Culturally Responsive Teaching for Learner Diversity in Czech Schools: A Literature Review

N. O. Kalu and M. Kurowski

ABSTRACT

Until recently, the Czech Republic had an educational system dominated by indigenous people, who accounted for 95% of the school population. With the increasing influx of migrants and foreign students especially from outside European Union, came a great disparity among the quality of learners and their learning needs, and a consideration for the challenges associated with being a minority and living within a foreign culture. This has prompted the research into ways of tailoring the educational system to meet the rising demand of learning styles and needs for the diverse learners in the Czech classrooms. Literature is reviewed regarding the various ways to accommodate the international students considering racial differences, focusing on theoretical approach and pedagogical principles. This study examines the compulsory educational system of the Czech Republic and the position and responsibility of the teacher in fostering a culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environment. Descriptive and content analysis is relied upon for this study. Recommendations are made for stakeholders to imbibe a more responsive environment that enhances cultural and social integration of all learners.

Keywords: Cultural Competence, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Czech Schools, Diversity, Inclusive Education, Learners.

Published Online: December 29, 2021

ISSN: 2736-4534

DOI: 10.24018/ejedu.2021.2.6.202

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Czech Republic adopted a restrictive and selective policy for migration resulting in strict visa policy and high financial deposits to enter the territory, after the inflow of asylum seekers and immigrants in the early 1990s (Felčer, 2020). According to the migration catalogue provided on the foreigners in the Czech Republic by the Czech Statistical Office (2020), a high percentage of the foreigners migrating to the Czech Republic are from Slovakia, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, Bulgaria, and Viet Nam, and can work legally or obtain resident permits and to live within the region since after 2010. Migration is very commonplace across the globe, and the International Migration Report from the United Nation (2020) stated that as of 2020 over 281 million people live outside their countries of origin (Jungwirth *et al.*, 2019). These migrants move for different purposes and often with their families including school aged children or those born to immigrants. The interconnectedness of the globe has ensured higher degrees of migration and more diversity with the classrooms (Kerkhof & Cloud, 2020), placing a demand on the Czech educational system to assimilate these children and ensure their access to quality education as well, (Hasman *et al.*, 2016) The number of foreign learners is gradually increasing with more of the focused in the larger Czech cities like Prague, Brno, and Ostrava, (Šimon *et al.*, 2020), going from about 6.3% in 2010 to 8.5% of the general population in

2019 (OECD, 2021), and gradually but steadily increasing. Our classrooms now consist of individuals from all around the world, and this world system will continue for as long as globalization and migration continue.

II. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING (CRT)

This term has earned different names such as culturally responsive pedagogy or global teaching practices and has been defined in various ways over the years. This work will consider some state-of-the-art definitions of culturally responsive teaching. It has been defined by Cowden *et al.* (2021) as the type of teaching that understands the importance of adjusting curriculum contents and instructional techniques to adequately meet the cultural needs and preference of the learners. A Culturally Responsive Teaching should be focused on discovering how the cultural background of students can become a strength to help them understand the curriculum, by making a connection between their home experiences and desired classroom objectives (Lim *et al.*, 2019). Samuels (2018) defines CRT as a student-centred approach to learning. CRT advocates for pluralism of curriculum content and its transmission, in the place of the singular method of teaching for every student within the classroom. Cowden *et al.* (2021) establishes a simultaneous progression between students' cultural experiences and academic achievement. Important things to note from the following definitions are the emphasis on learners and the

need for teachers to devise appropriate teaching methods and goals. Culturally Responsive Teaching bears in mind individual cultural differences and diversities. This allows for students' reflective thoughts and the expression of their individual cultural experiences. Teachers will be able to achieve culturally responsive classroom when they have a clear understanding of the interconnected world, thereby guiding students towards the building and application of experiential and reflective thinking in classroom discussions and analyzing global concerns. The position of the theory of critical pedagogy is highly reflected in the implementation of CRT Culturally Responsive Teaching. Traditional teaching methods that gave the teacher exclusive rights as the custodian and executor of the entire learning process is challenged by the foundational proponent of this theory, Paulo Freire. The author advocates for a student-teacher relationship that involves communication and contributions from both parties; the teacher acts as the facilitator while the students understand and learn through the application of their cultural knowledge and experiences (Cowden *et al.* 2021). The entire process of Culturally Responsive Teaching embraces the importance of the students' cultural background as being essential for their engagement in reflective learning. They are then able to make connections between their experiences and the learning taking place in the classroom. Reflective learning refers to a self-directed learning (Gencel & Saracaloğlu, 2018), that involves a deliberate and conscious thinking about learning concepts. This allows a learner to form a deeper understanding of the relationship between one experience and another (Balta & Ankara 2018). Reflective learning is thus crucial for Culturally Responsive Thinking to establish a connection between individual experiences and those made within the classroom.

