

Effective teaching of students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds: A critical literature review

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Abstract

The Australian Institute for School Teaching and Leadership's (AITSL's) *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, Standard 1, requires teachers to demonstrate professional knowledge as to how students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds learn. Sleeter (2011) and Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, and Bateman (2007) argue that professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy can impact teacher effectiveness but the how to apply it into the classroom context is not clearly understood.

In Far North Queensland, Australia, schools in the last 10-15 years have been involved in the resettlement of refugees from a number of countries under the UNHCR program. Although the State education department has a long history of catering for students who have English as an additional language (EAL), professional learning in second language acquisition and working cross-culturally has been sparse and predominantly focussed on Indigenous-specific needs. Many teachers seem to have had little, if any, initial training or opportunities for sustained professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy more broadly. Nor, it seems, is this a priority. A large body of literature around refugee resettlement (Bean et al., 2006; Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011) suggests that schools play a major component in the successful resettlement of refugee children. This paper presents a critical review of literature focused on critically responsive pedagogy and effective teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The review identifies that personal and professional nature of culturally responsive pedagogy presents significant challenges for teacher education and ongoing professional learning and that more research is needed into how to support teachers' culturally responsive capabilities in contexts of practice.

Introduction

The Australian Institute for School Teaching and Leadership's (AITSL's) *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, Standard 1, requires teachers to demonstrate professional knowledge as to how students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds learn. However, Sleeter (2011a) and Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, and Bateman (2007) argue that how to apply such professional knowledge into the classroom context is not clearly understood.

In Far North Queensland, Australia, state schools in the last 10 - 15 years have been involved in the resettlement of refugees from a number of countries under the UNHCR program. Although the State Education Department has a long history of catering for students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL), professional learning in second language acquisition and working cross-culturally has been sparse in recent years. When it does occur, it has predominantly focused on Indigenous-specific needs. This lack of attention to language and cultural diversity is explained in the literature as a phenomenon associated with schools' almost singular focus on student performance in the *National Assessment Plan in Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) (Sydney Morning Herald, June 15, 2014; Australian Parliament House, 2013).

Lo Bianco, as far back as 1999 when standardized testing was first introduced in Australia, articulates concern that

...narrow definitions of the literacy enterprise have been used to stifle curriculum choices, to introduce regimes of testing that may have the effect of constraining appropriate legitimate diversity in schooling and to overwhelm to responses of schools to the needs of minority language interests (such as ESL and bilingual education). (pp. 40-41)

There is a consistent argument in the literature that the high value nature of these performance data, narrows the curriculum and can have a detrimental effect on minority language student learning (Cummins, 1986, 1989; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Green, Hodgins & Luke, 1997; Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 2002; McKay 1998, a, b; 1999; McNaughton, 1995; Michell, 1999; Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, high stakes (for school and teacher performance) testing diverts teachers' and schools' attention away from diverse students' learning needs, inevitably positioning them, (Davison & Williams, 1999) or their teachers, as deficit.

The role of schools for refugee students is particularly important. A large body of research (Bean, Immigration, Citizenship, & Services, 2006; Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011) suggests that schools are critical in the successful resettlement of refugee children. However, in the current high-accountability educational climate, teachers have few, if any, opportunities to either implement pedagogies for culturally and linguistically diverse learners or engage in sustained professional learning in culturally responsive pedagogy. Nor, it seems, is this a priority in schools.

This paper presents a review of literature focusing on critically responsive pedagogy as a way of effectively teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students and refugee students in particular. It highlights a significant gap in current knowledge and the need to understand how to reorient teachers' attention and practice to *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* Standard 1, in the context of standardization and regulation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The Evolution of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The concept of culturally responsive pedagogy has evolved over time but in essence it is a pedagogy which effects a "...closer fit between students home culture and the school" (Ladson-

Billings, 1995) with the aim of improving academic achievement of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The idea of bridging the gap between culturally and linguistically diverse groups and the mainstream has been discussed and researched for over 30 years through many cultural difference studies. A range of key constructs or terms have been used in this period to conceptualise how teachers might work with a standardized curriculum in cross cultural contexts. These key constructs include culturally *congruent* (Erickson & Mohatt, 1977) culturally *appropriate* (Au & Jordan, 1981), culturally *responsive* (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982), and culturally *compatible* (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) pedagogy.

