A Reflection on Personal Bias to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed several areas of student need. It has also revealed and magnified the societal failures that have caused inequities in our classrooms. Creating an inclusive digital space begins with self-work. This paper explores the role of color-blindness in society and how to counter its effects. Additionally, self-awareness as a means to strengthen cultural competency through practices like the racial autobiography and personal reflection are discussed. Furthermore, methods for speaking up against bias to address the inequities and challenges in the digital classroom are considered.

Keywords: Race, Self-Awareness, COVID-19, Digital Learning, Reflection, Bias, Equity

Introduction

To begin this journey of self-reflection, it is necessary to reflect on why this work is needed. This topic is critical and is a parallel process of working on ourselves and working to support our marginalized students. While we are on this journey of self-reflection, it is important to acknowledge and accept that racial inequity is not just a "Black or Brown problem," but a problem that affects all of us. Singleton (2013) explains that we must stay engaged in uncomfortable conversations, be ready to experience discomfort, speak our truth, and expect, as well as accept that there may be unresolved issues because there is no quick solution. Student concerns and their challenges might result in this discomfort and in many cases these challenges will not have an immediate cure, just as the uncomfortable conversations about race.

Student Issues and Challenges

With an overwhelming amount of responsibilities and duties, educators may fail to notice students who are experiencing food insecurities, unemployment, loss of loved ones from COVID-19 or other illnesses, isolation, depression, domestic violence, single-parenting stress, and racism. This transition to online learning occurred abruptly. Some students didn't have access to courses due to lack of technology and Wi-Fi, while others had to care for their families or manage other issues that may directly relate to their privilege (Addy, et al. 2021). This digital learning was not representative of the student population and their needs. Students require a learning environment that is mindful of the cultures that they bring to the classroom. Inclusive spaces do not just revolve around a White, middle-class reality. The type of curriculum or pedagogy required to support students in an inclusive environment is a culturally responsive one; this consists of meaningful assignments and discussions that are part of students' lives.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Educators seeking to create an inclusive learning environment, may utilize culturally relevant and responsive frameworks (Addy, et al., 2021). Utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy involves supporting all students to academically succeed, understanding their own culture, building competence, and gaining a deeper understanding of social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This framework also supports students to experience learning that is relevant to their personal lives, and enhances their learning through the integration of meaningful experiences for students (Addy, et al. 2021). Culturally responsive pedagogy empowers students academically and socially, with a multidimensional approach of educating students, that builds on student strengths and freedom from the oppression of the structures in education (Gay, 2010). This framework establishes inclusion to, first and foremost, connect students and teachers. An example of culturally relevant pedagogy would be a project that requires students to conduct research in their own communities and neighborhoods; this would integrate their perspectives and possibly offer a solution to an issue that directly impacts the local people (Addy, et al., 2021).

Beginner, Ally, Activist

A reflection of personal bias includes a self-analysis of one's commitment to creating an inclusive environment. This self-reflection requires educators to consider a stance of being a beginner, an ally, or an advocate. As a beginner, there is care about joining others in creating

a safe and welcome society, which includes the learning environment that opens the heart and challenges your thinking. As an ally, there is a willingness to speak up and challenge within a specific circle of people, with the understanding that this work is life-long. Educators as allies exists across identity lines, as they recognize oppression regardless if they belong to the targeted group or not. (Gaffney, 2016). As an activist, this is the work that seeks to tear down oppression, although there are times when the oppression of others from the activist, requires a self-confrontation.

More and more educators are joining activist groups to struggle for educational justice, however they are still a small fraction (Picower, 2017). Whether the stance is that of a beginner, ally, or activist, there must be a starting point to this self-reflection to create an inclusive learning environment. Whether advocating for marginalized students or supporting their fellow educators, teacher allies must accept the responsibility to focus unwaveringly on how power and privilege function in the school environment and beyond (Gaffney, et al., 2016). Teacher activism and the work inside the classroom involves developing caring and respectful student relationships and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Picower, et al., 2017). These inclusive learning environments diminish traditional roles between teachers and students (Freire, 1970). Teacher activism requires a comprehensive lens that views each student as a unique individual. Activism that takes place in inclusive learning environments allows the space to value all students as individuals with distinctive qualities.

