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## **Culturally Responsive Education: Developing Lesson Plans for Vietnamese Students in the American Diaspora**

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### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on the application of the philosophical principles of John Dewey and Culturally Responsive Education in the creation of lesson plans for Vietnamese students in the American Diaspora. Through a Fulbright-Hayes Program a group of teachers from the New York City Public School System and Long Island spent six weeks in Vietnam studying the language and culture in order to develop lesson plans that would address the needs of Vietnamese students in their classrooms. This study demonstrates the importance of teachers connecting with their students through the incorporation of sociocultural elements that translate to a culturally responsive curriculum, not just for students in the Vietnamese Diaspora but for all students.*

**Keywords:** Culturally Responsive Education, multiculturalism, diversity, language learners, identity

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In the past couple of decades in the New York City Metro area, there has been a gradual increase in Vietnamese students in the public school system. It has been challenging for educators to develop lessons that are culturally responsive for this cohort. Educators must understand the background knowledge and histories of these students in order to develop lesson plans that succinctly connect to their lives in order to make what is being taught meaningful.

This article looks at the connection of Dewey's philosophical ideals about education and its linkage to culturally responsive lesson plans created by a group of New York City and Long Island educators. John Dewey, father of Pragmatism, stated that, "I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of a child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself...he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity" (Dewey, 1897, p. 1). He believed that education "concentrates on means in education, believing that it is the ability of the individual to question through experience that is most important for the human community" (Glassman, 2001, p. 3). In a culturally responsive classroom, the tools of instruction (i.e., books, teaching methods, and activities) are incompatible with, or worse marginalize, the

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students' cultural experiences, a dis-connect with school is likely (Irvine, 1992). In essence, the inability of students to succeed may be seen as underachieving or the total rejection to perform at all through attrition.

### **Literature Review**

Educators must utilize methods of Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) in order to make learning an accessible and significant experience that advances the opportunities of their students in a global society. Gay (2000) describes culturally responsive teaching as having characteristics that acknowledge cultural heritage that in turn impact student dispositions and attitudes about their education; culturally responsive teaching is purposeful in connecting student experiences to school through varied strategies. CRE is not the trivial celebration of cultural elements/icons from a minority community. It goes beyond the thin social function of multiculturalism in the classroom that might materialize as a day or month long acknowledgment of a particular subgroup of American society. CRE relates to students' linguistic and cultural elements so that the curriculum and classroom objectives are accessible.

Banks (2013, p. 3) states, "multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students – regardless of their gender; sexual orientation; social class; and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics- should have an equal opportunity in school." Banks states that because of these characteristics some students will have more of an opportunity to learn and students identified in the "Other" category may be unfairly disadvantaged due to the present structure of the school. Bhabba (1995) disclosed the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's ambivalence in respect to his position toward the colonized "Other". For the purposes of this discussion, the status of "Other" in reference to the Vietnamese immigrants is utilized to show the positioning of this cohort as not being a part of the mainstream, dominant culture. Vietnamese students in the public education system are indirectly designated in the "Other" category and are in need of teachers taking the totality of what it means to be Vietnamese in America into account in their lesson plan development.

Culture is the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor, 1871, p. 246). Culture is a manner in which to link the realms of Self and Other because there are many shared elements between the two factions. Culture has direct repercussions for teaching and learning; culture determines educational attainment due to its sensitive connection to the idiosyncrasies of ethnicity. An ethnic group's cultural traditions, socio-linguistic patterns and social structure are vital to their construction of educational systems.

For example, "teachers need to know (a) which ethnic groups give priority to communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspiration, and task performance; (b) how different ethnic groups' protocols of appropriate ways for children to interact with adults are exhibited in instructional settings; and (c) the implications of gender role socialization in different ethnic groups for implementing equity initiatives in classroom instruction" (Gay, 2000, p. 2). Ethnic groups and teacher familiarity are discussed further by Gold, Grant, and Rivlin (1977) and Takaki (1993).

Cultural diffusion is also critical to the development of CRE. Cultural diffusion is a selective process. "Whenever two cultures come into contact, each does not accept everything indiscriminately from the other. If they did, the vast cultural differences that exist today would have long since disappeared. Rather, items will be borrowed from another culture only if they

prove to be useful and/or compatible” (Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p. 14).

