The Black Inquiry

INCREASING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF
AFRICAN AMERICANS ACROSS MULTIPLE
ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

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Abstract

Critical thinking is often seen as a universal goal of higher education but is seldom confirmed as an outcome. This study was conducted to determine whether an introductory level college leadership course that encouraged active learning increased critical thinking skills. A pre- and post-assessment of critical thinking skills was conducted using the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. Significant increases were found in the Deduction and Interpretation subtests, and total Critical Thinking. Student engagement in active learning techniques within the context of studying interpersonal skills for leadership appeared to increase critical thinking.

Introduction

The origins of critical thinking may date back 2500 years to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle whose basic teaching premises were often to encourage their students to realize that things very often are not what they seem on the surface. A more modern adaptation to education can be found in the work of Dewey (1909, 1997) who proposed that critical thinking involved the suspension of judgment and healthy skepticism. Another modern adaptation by Ennis (1962) suggested that students should be assisted in the engagement of thinking that is reflective, reasonable, and directed on what to believe or do.

Culturally competent is the new mantra of today’s professional society, especially as it relates to almost every human service field. But what exactly does it mean to be culturally competent? How does one measure cultural competence? And is everyone capable of truly being culturally competent? Is it quantitatively or qualitatively measured? These are just some questions surrounding the culturally competent movement, yet, they are critical in grasping the magnitude of meeting the needs of diverse individuals in the United States of America. The American school system is based upon a white, middle-class value system that supports uniqueness and individual characteristics over unity and interdependence (Oakland, 2005); therefore, in order to support all classes and races of students it is important to delve further into understanding the dynamics of multiculturalism.

The recent 2003 US Census illustrated that over 78 million persons of color live in the United States. From these diverse families approximately 53 million students of color are in the over 92,000 public school systems (US Department of Education, 2007). Recent projects suggest that students of color will become the majority in public
education by the year 2020 (less than 13 years away) (Campbell, 1994). Moreover, Ponterotto and Casas (1991) project that one out of three children attending public schools in the US will represent a racially, ethnically, or culturally diverse group. “In response to the increasing cultural pluralism in elementary and secondary educational environments, it is urgent that psychologists and mental health professionals working in school systems demonstrate cultural responsiveness and sensitivity in their practice and service” (Kindaichi & Constantine, 2005, p. 180).

Multicultural competence can be defined as a sincere understanding in various influences that reflect our culture of family beliefs, behaviors, but is not limited to the majority/common culture (NASP Resources). This is different from the traditional “melting pot” theory that has been supported in the American culture. Today, and rightfully so, multiculturalism is seen as a toss salad. Individuals are able to preserve and present their uniqueness when combined with other groups while respecting the contribution of others. But there is also cross-cultural competence. Mestas and Peterson (2004), define cultural competency as “having the evolving knowledge and skills used for maintaining a process to increase one’s respect, understanding and knowledge of the similarities and differences between one’s self and others” (p. 43). Moreover, Lynch and Hanson (1993), view cross-cultural competence as a thinking, feeling, acting ability that acknowledge, respect, build on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Finally, Rogers et al. (1992) most training directors viewed cross-cultural competencies as “the psychologist’s knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to differences in culture” (p. 610). The commonality between these two terms is culture. Culture can be defined as “the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and rites of a particular group regardless of racial and/or ethnic background” (Tomes, 2004, pg. 23). Culture undergirds every lifestyle, interaction, and decision made. Culture is life. It is what eggs, flour, and sugar are to a pound cake. It is the substrata of what everyone lives upon. As culture changes, the population dynamics will also change. Hence, the culture shock school districts are experiencing throughout the country. As new students of varied background move into lower, middle, and upper class neighbors, the dynamics of neighborhood, magnet, and charter schools begin to change.

**Cross-Cultural Competencies**

Culturally competent practice as a school psychologist means to utilize culturally sensitive tests, multicultural consultations, appropriate individual/group counseling, preventions/interventions, etc. It is imperative for school psychologists to understand that culture provides the content for attitudes, thoughts, and actions; it determines the kinds of cognitive strategies and learning modes that individuals use for solving complex problems within their group.

