

Culturally Relevant Education Challenges and Threats in the US Secondary Classroom

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Abstract : This study explores the challenges and threats US secondary educators experience in incorporating culturally relevant education (CRE) practices in their classrooms. CRE is a social justice pedagogical practice used to connect student's cultural references to academic skills and content, to promote critical reflection, to facilitate cultural competence, and to critique discourses of power and oppression. Empirical evidence on CRE demonstrates positive student educational outcomes in terms of achievement, engagement, and motivation. Additionally, due to the direct focus on uplifting diverse cultures through the curriculum, students experience greater feelings of belonging, increased interest in the subject matter, and stronger racial/ethnic identities. When these teaching practices are in place, educators develop deeper relationships with their students and appreciate the multitude of gifts they (and their families) bring to the classroom environment. Yet, educators regularly report being unprepared to incorporate CRE in their daily teaching practice and identify substantive gaps in their knowledge and skills in this area. Often, they were not exposed to CRE in their educator preparation program, nor do they receive adequate support through school- or district-wide professional development programming. Through a descriptive phenomenological research design, 20 interviews were conducted with a diverse set of secondary school educators to explore the challenges and threats they experience in incorporating CRE practices in their classrooms. The guiding research question for this study is: What are the challenges and threats US secondary educators face when seeking to incorporate CRE practices in their classrooms? Interviews were grounded by the theory of challenge and threat states, which highlights the ways in which challenges and threats are appraised and how resources factor into emotional valence and perception, as well as the potential to meet the task at hand. Descriptive phenomenological data analysis strategies were utilized to develop an essential structure of the educators' views of challenges and threats in regard to incorporating CRE practices in their secondary classrooms. The attitude of the phenomenological reduction method was adopted, and the data were analyzed through five steps: sense of the whole, meaning units, transformation, structure, and essential structure. The essential structure that emerged was while secondary educators display genuine interest in learning how to successfully incorporate CRE practices, they perceive it to be a challenge (and not a threat) due to lack of exposure which diminishes educator capacity, comfort, and confidence in employing CRE practices. These findings reveal the value of attending to emotional valence and perception of CRE in promoting this social justice pedagogical practice. Findings also reveal the importance of appropriately resourcing educators with CRE support to ensure they develop and utilize this practice.

Keywords : culturally relevant education, descriptive phenomenology, social justice practice, US secondary education

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