In the case of Vietnamese students in the American school system, cultural diffusion must be intricately interwoven into the lesson plans incorporating useful material from C1(culture of origin) and C2 (present culture). Through this educational cultural diffusion, students are given the opportunity to relate what is being taught in the curriculum to their lived experiences –education becomes tangible almost automatically instead of waiting for the individual to assimilate (which has a negative connotation). Cultural diffusion in education essentially compels the educator to assess what items and elements are useful in a student’s education; cultural diffusion is critical to CRE.

CRE requires that teachers teach all students through differentiation. Differentiated instruction is a learner-centered teaching approach using individual learning styles, abilities, motivation and readiness levels (Bush, 2006). Differentiation signifies that the teacher knows the learner to the extent that all qualities of the student are scrutinized and noted. The curriculum is not diminished; it is relevant and challenging through tailoring it to the demographics of the classroom. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), CRE addresses the discontinuity that often exists between home and school environments. Culturally Responsive Education cannot be a superficial layer of cosmetic multiculturalism; it is not a limited celebration of ethnicity that obfuscates mainstream culture within its internal composition.

In essence, CRE directly relates to how Dewey sees the child as a free agent who achieves goals through her own interest in the activity. The practice of CRE coordinates with Dewey’s dogma in the sense that he understood the need to take into consideration cultural diversity, and that cognition should bring to light a common ground where dialogue between members of a society engage in cross-cultural knowledge. Dewey stated that education needs to inspire “personal interests in social relationships ...which secures social change” (Dewey, 1938, p. 104). Social change and the implications of socially just schooling were of utmost importance to the teachers on this trip; they had to take into consideration what would bring the culture of Vietnam to life in the lesson plans they were about to create.

### **Research Method**

I used participant observations and interviews to answer the research questions presented in this work. The artifacts and data that these teachers collected assisted them in the development of culturally responsive lessons for their Vietnamese students in the New York City area. The examination of research questions and analysis of observations allows us to conceptualize the formation of identity in Vietnam and subsequently how that identity exists in the Diaspora for Vietnamese students and specifically its relevance in their education in America.

### **Participants**

In the summer of 2013 a group of teachers traveled to Vietnam for six weeks to experience the country's culture, language, and people. The teachers were required to create 4 lesson plans for the State Department via the Fulbright-Hayes Program as well as take Vietnamese language classes. The teachers were selected through an application process that involved an essay which addressed issues of multiculturalism and language learning in the classroom with English Language Learners. The teachers ranged in professional experience from pre-service to veteran status in both the public and private sectors of education in NYC and Long Island. They ranged

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in age from 22 to 60 years of age; all but one had traveled outside of the United States prior to this trip. All of the teachers were certified in English as a Second Language instruction or in the process of receiving their certification in ESL. They were charged with developing lesson plans that related to Vietnamese culture in order to address Vietnamese students specifically, yet in a broader sense the lessons could be utilized to address the needs of diverse student populations beyond the Vietnamese population. The lesson plans could be a useful tool as a gateway to Vietnamese culture for a diverse range of learners, not just Vietnamese students. The lessons would also stand as examples of what a teacher can develop from a culture of origin (C1) and connect to a lesson plan that must adhere to given standards and curriculum in the present culture (C2) of the student. The teacher professional experience ranged from pre-service to twenty-five plus years in the field of education; only three of the teachers have Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American students in their home schools.

### **Teacher Responses**

I collected responses composed by American teachers during their six week stay in Vietnam in response to baseline questions relating to culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms and the implications of CRE for their students. Initially I prepared a list of thirty questions relating to CRE which I narrowed down to sixteen (See Appendix A). I thought it was important to collect responses by teachers living and experiencing a new language and culture because it placed them within an experience that is similar to what their immigrant students must experience; it allowed them to develop empathy and understanding for immigrant students in their classrooms that could have never been gained through simply taking a course. The teacher responses are a window into their acquired knowledge about CRE as it was encountered and processed in Vietnam.