Color-blindness

Color-blindness as a racial ideology has been embraced in the United States since its original application in Plessy vs. Ferguson, 1896 (Plessy vs. Ferguson, 1896). This commitment to color-blindness influences most aspects of education, as evidenced by educational policies and practices that integrate color-blind language, the plethora of color-blind approaches to educational research, policy analysis, and teacher education discourse (Annamma, et al., 2017). According to Asare (2017), "*Color-blindness* is the racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race" (para. 5). This perspective is particularly problematic in consideration of students and the ways they interact with their teachers and peers. Color-blindness may look like:
- I don't see color. I just see people.
- We're all just people.
- I don't care if you're black, white, green, or purple-polka-dotted!
- #AllLivesMatter (Fitchburg State University, 2021).

There are several ways in which color-blindness serves to perpetuate racism. The term *blind* means having a narrow field of vision (Hallahan, et al., 2019, p. 276). In relation to color-blindness, individuals are choosing to not see race as well as the racial inequities, disparities, historical and contemporary violence and trauma perpetuated in a racist society. Prescribing to a color-blind belief not only dismisses the lived experiences of people of color, but also suggests that racism does not exist as long as one simply ignores it. Within the milieu of persistent structural and systematic racism, racial color-blindness serves as a means to withdraw from conversations of race and racism altogether (Asare, 2017). Further, when race-related issues occur, color-blindness lends itself to the individualization of conflicts and shortcomings, rather than examining the larger issues embedded with cultural differences, stereotypes, and values placed into context (Williams, 2011).

Wanless (2018) identifies three Racially Responsive Teaching Practices in education as the Color Blind Approach, the Color Aware Approach, and the Social Justice Approach. These methods range from low racially responsiveness to high, with social justice being the ideal practice. To begin, within The Color Blind Approach educators "adopt the policy of not seeing or being influenced by their students' race. In this approach, teachers do not engage in direct conversations or discussions with children about race" (para 1). However, as Wanless (2018) points out, not talking about race still sends messages about race whereby non-White students' lived experiences are unseen and ignored in the classroom. When teachers dismiss race and conversations about race, students are left to develop their own understandings and draw their own conclusions, which may be biased, naïve, or ignorant.

The second Racially Responsive Teaching Practice, is the Color-Aware approach, which is an improvement upon the Color-Blind approach where educators "intentionally celebrate children's racial differences as an important part of who they are and teach children about race in direct and honest ways" (Wanless, 2018, para. 2). These types of teachers engage students in discussions about race, intervene when students ask questions, and clarify misconceptions. Students are taught that talking about race is okay and teachers pursue materials and supports that can assist in keeping these critical conversations going.

Finally, the ideal approach educators can adopt is the Social Justice Approach. Teachers are not just talking about race but "actively empowering young children to recognize and act on race-related injustices. This means involving them in projects that allow real participation in the process of change" (Wanless, 2018, para, 3). Involving children in the problem solving aspect of racial injustices allows them to experience agency, action, and positive social change. This approach is ideal because it not only allows students a safe space to have conversations about human differences but gives them opportunities to critically examine racial oppression in the world.

Multiculturalism is an alternative ideology to color-blindness that educators can adopt in which individuals acknowledge, highlight, and celebrate ethnoracial differences (Williams, 2011). Shifting perspective from color-blindness to a multicultural approach can be challenging. Through McCabe's (2011) research, three main ways of how to "do multiculturalism" were identified: (1) recognizing and valuing differences, (2) teaching and learning about differences, and (3) bridging differences via personal friendships and organizational alliances. Schools are the perfect context to engage in these practices. Educators who embrace a multicultural ideology facilitate learning through a lens that both recognizes and celebrates differences.

