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Getting the Conversation Started: School Library Candidates Speak Out About the Importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching

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GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED:

SCHOOL LIBRARY CANDIDATES SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

DEEP AND WIDE

When hearing the term “culturally responsive teaching,” many people’s thoughts automatically go to race as culture. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha we have made a concerted effort to ensure that our Library Science Education Programs candidates come to realize that culturally responsive teaching is much broader and deeper than just considering our P-12 students’ race.

In our program, the Special Methods: School Library course focuses on the role of school librarians as teachers. As such, one of the overarching themes is being a culturally responsive educator, and we are intentional about providing opportunities for our candidates to consider how we see and serve *all* students in our school. It is our responsibility as instructors to ensure that the candidates learn to consider the whole student, and we emphasize that this can only be accomplished by building strong relationships. These relationships allow us to get to know our students as individuals.

“In order to get to know my students better, I need to find creative ways to engage them in conversations when I see them. It makes sense to start our conversation with what they have read and liked, and then move into why they liked the text. Reading is such a personal experience; if I can get students to talk about their reading, their own personalities, stories, and backgrounds will come out as well.”—Valerie, school library candidate

STEP ONE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For their first learning opportunity of the semester, our candidates read Laura Summers’ (2010) article *Culturally Responsive Leadership in School Libraries*. We wanted our candidates to begin the process of reflecting on their own current teaching philosophies by considering the four levels of culturally responsive teaching mentioned in the article:



By Bridget Kratt and Courtney Pentland

- Level One: The Contribution Stage
- Level Two: The Additive Stage
- Level Three: The Transformational Stage
- Level Four: The Social Action Stage.

Our goal was for the candidates to experience a shift in perception from considering only the superficial aspects of students’ cultures to considering multiple viewpoints and perspectives that empower students. Our hope was for our candidates to realize the importance of school libraries as open and inviting places where all students feel safe to ask questions and discover more about their own cultures as well as the cultures of others.

“When reading about these four levels, I realized that I was probably sitting between stage two and three. I think I would do a good job of integrating cultural content in the classroom, but I am not sure I am familiar enough with alternative resources. I need to really think outside of the box to find materials that will have an impact. We can put up posters around the school for every special day, but that does not mean the students understand why we are doing that.”—Rebecca, school library candidate

STEP TWO: TEACHING TOLERANCE

Culture is personal and ever changing, and it is important for our candidates to understand

that even if our students share the same ethnicity or race, we should not assume they share the same culture. For the next learning opportunity, we had our candidates locate and watch videos from Teaching Tolerance. We wanted the candidates to discover and share tips and strategies they could implement right away to improve intergroup relations in their schools and support equitable experiences for their students. In doing so, their own teaching and learning are enhanced long after our course is complete.

“From this video I found that not only do I need to teach for all students’ learning styles, I need to also examine how I react to students. The video explains that it is human nature to react in certain ways to specific groups of students. After watching the video, I realized that I am guilty of falling into and trusting stereotypes. I have since been able to take a step back and work on how I react to my students. My goal is to react to a situation and not a specific student, breaking the stereotypes.”—Alicia, school library candidate

STEP THREE: CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Up to this point, the candidates had only had the opportunity to share their thoughts and reflections on the article and videos with the instructors and receive feedback from us. We

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know that peer discussions of new points of learning are essential in broadening perspectives. Even though the candidates had already expressed how the learning opportunities had shifted their thinking, they would benefit even more by sharing with one another.

As such, the first item on our agenda when they returned for our in-class session was to discuss their thoughts, questions, and “aha moments” with each other. To help the candidates focus their thinking, we provided culturally responsive teaching goals on chart paper around the room. Using these goals, the candidates were able to then discuss current teaching practices as well as new practices they could implement immediately to help them meet the goals. Candidates quickly realized that by engaging in these culturally responsive teaching practices, they could meet multiple goals. The candidates’ views of culturally responsive teaching made another shift as they moved from considering only the superficial aspects of our students’ cultures to considering multiple cultural viewpoints and perspectives that empower students.

“During class someone said that everyone in a school has their own stories. I think once I realized this to be true, I began to focus more on the individual than the class as a whole. . . I believe being culturally responsive in my teaching means looking at the individual. I will try to give each child what they need when the need it. While doing this it is imperative that I know “their story” and take into consideration their own cultural differences.”—Jackie, school library candidate

STEP FOUR: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

After engaging in the small group activity, our candidates enjoyed hearing from a guest panel of school librarians from culturally diverse schools in the Omaha Public Schools district. Panel members shared their experiences of teaching in school libraries with dual-language programs, high poverty, socioeconomic diversity, migrant and refugee students, and integrated special needs students. As the panel guests discussed the importance of learning about and connecting to the lives, experiences, and cultures of their students, we sensed another shift in our candidates’ thinking. They soon began to

share their own stories of how they may have overlooked the strengths or needs of their students due to cultural differences.

“From the class panel discussion of librarians from several Omaha schools, I learned that one of the most important things I can do to be a culturally responsive teacher-librarian is to get out of the library and be visible in the school and in the school community. This can be accomplished by working hard at building relationships with students and staff, learning student names, asking questions, marketing what you the librarian can do for patrons, and locating authentic cultural materials for the library collection.”—Tammy, school library candidate

OUR FINAL STEP: ASSESSING NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

Once our candidates participated in the learning experiences related to culturally responsive teaching, we needed to determine how we could measure their successful growth in this area of instruction. Through their written reflections to each outside-of-class learning opportunity and their in-class participation in discussions, we could get part of the picture—a progression of their thinking about this topic. To get a broader idea about the group as a whole, however, we determined that an anonymous survey would give us the best results. We were hopeful that by administering the survey prior to the start of the unit and again at the end, we would be able to chart growth for our candidates in this area. The five question survey asked candidates to rate their confidence level from a 1 to 4 (1 = no confidence, 4 = very confident) on creating a trusting and caring environment, identifying learning profiles, personalizing learning, challenging students with developmentally appropriate activities, and encouraging students when working independently and in groups. We were very pleased when, at the end of our culturally responsive teaching discussions and learning opportunities, our candidates had indeed grown more confident.

“The first time I took the Positive Culturally Responsive Learning Environments Self-Assessment in class I was shocked at how little I was doing to promote multicultural education in my media center. However, after our readings and discussions, and through

trying new multicultural methods in my media para [educator] teaching, I was able to score myself higher the second time I took the assessment. It was indeed an eye opening experience for me. I know that I have a long way to go before I can say I am at the social action stage, but it is a goal that I want to continue working towards.”—Erica, school library candidate

BEGINNING STEPS ON A JOURNEY

Our Special Methods: School Library course is in many ways just the beginning of discussions our school library candidates will have about what it means to fulfill their role as teacher in the school library—seeing and serving all students in the school. Our candidates have discussed with their peers their thoughts and ideas on how to be a more culturally responsive teacher in the school library. They have heard testimony from school librarians in the field about culturally responsive teaching practices, and they have documented their own thoughts along the way. Their knowledge and confidence levels for achieving the five major areas of culturally responsive teaching have grown.

As instructors our confidence has also grown. We know that by providing our candidates with background knowledge of what culturally responsive teaching “looks like,” they are better able to continue the learning of culturally responsive teaching practices on their own. While our teaching and our candidates’ exploration of culturally responsive teaching is not over, we know they are better prepared for the challenges that lie ahead on their journey to becoming school librarians.

Work Cited

Summers, Laura L. “Culturally Responsive Leadership in School Libraries.” *Library Media Connection* 28.5 (2010): 10-13.

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