

The Pertinence of a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Internationalized Higher Education

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Abstract

The burgeoning process of internationalization of higher education has greatly transformed university classrooms with the presence of innumerable nationalities. Thus it is imperative that professors are well equipped to teach in such culturally diverse context while sustaining the goals of internationalization. Although a culturally relevant pedagogy has been widely used in many educational settings, including higher education, there is a paucity of studies looking for its pertinence in an internationalized context. Then, based on Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) theoretical framework, this critical phenomenological study depicts the extent to which that approach is also pertinent for informing post-secondary teachers' work with international students in modern days. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten experienced professors across different faculties at a mid-sized Canadian university. Findings reveal that this pedagogy is highly appropriate to illuminate professors' practices, but this relevance also points to fundamental and urgent aspects that must be taken into consideration when aiming at a democratic and true internationalized education.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, internationalization of higher education, graduate international students, professors' beliefs, democracy

1. Introduction

Travelling to a different country to pursue a degree is not a new phenomenon (Van Damme, 2001). However, the modern process of internationalization of higher education has been distinguishable due to its pace, range and characteristics that have transformed the academic scenario. It is expressive how in 2016 Canada received 205,428 international students from more than 180 different countries (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2016). While the number of international students in higher education is thriving so is cultural diversity at universities, as each of them brings their own world views, language, etc.

In this study, the term *higher education* will be used interchangeably with *post-secondary*, referring to education in universities. Also, this research is focused on international students at the graduate level, that is, individuals who left their home countries in the pursuit of a degree in Canada, whether master or doctoral, either for the whole academic program or a shorter period of time.

There are many benefits for having a culturally diverse campus (Andrade, 2006; Knight, 2013). The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE, 2014), for example, recognizes that the process of internationalization has the potential to “create opportunities for collaborative knowledge production, exposure to different contexts and worldviews, more complex and nuanced analyses, and improved capacity to respond to change and diversity” (p. 5), promote ethical partnerships globally, enhance the curriculum, and empower individuals with a more critical view of the world.

Nonetheless, the evolving process of internationalization has also been marked by exploitative practices emerging from an unbalance focus on profit maximization, systemic exclusion and the consequent emergence of a neo-colonization of epistemologies (Clifford, 2014; Knight, 2013; Saunders, 2010; Van Damme, 2001). Many studies have articulated how prejudice and discrimination are commonly found not only on campus but also in the classrooms (Bennett, 2004), showing that “diversity is not necessarily indicative of the acceptance of difference” (Asher, 2008, p. 16). What the literature shows, then, is that the mere fact of having international students enrolled in a course does not guarantee the delivery of a democratic and truly internationalized

education, one that actually values, sustains and promotes cultural diversity. Moreover, the desirable goals of this ubiquitous phenomenon will not be achieved without teachers who comprehend their roles in such process, and who strive to ensure that culturally diverse students have their knowledge validated and resorted to as an educational tool, rather than silenced.

Indeed, Ladson-Billings (1994) already noticed long ago that how teachers perceive themselves and their students, how they think about knowledge, and their social relations with students, is what made the difference among those considered successful teachers of African-American children, contrasting to what she called an assimilationist teacher. Her subsequent Culturally Relevant Pedagogy theory (1995) has been widely used since then to inform not only the K-12 system, but also other educational settings, including higher education. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of studies looking for its pertinence in an internationalized context. Being this framework so frequently discussed and resorted to in education (even if with different terms or slight differences in its approach), the question is whether a culturally relevant pedagogy is also useful to illuminate professors' work in the modern internationalized higher education. This research, then, seeks to comprehend the ways in which this approach approximates or distances when thinking specifically about how higher education teachers perceive their graduate international students and internationalization. The major question that drove this research was: To what extent is Ladson-Billings' (1995) framework pertinent for understanding post-secondary teachers' work with international students? In this paper I will show how a culturally relevant approach, as proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995), not only clearly speaks the language of an internationalized university, from professors' lenses, but also points serious issues to be tackled in order to achieve the goals of internationalization.