Through using the Delphi procedure, Rogers and Casas (2002) delineated the three areas of cross-cultural competencies critical to the school psychology profession (Figure 1): 1) Assessment, 2) Report writing, and 3) Laws and regulations. Their study highlighted these three areas which the lowest mean (1.00 to 1.49), thereby, suggesting that these are the areas school psychologist should be and/or receive significant training in order to be a competent, cross-cultural psychologist.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency Category</th>
<th>Skill Area</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Nonbiased assessment and the process of adapting available instruments to assess LCD students</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternative assessment methods</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using instruments sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using assessment results to formulate recommendations that facilitate language acquisition</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Writing</td>
<td>The importance of integrating cultural and language background of the family and child, language proficiency, and learning style information in the report</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorporating information about family origins, family composition, parental attitudes about education and handicapping conditions, and levels of acculturation into report</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.55</td>
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It is not surprising to understand why assessment is critical for cultural competence. The choice of tests to assess students may significantly impact decisions made about their future educational attainment. Yet, as viewed by Rogers and Casas (2002), report writing is also important. Incorporating elements of the child's background into reports as well as cultural knowledge of the child helps to accurately reflect child’s character and ability level. While assessment can be inherently biased based upon the makeup of the content, report can be equally biased by the lack of information about the child and his/her culture in the report.

**Systems Barriers**

Initially, school systems think that children who are having difficulty should be “labeled” on some level and then receive an intervention plan. For immigrants to the United States of America, their understanding and knowledge of prevention and intervention programs may be extremely limited, especially if they are arriving from a underdeveloped country. Moreover, this is complicated when parents of children from less industrialized countries have poor outlook for health diagnosis. This may cause the American population to feel that parents are neglecting their children by not seeking services, when in essence; the immigrant parents may be not aware of or understand the services. Systems, especially educational institutions, have not been as responsive to cultural differences, but they are steadily improving (Walker, Saravanbhavan, Williams, Brown, & West, 1996). There are necessary strategies school psychologists can employ such as gathering information from older adults (i.e., patriarchs and matriarchs) throughout the community, speaking with healers, engaging politicians to address immigration and cultural concerns on local, educational levels.

**Family Priorities**

“Family priorities should guide all interventions with young children with disabilities, especially when the family’s culture differs from that of the service provider” (Lynch & Hanson, 2004, p. 33). For example, by the time children begin kindergarten, most believe the child should be ambulatory and in control of bodily function. Aspects of toilet training and some personal hygiene should be fulfilled. Yet, there are some cultures that do not place emphasis on these aspects, as a result, when children enter the school system they may require extra services. This should not reflect negatively on the child and/or parents because of the cultural norms that may support this behavior. Additionally, this also does not suggest that the child is suffering from emotional abuse or other psychopathologies.

**Family’s Belief System**
Children from a different cultural background may begin school with different cultural assumptions, thereby; they may come to school lacking certain concepts. For instance, the Hopi Indian are illiterate as it relates to math skills. Being introduced to mathematical computations and math concepts would be foreign to them in a classroom environment. Parents have supported this belief in order to instill family values of trust and interdependence amongst their family, nuclear and extended. Moreover, math has no place in the daily living of the various tribes, so teaching it becomes unnecessary.

**Mental Process and Learning**

Some cultures emphasize one aspect of brain development over another, so that one may observe striking differences in the way people think and learn. Anthropologist Edward Hall (1989) maintains that the mind is internalized culture, and the process involves how a people organize and processes information. Life in a particular locale defines the rewards and punishment for learning or not learning certain information or in a certain way, and this confirmed and reinforced by the culture there. For example, Germans tends to stress logic to their children, while Japanese and Navajo reject this Western system of thinking. Logic for a Hopi Indian based on preserving the integrity of their social system and all the relationships connected with it. Therefore, a Hopi child would not likely adopt easily the philosophy of learning in isolation, which could be perceived as a problem in the American culture.