In a study of Native Americans students (Erickson & Mohatt, 1977) it was observed that teachers who approximated their language patterns to those of their students' home cultural patterns were the most successful in academic achievement. The authors referred to this as *culturally congruent* pedagogy. The findings in the study showed that this framework did effect academic success. However, in terms of transferability to other contexts, it must be noted that participants in this study came from a context of one culture and one language. Nevertheless, the importance of the link between community and school in academic success of culturally diverse students is transferrable across contexts.

The term culturally *appropriate* pedagogy was used by Au and Jordan (1981) to describe how school learning could be congruent with the ways of learning in the home culture. Au and study of a reading program, looked at teachers who incorporated aspects of their students' culture into their reading program in a Hawaiian school. Teachers encouraged a "talk story" language interaction style used in Hawaiian culture in the school reading program and were able to improve standardized testing in reading dramatically. However as Osborne (2001) explains,

culturally “appropriate” suggests that “...something is proper or correct. This implies that we know the right adjustments to make, that there is no subsequent room for modification/improvement” (p. 59). Students in this study did improve their reading scores in standardized tests but again, this approach is not necessarily apposite in contexts of cultural and linguistic diversity given that not all cultural groups in Australian teachers’ classrooms share the same home communication style.

Another term, culturally *compatible* pedagogy, emerged out of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in urban Honolulu in the 1970s. Jordan (1985) defines culturally compatible pedagogy as “...educational practice [which] must be compatible with the culture(s) of the children being educated” (p. 112). The focus of this approach draws on behaviourist theories of learning: “The point of cultural compatibility is that the natal culture is used as a guide in the selection of educational program elements so that academically desired behaviors are produced and undesired behaviors are avoided” (p. 112). Again, this approach positions school and home culture in a differential power relationship where the home culture may be seen as something to the “avoided” in the context of the school.

Culturally *responsive* is a term used by Cazden and Leggett (1976) to describe a pedagogical framework that emphasises the need to acknowledge (and respond to) student differences. By acknowledging these differences teachers were asked to reflect on what must be changed in their pedagogy in order to be effective. Osborne (2001) in his analysis of Cazden and Leggett’s work, added that school systems (not just teachers) need to understand how children learn so that appropriate pedagogy can be used to provide educational success. This concept has been expanded in the literature from the Cazden and Leggett’s (1976) foundational work. Gay (2010) for example, defines culturally responsive pedagogy as one which uses “...the cultural

knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 50). This conceptualisation seems to resonant strongly with both the AITSL standards, where teachers need to “... demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic background.” (n.d., n.p.nos.), and with the diverse contexts within which Australian teachers currently work. Schools and the teaching workforce are not heterogeneous, so any conceptualisation of culturally responsive pedagogy needs to reflect this (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Culturally responsive pedagogy both allows a space for students to maintain their cultural integrity (Gay, 2002, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2011a) and for teachers to address the achievement gap in cultural and linguistic diverse groups. In order to enact such a pedagogy, literature suggests that teachers must have two important attributes: cultural competence and socio-political consciousness (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Young,2010). Cultural competence is a concept that emerged in the late 1980s. It has been defined by Cross, Bazron Dennis, and Issacs as a “...a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (1989, p. iv). This definition is also taken up in Lee, Cosby, and deBaca’s (2007, p. 3) more recent work and addresses Osborne’s (2001) concern relating to the importance of systems’ responsiveness not just teacher responsiveness. Lee et al. (2007) also see cultural competence as “ ...understanding one’s own identify and values, and how these influence one’s perceptions” evoking Cadzen and Leggett’s (1976) earlier conceptuatlizations. Applying this concept to teachers’ work and student

academic success, Lee et al. see cultural competence as requiring the "... knowledge, skills, experience and the ability to transform" (2007, p. 3) practice for improved outcomes.

Perso's (2012) comprehensive review of cultural responsiveness and school education as they pertain to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, concludes that whilst there are varied interpretations of cultural competence in the literature, there is agreement that it is a "...*personal* capability comprised of attitudes, values and beliefs that develop over time through a *personal journey*." (p. 20, emphasis added). This conceptualisation points to the importance of ongoing development of individual teacher dispositions and attributes as well as professional capabilities. This presents significant challenges in terms of developing teacher professional learning experiences which can address the personal as well as the professional in an ongoing and sustained way.