### **Observations**

I observed all participants during their six week excursion in Vietnam in both the classroom learning Vietnamese and engaging in the local culture. I observed teachers learning Vietnamese Monday-Friday for three hours in the morning and one hour in the afternoon with a private tutor. The teachers were also observed engaging in the local cultures in Thai Nyguen City, Hanoi, Denang, Ho Chi Minh City, and various towns along the Mekong Delta. The observations were critical in collecting first-hand data on the experiences of teachers learning an L2 (second language) and experiencing another culture.

### **Data Limitations**

The use of baseline questions to elicit participant responses may have guided the participants' thinking in some way about CRE. My intention of having the participants respond and write about specifics may have unintentionally guided their thought processes. The issue may also be whether or not the words were "leading" in some way. An additional limitation is that taking a group of teachers on a trip to a foreign country in order to develop culturally responsive lessons for their students is not a realistic excursion for all educators.

## Results

The analysis of the data collected in the form of teacher responses to a set of baseline questions about CRE resulted in three different overarching themes: Information was gleaned from the data that uncovered the distinct implications and impact of the idiosyncrasies of a student's culture in the classroom. The themes represent the significance of culture, as specified in three distinct realms in classrooms and students' lives.

### Background Culture

The teacher responses collected showed the crucial nature of teachers understanding the historical culture of students in order for students to be successful in the classroom. Culture is a way of describing and categorizing all that life entails; historical culture for students is the fusion of those cultural points of origin that exist in their ethnic and linguistic communities of their ancestors. Teachers learned about the traditions and customs of the Vietnamese first-hand; they also were exposed to the tonal language of Vietnamese. The exposure allowed teachers to get both an emic and etic understanding of the Vietnamese worldview, this in turn assisted them in developing culturally responsive lessons for their Vietnamese students in the metro-NYC Diaspora. These educators learned about their students' histories in order to understand what needs to be included in the curriculum. Historical culture is vital to the knowledge an educator utilizes in lesson plan development so as to be properly informed of students' backgrounds.

The following excerpts are from teacher interviews performed in Vietnam. These excerpts exemplify the importance of understanding the background cultures of students:

Julia: "CRE is understanding and responding to the different ways students of non-majority cultures learn so that they can achieve at the same high levels of majority students.

Jessie: "When you include other cultures in your lessons, students will learn."

Christine: "When the child's environment does not encompass empathy for other cultures and does not support the child's multiculturalism learning is impeded."

### Culture of the Curriculum

The interviews revealed there is a culture embedded in curriculum development. Effective teaching must include the needs of the students; curriculum must conform to the student not the student conforming to the curriculum. The interviews demonstrated that teachers who have knowledge of the culture of origin of their students can effectively include meaningful resources; relevant cultural information sends a message that the student is valued. Curriculum that connects to the learner through culture motivates and encourages students to learn. Also, the interviews revealed that teachers must take into account how students are structured socially within the classroom. Teachers are powerful agents in determining what the curriculum contains that will prompt students to perform at their highest level.

Christine: "Virtual visuals to other countries, Skype lessons with classrooms around the world. Standards are standards but how those standards are achieved will not be along one continuum. All cultures do not learn that same way. Curriculum cannot be written in

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simply one manner either.”

Isabella: “There should be an emphasis on how we are alike, things that we share. If I comprehend who are the students in my class then I have knowledge of what they need in the sense that I will more aptly be able to use cultural items they are familiar with and connect it to what I want to teach. Therefore, the curriculum that I am teaching makes education real and relevant.”

Julia: “I’ve learned about some of the socio-linguistic aspects of Vietnamese people such as how they address people with personal pronouns. This knowledge is important for understanding the communication styles of our students and their families. Also, just as important is the knowledge we have gained about Vietnamese traditions and customs so that we can create culturally appropriate lessons-in other words be able to better relate the curriculum to students’ backgrounds.”

### **Cultural Of Success**

The interviews revealed there is a culture of success when it comes to creating lesson plans through culturally responsive teaching. The interviews demonstrated that the teachers who participated in the study feel their schools need to provide professional development in order for educators to be knowledgeable about how to develop culturally responsive lessons. The interviews illustrate that teachers need guidance in order to incorporate CRE; all teachers in the American school system cannot go on a trip abroad to learn about the cultures of all students in their classrooms. There must be basic professional development on how to relate curriculum to culture by teachers in order to make teaching relevant to the child. The data exposed the deficiencies regarding teacher preparedness for implementing culturally responsive lesson plans for diverse populations. The data told a story of the totality of mostly insufficient groundwork that is laid for American teachers to efficaciously implement CRE.