2. Relevance

For decades, the government of Canada claims to be taking measures to promote cultural diversity as well as to cooperate with its increasingly changing population (Library of Parliament, 2013). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, for example, claims that the Government of Canada is "committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada" (Minister of Justice, 2016, p. 2). This Act also emphasizes that the Government of Canada is committed to recognize, preserve and promote appreciation of cultural diversity. Moreover, Federal Institutions are to "carry on their activities in a manner that is *sensitive and responsive* [emphasis added] to the multicultural reality of Canada" (Minister of Justice, 2016, p. 4).

Nonetheless, when it comes to the four walls of a classroom, it is not certain that cultural diversity is being perceived in such constructive and positive manners. As the literature shows, teachers frequently neglect or undermine perspectives brought by culturally diverse students (Schachner et al., 2016). But especially in a country that takes so much pride in their multiculturalism policies, like Canada, it is imperative that teachers also share a culturally relevant mind and seek to make informed decisions that validate students' background in every aspect of their classes.

Committed to promoting social justice and equity in culturally diverse classrooms, Gloria Ladson-Billings sought to develop an effective pedagogical practice that "not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Then, in 1994, Ladson-Billings published in her book *The Dreamkeepers* what she had witnessed from the speech and practices of eight teachers of African-American learners, whom she perceived as being thoughtful, inspiring, demanding, and critical, and at the same time connected to the students. In other words: successful teachers of those who had been previously segregated.

Later, Ladson-Billings (1995) developed what she called *culturally relevant pedagogy*, as a new perspective to deal with a diverse classroom, contrasting it with an assimilationist teacher. She defines this theory as one "that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18). In broad terms, this theory would be a guide to "produce students who can achieve academically, ... demonstrate cultural competence, and ... both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 474). The similarities between this approach and the claimed goals of internationalization of higher education are clearly noticeable. As the Accord on the Internationalization of Education states, this process should "equip participants to understand local and global connections critically, to expand frames of reference and possibilities for rethinking, relationships and educational, economic, and social practice" (ACDE, 2014, p. 5).

The validity of a culturally relevant pedagogy in other contexts is also questioned by Aronson & Laughter (2016). The authors show, however, that many studies have upheld its efficacy, especially when the focus is on social justice. Many other scholars have contributed to this field using different terms and there may be slight differences among them (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Richardson, 2011). But what undergirds all names is the teaching that recognizes, values and uses cultural diversity to empower students to achieve their potential, seeking “the inclusion of minoritized knowledge in mainstream curricular and pedagogical contexts” (Richardson, 2011, p. 334).

Indeed, a culturally relevant pedagogy has been successfully applied in many contexts, including higher education. Ladson-Billings (2014) herself has declared that “any notion of culturally relevant pedagogy has to change and evolve in order to meet the needs of each generation of studies” (p. 80-81). The question that remains, then, is the extent to which it can also be applied to understand how post-secondary teachers across areas perceive and react to their classrooms comprised of so many international students, consequently being instrumental in developing democratic and true internationalized classrooms.

3. Methodology

Professors of different faculties of a mid-sized Canadian university were invited via email to participate. The first ten professors who attended the criteria of inclusion and agreed to participate were recruited. Based on Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each professor who took part in this research. Interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed verbatim by the researcher, who also analyzed them following Moustakas’ transcendental phenomenology, step by step.

At the time of the interview professors had between 13 and 34 years of experience at that institution and belonged to 6 different faculties, in both sciences and social sciences. Although I did not ask participants about their gender or nationality, I assume 3 are men and 7 women, and 3 participants mentioned not being born in Canada, increasing the group’s heterogeneity.

