Bringing Thiagi to the classroom: Reducing stereotype-threat by promoting reflection in CRT

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Abstract

Culture and ethnicity influence how a person learns and views the world. Experiences at home influence students' learning fundamentally. However, cultural diversity in classrooms as well as issues such as stereotypes and biases have yet to be addressed in the German education system. School materials i.e., do many times not reflect the cultural diversity in modern classrooms, portraying and promoting stereotypes and biases. These (unconscious) biases are at the center of the problem and have yet to gain the attention and importance they deserve. Since stereotypes and biases are learned constructs, it is of utmost importance to provide tools to unlearn/relearn incorrect constructs and form new synapsis. The existing challenges have thus far failed to be addressed by generic teaching techniques and pedagogy. A new strategy and teaching approach in education is needed to address these issues in an attempt to reduce the current achievement gaps across students of different cultural backgrounds and to incorporate experiences of all students in classroom interactions. In this workshop, we will introduce an interactive teaching and learning approach to promote reflection in culturally responsive teaching (CRT). The instructional design method of Thiagi will serve as an innovative tool to successfully implement CRT, raise awareness of existing stereotypes/ (unconscious) biases, and thus model a way to reduce stereotype-threat. By integrating diversity in form of CRT in the curriculum, we can fundamentally change existing patterns and enable every student to understand and connect to academic content.

Keywords: Attitudes and beliefs, Cultural diversity in school, Teacher professional development, Teaching approaches

Extended Summary

In German schools, the issue of cultural diversity in classrooms has been rather overlooked in curriculum design, school materials as well as teacher education up to now. Stereotype-threat is prevalent, and students with diverse cultural backgrounds are at a disadvantage. Imagine you belong to a minority group and when looking at your textbooks, every face on the cover looks different than yours. How would you feel? Would you feel included or might you presume education to be a privilege to white people? The portrayal of other cultures in school materials many times does not reflect reality, but a distorted picture influenced by stereotypes and biases. Stereotype-threat is a serious issue, affecting social identity, psychological well-being, motivation and academic achievement of culturally diverse students negatively (Martiny & Götz, 2011; Jaramillo, Mello & Worrell, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to educate teachers as well as students about the existence and effects of stereotypes and (unconscious) biases. Why do we have them and what is their purpose? What are potential consequences? The aim of this workshop is to not only inform but also provide tools to counteract potential harm that arises when being ignored. We want to support diversity in education and help create a learning environment where all students can develop their full potential.

Among various methods to achieving this goal, CRT has been well established in US classrooms and teacher education, integrating diversity in the curriculum and thus changing existing classroom practices. It is defined as a form of pedagogy using cultural references that convey knowledge, skills and attitudes to empower students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2002; Santamaria, 2009). According to Ooka Pang (2005), CRT can be described as an approach to instruction, including and integrating the sociocultural context as well as seeking to integrate the cultural content of the learner in order to shape an effective learning environment. Many students of color cannot relate to examples in school materials. The goal of CRT is to make academic tasks relevant for every student. Students need to be able to relate to the content in order to make sense of it, creating constructs based on their daily experiences and environment. Embedded in this process, reflection is a key part of effective CRT to counteract stereotypes and biases.

Reflection as a didactical approach serves as foundation for change. In order to create opportunities for students to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries and also learn from those experiences, reflection is an integral part of learning (Vein et al., 2020). The reflection process is defined by intellectual and affective activities that lead to exploring experiences, in order to develop understanding and appreciation (Colomer et al., 2013). Following Kolb and Kolb (2005), experience forms the basis of learning, but learning cannot take place without reflection. In order to raise awareness of existing thought patterns, learned constructs and implicit biases, triggering the process of reflection is essential.

Our way of implementing CRT and supporting the reflection process is through Thiagi's approach of instructional design. Existing methods of reflection, such as prompts or diaries, have been widely used in an educational setting until now. Studies have shown, however, that they serve as a reflection tool to enhance learning strategies rather than promoting lasting mindset change (Hartung-Beck & Schlag, 2020). Thiagi's approach, on the other hand, is a well-established training method used in corporate settings, consisting of performance-based, interactive training. It touches a deeper level of understanding and motivates people to achieve more effective changes. Through an interplay of training games and content, the learner is able to give personal relevance to new information, which in turn provides them the opportunity to learn and create new constructs and synapsis. According to the creator of this method, Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan, „people do not learn from experience; they learn from reflecting on their experience" (Thiagarajan, 2005, p. 109).

Building on Thiagi's understanding, when implementing CRT and giving the learners opportunities to reflect, forms a new approach in formal classroom settings, to not only raising awareness of pressing matters and topics, but to paving the way of lasting change. Only when teachers and students get the chance to experience effects of cultural diversity, stereotypes, biases and discrimination themselves, can the reflection process begin.

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