Socio-politically conscious teachers know the larger socio-political context of the school, community, nation, and world and have knowledge of the social and political realities in which they live (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2000). Ross (2008) suggests that "...socio-political awareness is to be aware of the social construction of our own identities and that of our students and to realize that identity is shaped in cultural experiences" (p. 2) and that critically reflexive praxis, again resonant with Cazden and Leggatt (1976), is necessary to effect positive educational outcomes for culturally diverse children.

The Importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for Refugee Children

In the context of refugee children, not only are vital in assisting students achieve academic success, they have an important role in the resettlement process. Schools are "...a stabilizing feature in the unsettled lives of refugee students" (Matthews, 2008). Research into the

adjustment of refugee children shows that the provision of quality early educational experiences in schools, in particular, is crucial in how well children settle and integrate successfully. It is, therefore, important that schools and teachers are equipped for “...getting it right the first time” and are allowed to make appropriate judgements based on evidence rather than ideology or the common political agenda at the time (Rutter, 2006). In addition, literature both internationally and nationally agrees that developing proficiency in English is essential and critical to assist social cohesion, successful resettlement and wellbeing of refugee children (Hek, 2005b; Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Rutter, 2006). So, explicit teaching of English must be an important part of refugee children’s experiences.

Most research around refugee children in education focuses issues of trauma. Although this is significant, it has the capacity to unintentionally universalise and homogenise the refugee experience making it difficult for other programs and perspectives to take centre stage (Hek, 2005a; Matthews, 2008; Rutter, 2006). As stated earlier, the initial schooling experience is critical for overall success. However Taylor and Sidhu (2012) highlight that, while there is a growing population of refugee students in schools there are few examples of best practice and effective support for these students (Matthews, 2008; Pugh, Every & Hattam, 2012). This is a significant gap in the research.

One possible factor that impinges on the success of refugee students is that policy makers and institutions do not explicitly identify the needs of refugee students as different from economic migrants and First Nations people of Australia. Refugee students are subsumed into policy documents where it is difficult to identify anyone from a CALD (Culturally And Linguistically Diverse) background. As a result “...the discursive invisibility of refugees in policy and research has worked against their cultural, social and economic integration” (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012, p.

42). Rutter (2006) argues that the nature of such policies prevents a detailed examination of pre – migration and post – migration factors necessary to create programs that address the specific and distinctive needs of refugee children. Furthermore, increasing standardization of curriculum and assessment significantly and directly impact negatively on CALD students, including students with a refugee background (Pugh et al., 2012; Taylor, 2007).

In the UK, refugee children are still rarely identified as a distinct category with specific educational needs despite systemic recognition that “...learning is defined as the main path to integration” (Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa, 2013, p. 19). Similarly, Taylor’s 2007 study of policy and provision for refugee students in Australia identified that refugee students were “...rarely targeted with a specific policy. Instead, they were either conflated with other categories such as ESL students or not mentioned at all”. In the Queensland context as far back as 2007, there have been discussions around the exclusion of refugee students from educational policy documents and there appears to be a genuine attempt to include refugee children as a distinct group that schools and teachers need to consider when differentiating in the classroom. For example,

Education and English language learning are critical to the successful settlement, development and wellbeing of Queensland’s refugee and CALD youth. On arrival in Australia refugee and CALD students confront challenges in education due to historical, environmental, cultural and social factors, resulting in barriers to accessible, equitable, quality education responsive to their needs. (Muticultural Development Association, 2011, n.p.nos)

However, there is little guidance or impetus for teachers as to how the effect culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a critical review of current literature relating to culturally responsive pedagogy and the particular needs of refugee children in Australian schools. It has identified that there is little literature on how to implement these practices (Sleeter 2011a; Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh & Bateman, 2007) but they are necessary both in terms of teacher professionalism and the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, Standard 1 and for the academic success of the diverse groups of students. The personal and professional nature of culturally responsive pedagogy presents significant challenges for teacher education and ongoing professional learning. More research is needed into how to support teachers' culturally responsive capabilities in contexts of practice.

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