Based on the three main tenets of a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Conceptions of Self and Others, Social Relations, and Conceptions of Knowledge, a set of questions was prepared beforehand to serve as a guide in order to comprehend how professors perceive their international students and internationalization. Responses were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, no single answer was tied to any specific individual and no specific faculty has been identified. Where necessary, words (such as one’s faculty) have been replaced by something else in brackets so as to keep the sentence’s meaning.

4. Culturally Relevant Internationalized Higher Education?

This research sought to understand the extent to which Ladson-Billings’ (1995) theoretical framework is pertinent to inform post-secondary teachers’ work with international students in modern internationalized universities. I present now the most relevant data that emerged from the interviews, according to the three major tenets of Ladson-Billings’ theory while offering critical insights to the present condition of higher education in light of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

4.1 Conceptions of Self and Others

The first differentiation Ladson-Billings makes between a culturally relevant and an assimilationist teacher is that the former sees him or herself as an artist, while the latter as a technician. Similarly, the presence of so many international students thrills professors who are always encountering different groups of students, so the class never seems to be the same. Teaching thus becomes the art of finding ways to help every student, with their culturally different ways of thinking and behaving, to become successful.

Anna: ... So, maybe students do a film, or maybe they do interviews, or maybe they do art work as opposed to always essay, essay, essay. And just allowing people to explore different kinds of methods for evaluation.... Essays, exams, essays, exams, you know, let’s be more creative.... I have gone as much as I can with the, you know, powers that are above me [laughs]to no exams, right? No final exams. Which just takes a lot of pressure of students, all students but international students in particular, I think, feel quite stressed by the presence of final exams, and they get a lot of them, particularly in the first and second year. So going, you know, changing the way in which we evaluate has been big.

Nevertheless there is a thin line between knowing how to anticipate problems and stereotyping. Professors in this study argued that their experience has taught them how to anticipate the problems they or their international students might face, but at the same time some expressed that students’ skills and behaviors are frequently associated to their origins.

Adam: ... *the length of my experience has taught me what to expect from different international students... has maybe given me a better appreciation of their background that they are coming to the class with... and what different, graduate students what kind of strengths they have, for example, certain kinds, certain countries produce students with very good math skills, some of them with you know, different programming skills or poor programming skills, and so I think this has just given experience on what to expect from the students. Also, on a personal interaction level it's given me, my experience has given me better understanding of how their interaction is gonna go, when for example, if they fail a test, how that interaction is gonna go, so I'm not at a surprise anymore, so I'm, I guess I just, I just have more experience dealing with them now.*

Others also pointed how they thought they knew what students would prefer (e.g. a certain type of exam), and then realized they were wrong (which led them to be frustrated and avoid further modifications). Consequently, professors seem to oscillate between being an artist and a technician. For example, even though in some cases professors see teaching as a technical task because of the content that cannot be altered, they are still looking for several different ways to guide students to their desirable goals.

Mary: *I love the mix, but if you have people who are so much extroverted and the introvert combined, it stills brings out the best in people. But it's something we have to work with because when it comes to some programs where we require some students to participate in, the extrovert they always jump in but those who are not very, they don't feel free to express themselves much, they don't want to be at the center stage.... But it's a challenge because the cultures, they really dictates sometimes what we see in our students in terms of what they are willing to do and where they are very reserved.*

Differently from what would be classified as an assimilationist teacher, there is a strong sense of belonging to the Canadian and local community in all professors, even among those who mentioned not being born there. Professors are passionate about how they contribute to their context and encourage students to do so, and some already feel how their students are devoted to making the difference either in their home countries or in Canada.

Most teachers hold strong beliefs that international students are talented and with great potential to thrive in their academic endeavors. However, they also believe many international students arrive with serious language issues that have to be overcome for them to succeed.