Self-Awareness and Cultural Competency

Daniel Goleman (1995) describes "self-awareness as being aware of our mood and our thoughts about that mood. It is the ability to recognize your emotions and thoughts, how they influence behavior, and making accurate assessments of our strengths and limitations" (as cited in LaBarbera, 2021, section 1). For educators, self-awareness encompasses the understanding of the ways in which our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors influence our interactions with our students. Self-aware teachers are cognizant of their own emotional demeanor and conduct as well as how they affect their students and how students' behavior affects them (LaBarbera, 2021). It is through self-awareness that teachers can begin to conceptualize cultural competency.

Striving for a personal awareness that strengthens cultural competency is an acutely individual process. This type of development includes several essential principles as described by Learning for Justice (n.d.):

● Asking oneself how issues of sameness, difference and power affect interactions with colleagues, students and families

● Genuinely seeing diversity as a strength and an opportunity, rather than an "issue" or problem

● Understanding how one's own life experiences can help build relationships with students and enhance curriculum

● Thinking about what each of us still needs to learn and engaging in relevant professional development, dialogue, study or personal reflection

● Developing skills and attitudes that can help bridge cultural differences. These include empathy, flexibility, listening without judgment, appreciation for multiple cultural perspectives and cross-cultural communication (section 5).

Considering the ways that personal perceptions of concepts, like those above, help teachers strengthen their own awareness as related to cultural competency. It is essential for teachers to increase self-awareness in an effort to understand how their perceptions affect their students. There are a plethora of strategies and practices teachers can employ to build self-awareness as related to cultural competency, including the Racial Autobiography and Personal Reflection.

Racial Autobiography

A racial autobiography, simply put, is a personal narrative in which the author explores how race has manifested in his/her own life. The Pacific Educational Group (n.d.) suggests starting with Racial Autobiography Bookends. These bookends require the author to consider both the earliest and most current "events and conversations about race, race relations, and/or racism that may have impacted your current perspectives and/or experiences" (section 1). Once the author establishes an entry and closing point to the racial autobiography, the body can be written.

Several groups and organizations have created guiding questions to support educators in writing their own racial autobiographies, such as The Pacific Educational Group, Iowa Department of Human Services, and Whites for Racial Equity. Questions for consideration typically include elements like *family*, "Are your parents the same race? Same ethnic group? Are your brothers and sisters? What about your extended family -- uncles, aunts, etc.?" (Whites for Racial Equity, n.d., section 2); *schooling*, "What was the racial makeup of your high school? Of its teachers?" (Whites for Racial Equity, n.d., section 5); and *community*, "What is the racial makeup of the neighborhood you grew up in?" (The Pacific Educational Group, n.d., section 3). It is important for teachers to examine when they became aware of their race, and how their racial experiences manifested throughout their lives.

The racial autobiography can be an empowering tool for educators to increase their self-awareness and cultural competence. Many educators, regardless of cultural background, are inhibited when discussing race and racial issues. In some ways, this is because of minimal awareness of their own racial experience and the experience of others who have diverse backgrounds and perspectives. (Singleton, 2015). By integrating exercises like the racial autobiography, teachers can use introspection as a springboard for competently teaching students who come from cultures other than their own. Educators must work diligently to

meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms. In an effort to do this, teachers must participate in continuous professional learning and self-reflection.

Personal Reflection

It is not enough to just acknowledge that implicit bias exists, educators must directly confront and explore their own personal biases. "Before engaging students in dialogue or activities about implicit bias, instructors must begin the work of their critical self-reflection" (University of Michigan, n.d.). When engaging in self-reflection and self-critique to identify personal bias, it is integral that one admits they have biases at the beginning. From there, asking oneself how their biases were formed, what privileges they have that others do not, and examining social groups will provide insight into implicit biases.