### **Lessons from Vietnam**

The teachers received daily instruction in the Vietnamese language. It is through this exposure that they learned first-hand what it is like to be in a foreign land and immersed in the local culture and language. A participant said, “I would have to say that I was in shock, homesick, and basically felt lost. I couldn’t get the tones correct because it is a tonal language. I wanted to cry”. The teachers made school visits and met with Vietnamese educators also who were integral components of the overseas phase. Finally, in the post-travel portion of the trip they shared what they learned with their local school districts.

These teachers were given unique experiences visiting museums, world heritage sites, villages, parks, and much more in order to develop a sense of what Vietnam is ranging from the northern region to the southern region. The journey started in Thai Ngyuen City north of Hanoi and in 6 week time the group had covered many regions, ending in Ho Chi Minh City. They attended many lectures by knowledgeable professionals at two different universities where teachers learned about such topics as education, economics; ethnic groups, history, and geography, to name a few.

Even though the teachers had a sound footing on what it takes to produce successful learners, not all had the background as admitted on their behalf to tackle the enormous job of developing lesson plans that were culturally responsive for Vietnamese students back in the NYC public school system. One teacher stated, “I really had no idea what my students go through until I came to Vietnam. I can't speak the language and I don't understand the culture; imagine what those kids coming into the American school system must be feeling”(personal communication, July 15, 2013). It was an eye-opening experience for many on the trip as they realized the full impact of what it means to learn a new language and adapt to new surroundings. A participant stated, “ imagine the pressure American students are under in order to pass NYSESLAT need to define the Acronym and Regents exams in English. There is no way I could pass that kind of exam in Vietnamese.” The lesson plans are unique examples of teachers being students in order to fully grasp who their students are and what cultural artifacts are important to them in order to learn in the American school system.

### **Summary of Data Analysis and Themes**

The themes of historical culture, culture of curriculum, and culture of success revolve around the significance of people who are both in the past and present as individuals and societies. These themes denote the importance of realizing tenets of culture in education if students are going to be productive and thriving members of the workforce and local and global society. The themes tell a story of the American student of today; it is not solely restricted to the discussion of Vietnamese immigrant students in the American Diaspora. The changing demographics of the American school system beg that teachers revisit how they create lesson plans in order to make what is being taught user-friendly for diverse student populations. The teachers who participated in this study learned about Vietnam first-hand which afforded them the opportunity to collect artifacts and gain exposure to the Vietnamese culture and language. The triangulated data resulted in the categorization of the aforementioned distinct themes. The themes are emblematic of what should guide CRE in order to transform education so as to connect to the lives of students and make learning a meaningful experience that translates into societal growth and improvement.

The experiences that these teachers acquired in Vietnam developed cross-cultural learning in that the teachers were forced to inspect and re-evaluate how they looked at schooling because they were temporarily placed in the situation of being the immigrants; they were the immigrants trying to learn the language and communicate with the local people and buy food in the market and go to school every day and expected to do well on the written and oral exams. The teachers were temporary immigrants; they had to read, write, and communicate in Vietnamese. They had to go to the local markets and shops using their limited L2 language skills. All of the teachers agreed that their structured learning experiences in the classrooms were most relevant when instructors/lecturers understood aspects of how to teach in accordance to their learning style and when instructors would clarify information in English.

The teachers developed an appreciation for what immigrant students experience when entering this country and expected to perform well and pass exams in America. Teachers developed cross-cultural learning when they are expected to do it; they develop cross-cultural learning when they are given the professional development. It isn't feasible for all teachers to go on excursions overseas in order to participate in schooling and basic daily living in order to gain cross-cultural awareness but American schools could do a much a better job in providing the

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much needed professional development that would enlighten them on how to effectively instruct diverse populations. The information that can be gleaned from this research for US teachers, international students and scholars alike is that learning in the classroom is not the same experience for all students. Teachers need to know who their students are and make sure there is a connection.