Matthew: ... *it's been a barrier in as much as... if the ability to communicate wasn't part of their grade then they would do just as well as the students whose first language was English, on average. But sadly, like I said, as sad as researchers and academics we have to be able to communicate effectively, and if we can't do that then it's tough, it's gonna be real hard. And, and so, yeah, the language aspect is, is very important. And so if you, if you could figure out some way to, to remove that from the equation, then yeah, so on average the students would do just as well and maybe in some, well no, maybe, in a lot of cases, individual basis anyways, a lot better. But it's just that language barrier that's a bit of an impediment to some, not all, but some students.*

Furthermore, other aspects were raised by professors as necessary skills to be developed in students as a condition for their success, falling in what Ladson-Billings portrayed as the assimilationist teacher, who believes “failure is inevitable for some” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 38).

David: ... *just in terms of academics, the academic culture in different countries can often be very different. And so, at least in [my department], what we found is that student from, from other countries are often not, don't have the background that we would expect in [our area] students from, students from Canada have. And so, students are coming in with equal worth degrees to a domestic student, but the... training that goes into that degrees is quite different. And in some ways it's stronger, so often technically, mathematically students are quite good... but in terms of other things like critical thinking and formulating research questions and organizing thesis statements, students are often not as good. And so... what we expect students to come in with often they don't have. And that places some real challenges both on the students themselves who struggle to catch up, and the professors as well where trying to deal with... domestic students who have certain skills and certain problems and then international students that often have other skills and problems.*

The Freirean notion of teaching as “mining” rather than “banking” (Freire, 1996) characterizes the culturally relevant teacher who believes that every student can succeed and which was a common belief professors in this study held. As Ladson-Billings explains, “One of the commonalities among this diverse group of teachers is an overriding belief that students come to school with knowledge and that that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 56). Many expressed their

frustration to see how international students are commonly regarded with a deficit view instead of looking for what they bring.

Anna: ... I think the same thing is pertain in terms of identifying whether they're bringing... their own experiences, getting the opportunity to share that or whether they get, sort of, shut into a, a corner [laugh] and not engaging with the other students. So the potential is huge, the actual outcome I think is a mixed bag... and you certainly will see students who are, and faculty who are very vexed about what's going on in terms of some of the international students. And it's largely around language issues, and whether they're actually prepared adequately to be in a university-level classroom, that's seems a bit harsh, but.... I think it's about recognizing what they bring into the classroom and being, to me one of the most important ways of both teaching and learning is through story-telling... give people an opportunity to tell their story. And when that happens the dynamic in the classroom can change, from being a place that's tension-field to being one where people feel that they have some value, that they're not just there as the empty vessel to be filled but are there as co-learners.

Paradoxically, English skills is still a watershed in how they perceive their students, who do not communicate like Canadians, going against the desired goal proposed by the ACDE, that "Multilingualism should be valued and encouraged" (ACDE, 2014, p. 10). Diversity of languages should be regarded as an asset rather than a weakness. A person who can speak more than one language should be praised and encouraged for the intrinsic value it brings to their understanding and connection to the world. Nevertheless, it seems that the opposite has been taking place in higher education, for unimportant things, such as one's accent.

Also, there seems to be a contradiction when some teachers claim to believe their students' experience have to be heard, but are unyielding to change the curriculum or even to simply look for ways to make it meaningful to students' lives. Virtually all professors expressed that international students' knowledge has to be validated, but in few occasions did they clarified the ways in which such could happen, as will be better explained further ahead.

Finally, while culturally relevant teachers help students develop their global identities while making connections to the current context they are in, as would also be one of the main goals of internationalization, the opposite, as Ladson-Billings points, would be a teacher who homogenizes students into the dominant mindset. However, only a couple of my participants claimed that students should not abandon their origins and history. What most professors pointed is that integrating into the Canadian culture is pivotal for their success.

Samuel: ... most newcomers who are planning to stay are quite interested in learning how things are done here. And even if they don't agree they tend to go along with it just because they feel like they want to become a Canadian. Now they probably also want to remain something else as well, you know, especially with respect to things like food. But... often they're willing to change their ideas more than they're willing to change their eating.

