Chapter 14
Problematizing Niceness:
A Teacher Educators' Learning Community on Culturally Responsive Teaching

Michelle Reidel
Georgia Southern University, USA

Peggy Shannon-Baker
Georgia Southern University, USA

Courtney Alexander Toledo
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0030-5325
Georgia Southern University, USA

Kathleen M. Crawford
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9176-0563
Georgia Southern University, USA

Leslie D. Roberts
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3746-1930
Georgia Southern University, USA

Heather M. Huling
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6468-3597
Georgia Southern University, USA

Delores Liston
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6597-8822
Georgia Southern University, USA

ABSTRACT

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) advocates for "teaching to and through" cultural diversity to improve learning, build relationships, mediate classroom power imbalances, and challenge stereotypes and prejudices. Despite the plethora of research on CRT in the K-12 environment, there is a lack of research regarding how higher education faculty enact these practices. To address this disparity, an intentional learning community of teacher educators at a university in the US South conducted a self-study to identify areas in which they enact CRT. The authors used a qualitatively oriented, embedded mixed methods design using the culturally responsive teaching self-assessment tool (CRTA) and conversational interviews as data which were then descriptively and inductively analyzed, respectively. The analyses identified three major themes: (a) the impact of course delivery and content on the implementation of CRT, (b) the prevalence of niceness as an obstacle to CRT, and (c) the power of reflection for increased awareness and long-term change.

Over a decade ago, Hayes and Juárez (2011) challenged teacher educators to critically examine their own practice. Delineating how Whiteness in teacher education continues to obstruct culturally responsive teaching (CRT), these researchers lay bare the everyday practices and choices that perpetuate inequality rather than disrupt it (Hayes & Juárez, 2011). In the intervening years, the work of disrupting and decentering Whiteness in teacher education has drawn the attention of a wide range of scholars, each contributing to our understanding of the normative culture of Whiteness that continues to inform teacher preparation program design and implementation (DiAngelo, 2018; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019; Matias, 2016; Matias et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2001, 2017). One aspect of this research focuses specifically on the role of White women in teacher education who profess a commitment to culturally relevant and sustaining practices while simultaneously acting in ways that ensure the opposite (Evans et al., 2020; Fasching-Varner & Seriki, 2011; Hayes & Juárez, 2011; Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019; Warren & Talley, 2017). Fasching-Varner and Seriki (2011) characterize this type of dissonance as living and teaching with our "eyes wide shut" (p. 2), suggesting that critical self-reflection on the part of teacher educators is essential to ensuring that CRT is clearly and meaningfully applied in colleges of education.

In the Fall of 2019, a small group of seven White university educators took up this challenge by forming a professional learning community focused on CRT. The group initially sought to gain a more comprehensive understanding of CRT by examining various articles rooted in CRT practices, creating concept maps based on those articles, and conducting reflective discussions. These activities led to a shared interest in examining and assessing their own CRT practices with undergraduate and graduate students in higher education in both face-to-face and online settings. The group, familiar with the literature on CRT in K-12 settings, were concerned that we, too, might be contributing to the absence of CRT in colleges of education rather than its authentic enactment. When we began trying to learn more about CRT in higher education contexts, however, we quickly found that research on CRT practices in higher education is limited. To learn more about the enactment of CRT in higher education, we shifted our investigation inward to analyzing our own practices. In this collaborative self-study, we delineate the process we used to critically examine our instructional practices, what this examination revealed, and lessons for other teacher educators.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogical paradigm built on the central role of culture in teaching and learning (Hammond, 2015; Gay, 2010, 2013, 2018). Gay (2013) defines CRT as a "developmental process" that involves "advocacy for teaching to and through cultural diversity to improve the achievement of ethnically diverse students" (p. 53). CRT uses the students' cultural knowledge, perspectives, and experiences as instructional resources to improve learning, build relationships, mediate power imbalances in the classroom, and challenge stereotypes and prejudices (Gay, 2013). Hammond (2015) argues, when used effectively, CRT contributes to the development of culturally and linguistically diverse students' intellective capacity; counters aspects of our school systems that negatively influence students' academic mindset; and helps dependent learners move closer to independent learning. Empowering students by helping them become independent learners is the goal of CRT—a goal that cannot be achieved through "platitudes and cheerleading" (Hammond, 2015, p. 120), but that must be built by engaging students in productive struggle and by developing the cognitive skills for higher order

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