Cultural cognitive styles are also ways to assessment learning. Tomes (2004 & 2007) suggest that by understanding the manner in which children of different cultural backgrounds process information, academic and behavioral difficulties could be minimized. Moreover, there tends to be a mismatch between cultural expectations of the teachers and cultural capabilities of the students.

**Choosing Culture-Fair Measurements**

This pre-information should provide critical information about the student’s development and possible difficulties he/she is experiencing. All of this information should lead to determining what is the next step and possible assessment instrument for the student. The determination of the most appropriate assessment instrument is critical to obtaining the most accurate information regarding the child’s cognitive, socio-emotional, and academic functioning. Therefore, the choice of intellectual assessment must be made on the technical and psychometric merits of the instrument and the utility with the necessary population. While the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – IV (WISC-IV) is the most common intellectual measurement used by school psychologists, it is not always the most appropriate for populations of color. The WISC-IV is very much a language based test with a normative sample stratified on age, sex, parent education level, geographic region, and race/ethnicity. The four index areas address verbal comprehension, perceptual reasoning, working memory, and processing speed. With a heavy emphasis on left-brain activity, the WISC-IV may not be the best instrument for students with a multiracial/multicultural background. However, certain subtests on the measures of the WISC-IV and WAIS-III are relatively culture
independent (Shuttleworth-Edwards, Donnelly, Reid, & Radloff, 2004). More empirical research is being conducted by neuropsychologist supporting the creativity of right brain functions in varied populations and how these functions are not being fairly assessed in testing situations or classrooms. Moreover, research is yielding results that right brain hemisphere is responsible for more language development than initial thought (Bryan & Hale, 2001).

However, the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children, second edition (KABC-II) presents a slightly different perspective on assessing intellectual capabilities. The KABC-II combines the assessment approaches of Luria’s neuropsychological model and Cattell/Horn/Carroll method of categorizing cognitive abilities. The battery has optional information that can be gathered through Knowledge/Crystallized Ability Scale, but as a whole it continues to measure other broad abilities and processes with a minimum of verbalization. As a result, it is best suited for children with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence (CTONI) is an unbiased test that measures nonverbal reasoning abilities of individuals for whom most other mental ability tests are either inappropriate or biased. Results of the CTONI tend to be most useful for estimating the intelligence of individuals who experience undue difficulty in language or fine motor skills, including individuals who are bilingual, who speak a language other than English, or how are socioeconomically disadvantaged, deaf, language disordered, motor disabled, or neurologically impaired. Other tests that are considered more culturally-fair are: Differential Ability Scales – Second Edition (DAS-II), Test of Nonverbal Intelligence, Third Edition (TONI-3), Leiter International Performance Scale – Revised (Leiter-R) and Process Assessment of the Learner (PAL).

In order to get the most accurate and comprehensive snapshot of a student’s capability, the school psychologist may need to “test the limits.” This would engage the school psychologist in using alternative assessment procedures after a standardized administration. For example, a school psychologist would allow the student to work beyond a time limit on a measure to see if the student can figure out the problem or sequence. This is especially beneficial for students who do not regard time within the same context as traditional American schools. If the child is able to complete the tasks within a few extra seconds, this provides critical information about the child’s abilities minus time constraints. Also, while directions may instruct the child to perform a task as quickly as possible in order to receive extra points, but the child may work more laboriously exploring multiple options before settling on a solution. This action may be a cultural phenomenon that has translated into detailed work ethic.

Conclusion

“For those students who do are at greatest risk due to accumulation of multiple risk factors, schools may represent one of the most potentially protective environments – encouraging the development of good problem-solving and academic skills, individual talents and other productive activities and social competence” (Doll & Lyon, 1998, p. 356). In order to work effectively with families of different cultural/racial backgrounds as a school psychologist, one must first understand their own value and belief system. Additionally, the school psychologist must recognize that their own language, culture,
and ethnicity influence all interactions. We, as School Psychologists, must always remember our sole responsibility is a child-student advocate. Vacating this premise is not an option and must be employed at all times, especially with children who are immigrating to our country or indigenous children who have been marginalized and ostracized based upon color and other cultural factors.

References