Professors claim that the different world views international students bring is of great benefit to the university. Yet those students are often told (through policies, schedules, regulations and teachers' attitudes) that their ways of studying, thinking and behaving, for example, are not appropriate, and so are exhorted to fit into Western, North-American, Canadian ways if they want to be successful, which seems contradictory.

4.2 Social Relations

Ladson-Billings clearly contends that culturally relevant teachers have fluid and humanely equitable relationship with *each* student rather than a hierarchical and authoritarian one, which goes beyond the classroom moment. Indeed, most participants in this study emphasized how they do not differentiate between international and Canadian students *because of* their origins, but that it ends up being different because they treat each student (including internationals) as individuals with their particular difficulties, abilities, and goals.

Matthew: ... I mean if you ask me "do I treat the-the Canadian students different to the international students?" I'd probably say yes. I probably do. But, then again... yeah... I don't know I said, because I'm going through all my students in my head now and I'm thinking how differently have I treated them and... really I think... as individuals rather than as a person from Brazil or a person from Europe or a person from Southeast Asia... they're just individuals to me, and everyone, including myself, has their own strengths and weaknesses. And so, I- you know, I treat each individual differently because of that. Because my job I see as trying to get the-the one person to perform to the best of their ability. And that means you have to deal with each individuals, and with individuals in a different way.

Most professors claim to be sensitive to international students' needs, and they believe they are supportive of

those needs as much as possible. This means professors see themselves dealing with international students outside the classroom, counseling them in their offices about academic and personal issues, besides accommodating their practices in many ways.

David: *And so I often, for international students, I find them in my office just telling me about their lives and the challenges that they face being away from home or dealing with domestic issues and stuff like that. So, yes, stuff like that, you know, it's, I think it's really important to sort of be able to listen to students and give them someone to talk to even though, professionally speaking, I'm completely unqualified to deal with their personal issues... it's more personally challenging often to deal with some of the things that the international students have.*

Professors recognize how students arrive regarding them as a superior being and how this relationship evolves with time as students see how they are treated as colleagues, equitably.

Adam: *... for most of the international students that I get I would say that there's a more traditional professor-student relationship at the beginning... where with Canadian students these days there's less formality. But over time I think they learn that, with me they don't necessarily have to be as formal. So, the relationship with is maybe dynamic, it changes over time with me depending on how long they know me.*

Another way in which culturally relevant teachers are distinguished from the assimilationist ones is because they encourage a community of learners, rather than promoting competition among them. The formers would encourage collaborative learning while the latter, individuality. When depicting a cooperative environment, Ladson-Billings (1994) notices that “Psychological safety is a hallmark of each of these classrooms. The students feel comfortable and supported. They realize that the biggest infraction they can commit is to work against the unity and cohesiveness of the group” (p. 79). We can see that professors in this study believe in their efforts to maintain a comfortable environment and to lead students to maintain healthy relationships, while helping each other day by day.

Adam: *... if they're gonna succeed in my lab they basically end up being, really part of the group and interacting in my lab, in my particular lab everybody works together, certainly they take the lead on certain research projects but then, they work in various groups and they support each other and by the end of their PhD I have very, I don't think I have any that work on their own, individual projects, they all do, they all share different projects. So if they're gonna succeed in my lab they have to get through that.*

Not only that, but when cultural misunderstandings arise, which could jeopardize the cohesion of the class, professors promptly interfere to coach them through their issues and thus maintains the peace and collaboration among students.

4.3 Conceptions of Knowledge

When it comes to the third proposition that emerged from Ladson-Billings' study, the author contrasts how knowledge is perceived by culturally relevant teachers versus assimilationist ones. In the former group, knowledge is not viewed as something static or unchanging, but rather as something that is “continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 89). Differently from the assimilationist, culturally relevant teachers do not see themselves as a bank of knowledge to be transmitted to students. Rather, they believe in a constructive, multi direction teaching, where they also get to learn from students. In many occasions my participants expressed how they do not see themselves as *the* source of knowledge, but appreciated the knowledge brought by international students, their different ways of solving problems or viewing the world.