The lesson plans were initially intended for Vietnamese students who are English language learners yet it became apparent that these lessons would be valuable for Vietnamese American students who want to reconnect with certain aspects of their Vietnamese heritage. In addition, the lessons could be a valuable tool in educating any students about the culture of Vietnam.

The excursion to Vietnam was meant to provide this cohort of teachers with experiences in order to probe their understanding of CRE and how to incorporate it into their lesson plan development for the Vietnamese students in their schools. All of the questions were developed with the basic tenets of Dewey in mind; Dewey's philosophy of education can be seen as a forerunner to CRE. The teachers used the template (See Appendix B) to guide them in lesson plan creation. They used all of their experiences in learning Vietnamese and being exposed to the local culture(s) and people to create these lessons for the children of Vietnam who have made their new homes in the United States.

CRE means the teacher must “find a way to take the standards based content or curriculum and make it accessible to students... incorporating student’s daily life, prior knowledge, music, sports, language, and any other interests into the curriculum so that the student feels comfortable enough to try and learn the content because it appears easy to understand” (retrieved from: <http://ghspacers.com/create/culture.html>, February 22, 2014). Through the culturally responsive line of questioning and lesson plan development the importance of Dewey’s philosophy came to life, “we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.”

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Johns Dewey stated, “We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 3). If given the opportunity to use their previous knowledge and experiences to try to help them learn what is being taught, students will make social connections, the points of significance that endure will make learning a real part of their existence. Dewey's stated in his research on ethics and education “education is the totality which can be separated into different fields, or specific educational actions are summarized in education as a whole... defining education as a social function which exists within the structure and functionality of this society which it strengthens, reproduces and changes”(Karafillis, 2012). Social and cultural implications are a part of the foundation of a fortified education which in turn builds formidable minds.

The purpose of the Fulbright-Hayes trip was to immerse American teachers in the culture and language of Vietnam in order to better understand their Vietnamese students in the American Diaspora. The lesson plans are examples of how to engage in socio-cultural and linguistic activities in order to better understand what all English language learners experience in a new culture and language. The lesson plans that were created are exemplars for how to look at a culture and integrate such into curriculum; the practice of integrating culture into curriculum is what Dewey called making “education life itself” and this is the central idea of Culturally Responsive Education.

If we as educators want students to succeed in schools and ultimately build a strong,

erudite America society then the proper environment must exist for them in our classrooms. Dewey specifies the importance of environment. “He explicitly widens the scope of environment beyond location: the words —environment and —medium denote something more than surroundings that encompass an individual. They denote —the specific continuity of the surroundings with his own active tendencies: that is, the things that are noticeable to or important to a person” (Jayanandhan, 2009). If we as educators modify conditions in the classroom to meet the needs of diverse student populations and make our instruction culturally responsive through properly, well thought-out lesson plans everyone benefits: the school, the home, the society. Dewey's views on education are true to education being a reflection of life itself He thought education to be a communal experience that sourced its energy from its linkage to culture in all of its aspects. This basic precept of Dewey guided a group of teachers from metro-New York/Long Island on a trip through Vietnam, utilizing basic strategies of Culturally Responsive Education to create unique lessons to instruct the children of Vietnam in the Diaspora and hopefully to teach all those who wish to explore and experience an urbane example of cross-cultural learning. Society is changed for the better when the social function of the school is unified with the goals of humanity.

### **Implications**

The implications of this research is that teachers who are charged with teaching English language learners will take the time to understand and learn about the backgrounds of their students. Teachers can accomplish two things simultaneously: promote Common Core aligned lesson plans and make their lessons culturally responsive; both elements are intricately connected to student success through making education real and relevant for students. As Dewey has taught us through his philosophical writings, education must be reflective of life itself. Further implications are that educators will realize that ELL students require assessments that are not just culturally responsive but what I would call culturally responsible. Testing of ELL students will not just be about entering and exiting ESL programs but about what the student actually has learned, through connecting the points of each students' history and accomplishments to the English language and what education means for each individual. This article focused on making lesson plans culturally responsive for Vietnamese students in the American Diaspora by a group of American teachers is an opportunity for us all to visualize how important it is to acknowledge that English language learners come to the classroom with many experiences and the background knowledge to be successful; it is not just a piece of research about Vietnamese students in the American Diaspora, it is research that can help all English language learners in the American Diaspora.

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