Reading summary

Vass, G. (2017). Preparing for culturally responsive schooling: Initial teacher educators into the fray. *Journal of Teacher Education,* 68(5), 451-462.

This article reports on a study that focused on postgraduate students as they prepared for, undertook, and reflected on practicum experiences. To set the scene, the article begins by considering the cultural diversity in Australian classrooms, and describes how conventional educational reforms often fall short. It argues that such reforms tend to adopt compensatory strategies that address perceived deficits in students and communities, rather than recognising and valuing their cultural assets. It argues that good intentions alone are insufficient and that educators must engage in critically informed and reflexive pedagogical practices to create meaningful learning experiences.

The article outlines a series of workshops designed to prepare student teachers for their practicums. These workshops focused on self-reflection regarding cultural locations, understanding relational power dynamics in the classroom, and familiarising participants with the theoretical and political foundations of CRS. The aim was to equip future educators with practical strategies to implement CRS effectively.

The experiences of teacher candidates during their practicums revealed three main obstacles hindering participants' culturally responsive approaches:

Barrier 1: Limited and Limiting Focus in Terms of Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment

Initial teacher educators (ITEs) faced institutional pressure to restrict their teaching scope and maintain low expectations for culturally diverse students. While surface-level teacher-student relationships were encouraged, meaningful curricular reforms were blocked. The system prioritised White-dominated requirements over cultural responsiveness, limiting teachers' ability to demonstrate authentic care for students' learning experiences.

Barrier 2: Resistance to Seeing the Need for Change or What ITEs Have to Offer

Experienced teachers exhibited entrenched resistance to CRS through deficit perspectives and fixed cultural views. Mentors actively discouraged new teaching approaches, viewing cultural responsiveness as unrealistic or unnecessary. The environment lacked critical self-reflection, with staff dismissing the need for change and maintaining reductive assumptions about student abilities based on cultural background.

Barrier 3: Concerns With Being Evaluated During the Professional Experience

Power dynamics during professional placements created fear among ITEs that implementing CRS could result in negative evaluations. Pressure from standardised assessments and curriculum reforms further complicated their ability to experiment with culturally responsive approaches. Many ITEs ultimately abandoned CRS practices to meet traditional expectations and secure positive reports.

These illustrate the complexities of implementing culturally responsive schooling (CRS). Nevertheless, the structured reflections and peer support within this project, akin to a professional learning community, helped participants: recognise this as a systemic challenge; maintain focus on students' educational experiences; and stay committed to developing and implementing culturally responsive practices in their future teaching roles.

Ultimately, the text advocates for a systemic approach to education that recognises the value of diversity and actively promotes inclusive practices. To address power imbalances between mentors and ITEs, professional development should reposition all educators as reciprocal learners who recognise their students (and mentees) as valuable sources of knowledge and skill. It calls for school leadership to create environments that enable all students to feel recognised and valued within the educational system.

Take Home Messages

Commitment to social justice on the part of teachers and leaders is crucial: This links to an awareness that Australian schooling continues to be predominantly Anglo-Centric

A commitment to flexibility while recognising existing demands is needed: We need to recognise that an existing strength of teachers is their ability to attend to systemic demands while still being flexible to the complexities of their classrooms. This is a reminder that educators are not involved in straight-forward or neat endeavours.

Being persistent and finding allies: Being persistent is vital, and finding allies in this commitment can help sustainability.

Leadership Matters: School leadership plays a critical role in fostering an environment that promotes culturally responsive practices.

Discussion questions:

How do systemic pressures and individual agency interact in creating change? What role might 'finding allies' play in sustaining culturally responsive practices?

Vass describes teaching as neither straightforward nor neat. How might embracing this complexity change how we approach culturally responsive teaching?