Samuel: *Well, I think you need to recognize the wisdom of the students in your class. Like, especially at the graduate level, people have usually had quite a bit of life experience and it's important not to waste that. You know, if I think the whole thing is “I'm the font of knowledge and I transmit it to other people and they're just supposed to sit there and receive it and right it down and then spin it back to me in an essay”, then I'm wasting all of the life experience, all the knowledge of the people in the class that are there.*

Nevertheless, the way in which this claim goes beyond a mere appreciation was somewhat obscure. When asked how the presence of international students has influenced their practices a common answer would be:

Matthew: *Not at all. In terms of course content, not at all. I mean, I, you know, deliver course-content based on the science not the student body. And the students are there because they're interested in the*

course content not because there's, you know, maybe more or less international students in that class. At least that's what I would hope of, that's why I'm for [laughs].

Or also:

Noah: To my class? Well, they're just like a normal student, right, in my class. And then, yeah, whatever the contribution made by other students be they contribute to my class. And I know there's sort of this idea of bring international student to the classroom and they can share their experience from their own countries, and... but my courses are mostly technical courses, we deal with technical issues so there are no sort of boundaries between [laughs] countries, between cultures.

Some participants pointed that students in their classes have the opportunity to speak up, but, at the same time, that many will not because of insecurity or shyness. In most cases, professors alleged that they enjoy having international students in the class, but it was not evident how, in fact, changes in benefit of international students take place in the environment, as would be expected in a culturally relevant classroom.

Teachers want to lead students to achieve their full potential, and seek to do so by helping them develop the necessary skills. The work advisors have with their own students, scaffolding their development, is perceived as fundamental to this process, whereas they feel some isolated students do not get as far.

Elizabeth: I think... the relationship with, communion, with the supervisors and the participation, like, really engaging in the whole scope of graduate student activities really help students succeed... student life is hard but it shouldn't be just solid work... it shouldn't be playing around either, only playing around. Yeah, and I think, a really good relationship with the supervisor is quite critical to that.

As Ladson-Billings (1994) reminds, "Culturally relevant teaching methods do not suggest to students that they are incapable of learning. These teachers provide intellectual challenges by teaching to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator" (p. 134), and this does seem to be what professors in my study believe in. It appears that every accommodation, for example, has been carefully done so as not to lower the standards or take away students' independence.

Samuel: ... I guess the only other thing would be maybe extending time sometimes... it takes students who are reading in a second language longer to read stuff and they need to re-read it a couple times to get it figured out and it takes them longer to write stuff so I sometimes let them know, you know, "if you need more time... you know, that's ok". But I don't direct that just to international students. I would kinda say, you know, "if you need more time for any reason, you know, come and let me know, let me know what the reason is other than, you know, if the reason is you're lazy then no, that's not so good. But if the reason is that you're pregnant, or the reason is that you're... you're visiting your mom who's sick in the hospital or if the reason is that you are processing the language more slowly than you would in your native language then those are good reasons" so then we figure out an alternative schedule to when to get things done back.

Absent from most participants discourse, though, was what Ladson-Billings calls a critical view of knowledge, fighting against the status quo that diminishes the difference. Through internationalization "Students should be exposed to multiple worldviews and offered critical tools of analysis to assess the historical, political, ethical and social implications of different positions, including their own" (ACDE, 2014, p. 10). Although asserting critical thinking to be an essential component of graduate studies, it does not seem that professors actually engage students in criticizing their own epistemologies, but rather try to fit students into a Canadian way of knowing, which supports what Clifford (2014) also noticed: Students are urged to be critical, but not to question the state of affairs of the dominant society, especially when it touches historically ingrained acts of racism and prejudice. Actually, one professor said that he tries to be less Canadian-centric in his teaching style. But it seems that there is still a lot to be learned and improved when it comes to teachers internationalizing themselves, something that, as Clifford (2014) showed, is not easy achieved in a context where Western thinking is strongly rooted.