Personal biases can be identified in a multitude of ways, such as taking Implicit Association Tests (IAT) and engaging in self-reflection. Specifically, Project Implicit at Harvard University developed a *Social Attitudes* test that gathers information to assess a person's attitudes and beliefs about various social topics such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Project Implicit, 2011). Using journals or diaries is another valuable tool to help examine one's biases and see where they occur in your life. These provide opportunities to record one's experiences, thoughts, and feelings; this can then be analyzed and used to reflect on how to better approach situations in the future (The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

Moreover, by examining close relationships, one can also expose areas in which they are likely to have personal bias and need more education. Considering the experiences from the point of view of the person or group being stereotyped can assist in self-reflection; this can involve directly interacting with people from that group, or consuming media regarding experiences in which the group may often endure. This personal reflection and self-examination of one's own biases is especially important to those in the field of education. Educators must always be mindful of evaluating each student objectively, assessing the quality of the work and focusing on the student's personal characteristics rather than associating the student based on a group with which they identify.

Application to the Classroom

Many educators are unsure how to appropriately respond when someone uses biased language or stereotypes. One factor that often inhibits speaking up is fear of the consequences. There may be personal or professional repercussions directly (or indirectly) based upon the act of speaking out. Whether these are real or perceived consequences is irrelevant because when educators remain silent, the offensive behavior or language continues. Sanderson (2020) identifies another factor that prevents individuals from challenging inappropriate behavior as confusion about what they're actually seeing or hearing. Is that comment an innocent joke, or is it racist and offensive? Is that spat some harmless bickering, or a dangerous case of domestic violence? "Ambiguous situations like these make it harder for people to step up and act, because we don't want to appear stupid or overly sensitive" (Sanderson, 2020, para. 5). It is easier for educators to push back against clear aggressions. There is often ambiguity in biased language usage, which makes standing up and speaking out challenging.

Teaching Tolerance (2018) reports that the best way to avoid personal silence in the moment of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes is to prepare. When educators believe that they are those who speak up when witness to injustice they shift from inaction to action. Once this mindset has been established, it is essential for teachers to plan responses that will acknowledge bigotry in the moment. Replies such as, I am offended by that; That is not funny; or I am really surprised to hear you say something like that, can strengthen one's ability to react directly and immediately (Teaching Tolerance, 2018). Responses such as these can lead to open discussion about the offensive language or behavior or at the very least, give teachers the opportunity to take a stand against bias. Finally, questioning is an effective way to interrupt everyday bias because questions put the responsibility on the person who made the comment. When asked, "What do you mean by that?; Why would you say something like that?; or What point are you trying to make by saying that?" the offender is forced to examine his/her beliefs, (in)tolerance, and bigotry (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, p. 10). If these questions are also asked in a group setting, it also provides others with the chance to get some insight as to why the person believes what they are saying. Other people are also afforded the opportunity to examine bias that they may not be aware of.

Fostering a community of respect and promoting cultural awareness is critical in addressing bias and stereotypes in school; this can be achieved by implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices. Lynch (2015) suggests several ways which will help educators begin to develop a more inclusive environment and reduce the probability of stereotypical attitudes and beliefs in their classroom. First, educators can encourage students to share about their ethnic backgrounds. Teachers who show a personal interest in their students demonstrate respect for them as an individual. This also serves as a model for other students. A second strategy that was discussed involved teachers serving in more of a facilitator role rather than a typical instructor role. "Students in an authoritarian classroom may sometimes display negative behaviors as a result of a perceived sense of social injustice" (Lynch, 2015, para. 3).

Conclusion

Students bring varied backgrounds, identities, and educational needs to each classroom. Educators need to understand the role unconscious bias plays in discrimination and inequity, and have the tools to develop strategies to prevent and address deficit thinking in the classroom. Cultural competence is a set of knowledge, skills and dispositions that enable educators to interact effectively with students. Elements of inclusive teaching include fostering a positive classroom climate, integrating diverse perspectives and issues of diversity and equity into course content, and inclusive pedagogies.

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