the radar of campus administrators and teachers so that student achievement and cultural connection are important concerns. As the researchers struggled to assist their doctoral students in crafting a description of the concepts of urban education and culturally responsive social justice pedagogy, the following examples were developed and identified as working descriptions.

Urban Education
Addressing economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental issues in education in urban settings and through a culturally responsive lens in a local to global context should focus on diversity, equity, and social justice leading to critical consciousness and civic engagement.

Culturally Responsive Social Justice Pedagogy
Addressing economic, social, political, environmental and equity issues in education in a local to global context should be connected to ethnicity, race, class, gender, age, ability, orientation, and culture and should promote an understanding of critical consciousness and civic engagement.

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