Another characteristic Ladson-Billings perceived in the participants of her study is that they were passionate about knowledge and used it as empowerment. That is, those teachers would encourage students to make sense of what they learn, relating it to their lives and not simply memorizing content. As she describes,

Students' real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the 'official' curriculum.... They are not writing on blank slates; instead, they are challenging conventional scripts by importing the cultural and everyday experiences of the students into the literacy learning. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 127)

Most professors in my research demonstrated a willingness to engage students in such a way. Even though they

would occasionally speak of teaching science matters with some neutrality, as something unavoidable, some also expressed the desire to make students excited and committed to their studies.

Samuel: *I kinda believe... you have to understand, I'm in [an area that]... from my point of view I wanna know that the people who take my courses and who graduate from the programs that I'm teaching them are going to be affective advocates for people who have disabilities, that they're going to be affective in terms of intervention on behalf of those people whether it's in the workplace, sort of schools or... you know within academic context or non-academic context, I want to make sure that they're going to be good advocates and that they're going to intervene to create a more inclusive world, one in which students with disabilities can participate in more normal and more inclusive, included ways, and in which the outcomes can be as close as possible to the outcomes that non-disabled people, you know, would experience. So... I'm really interested in the person and how they evolve and the skills they have to do those things than I am for example in achieving, per se.*

Finally, Ladson-Billings notices that culturally relevant teachers see “excellence as a complex standard that may involve some postulates but takes student diversity and individual differences into account” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 89). She recognizes that such can be done, for example, by incorporating multifaceted ways of assessment. Participants here shared how they have tried to be flexible in their assessment criteria and methods of evaluation so as to provide everyone with the opportunity to share their expertise. Additionally, when asked about their definitions of academic achievement, it was clear that professors believe in a complex, broad and multi-layered way of seeing it. The traditional GPA scale was present, but followed by several other skills and values such as critical thinking abilities, communication skills, having novel ideas, etc.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to deconstruct the modern process of internationalization of higher education in light of the three tenets of Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy. The main question that drove this research was the extent to which her framework is pertinent to inform professors' work with their international students in modern days. From the generated data it is possible to recognize how the characteristics of a culturally relevant approach can also be pursued in an internationalized higher education context. Moreover, the aspects from that framework which diverge from the present setting, rather than diminish its pertinence, urge for improvement.

Professors' experience has taught them how to anticipate challenges international students might go through, and at least most of my participants demonstrated a willingness to contribute to their students' well-being. Nevertheless, however praiseworthy such finding may be, one must stand guard against a rigid cultural understanding, taking for granted each student's individuality. It must also be observed that professors may often claim to admire cultural diversity, suggesting that it is necessary to value what international students bring to class, yet at the same time hold a deficit view towards them in practice, especially in terms of language difficulties. The danger is that international students may become merely an object of exotic admiration while being forced to fit into a system that sets standards and norms to the detriment of their knowledge, usually based on the excuse that there can be no change in the curriculum.

Internationalization must not be an end in itself, nor is the amount of enrolled international students a synonym of its efficacy. In order to be truly international it is necessary to have an upfront stance toward the difference and raise the flag of diversity, rather than that of sameness, not only through policies, but also every educational practice. If the goal of internationalizing higher education is to make the most out of global diversity, rather than promoting global sameness, every knowledge and perspective, which represents a cultural manifestation, should be welcomed and supported, regardless of subject or content. It is necessary, then, that professors, who play such a crucial role in this process, embrace the objectives of internationalization and, being open to change, truly strive to sustain an education where culturally diverse students can have their experience validated and allowed to make meaningful contribution to a class which is at the same time meaningful to them.

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