III. THE CZECH EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Czech society places a lot of value on education for citizens, as it embraces traditional European values. It is overseen by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, which makes policies, strategies, and guides the overall school system (OECD, 2016). Despite this position maintained by the Ministry, schooling decisions are still made mostly by the individual schools (OECD, 2020). This school autonomy was created in 2004 with the amendments of the Framework Educational Programme, allowing schools to create their own School Educational Programme to meet the needs of learners (National Institute for Education 2021). The governmental Strategy for Education 2020 contained priorities as reducing of inequalities, supporting quality teacher education, the effectively managing the educational system. The recent Strategy 2030+ aims to modernize the Czech educational system to meet the demands of the 21st century by reducing inequalities in education and by preparing students for active personal, civic, and professional life (Eurydice - European Commission, 2021). These educational policies and frameworks are mostly associated not only with the compulsory school years (pupils within the ages of 6 to 15) but also with the upper secondary education (students within the ages of 15 to 19). The school level curriculum which is used within the Czech Republic according to Pešková *et al.* (2019) is formulated by the School Education Program which allows for schools as well as the teachers autonomy in the techniques and method of

instruction but maintains the position of overseeing curriculum content and objectives. This should provide opportunities for patterning classroom activities to suit any agenda pushed forward by the instructor, and in this context, this would be to achieve a culturally responsive learning environment. Studies conducted by the authors revealed that in the Czech Republic, changes and reforms made in the educational policies were met with certain resistance by the schoolteachers, with as little as 19% of the sample population accepting educational reforms made in the state. Educational reforms are essential for educational development, and the teachers' ability to adopt and implement them will ensure changes in line with the objectives of such reforms. Educational reforms that meet the needs of the 21st century diversified classrooms are needed to address the demands of globalization, hence the need for the teachers in the Czech Republic to consider culturally responsive teaching, especially in the formative years of learning.

IV. PREPAREDNESS OF THE TEACHER

Currently the popular approach to teaching and learning are those that focus on the learner, making room for the learner to be seen and heard, encouraging, and supporting them to grow in their learning environment. To learn and develop, the learner must feel safe and able to be creative. Every learner is unique and different, and in today's world stage our classrooms are filled with learners who represent different cultures, who speak different languages and possess different ideologies about the world around them (Zaidi, 2020). Culture, according to research carried out by Krasnof (2016) and numerous other works, has shown to have a strong influence over the attitudes, values and behavior of both students and teachers, and is brought into the learning environment. This fact has led to the urgency for teachers to be prepared to attain cultural competence, manage diversity in the classroom in order to guide every child towards achieving learning outcomes. According to Krasnof (2016), the teacher must be culturally responsive to meet students' unique learning needs and styles. The teacher must be trained or retrained with the right knowledge and skills to attain cultural competence, which will in turn lead to the adoption of healthy teaching practices and techniques.

The ability to build a positive learning environment for every student in the Czech Republic will impact the ratings of teachers' support in the classroom (OECD, 2019). The ratings for teachers support in PISA 2018 assessment showed the data collected from the students varied significantly from the data collected from the teachers.

Various models of culturally responsive teaching have suggested steps to guide the classroom teacher. The teacher oversees the learning experience and, therefore, has a major part to play in ensuring a culturally sensitive classroom. Samuels (2018) stated that various research carried out amongst pre-service teachers shows the level of knowledge they possess regarding other cultures turned out very low. The author suggests that educators of pre-service teachers must, hence, shoulder the responsibility of preparing teachers to be advocates for educational equality and foster an inclusive curriculum. The educational policies in Czech Republic have given teachers more autonomy, and this has

shown to be empowering (Pešková *et al.*, 2019). This provides room to experimentally and progressively device methods to achieve a culturally responsive learning environment in the Czech schools.

The challenge the Czech teachers are facing is the preparedness to embrace diversity in their classrooms. Another is their ability to harness this quality to their advantage in achieving, not only the lesson objectives, but ultimately develop independent and critical thinkers, who can reflectively proffer solutions to societal issues.

V. PROMOTING DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Promoting and maintaining a culturally responsive learning environment is important because it provides equity for all learners and gives equal opportunities for excellence. The benefit of teaching students to embrace diversity is necessary for globalised societies. There are certain practices and activities required of the teachers, as the facilitators of the learning process, to achieve a level of cultural responsiveness,

A. *Knowing Yourself and the Learner*

It is important to note that due to the sociocultural experiences and training that every individual goes through, people are predisposed to conceiving ideas about others. This includes teachers, who have already formed perceptions regarding student behaviours, backgrounds, and capabilities (Cowden *et al.*, 2021). Cowden *et al.* (2021) express concern about stereotypes and assumptions as the most common challenges to attaining a culturally responsive learning environment. It is imperative for teachers to recognise themselves as cultural beings to help students to come to the same understanding (Kerkhoff & Cloud 2020). A sound communication structure and healthy relationships between the teacher and the students will ensure that the teacher has sufficient knowledge about the students to reach the success of their academic performance. The teacher must understand what makes each student unique: their cultural inclinations and attitudes, language and communication styles, values and traditions and their learning styles (Lim *et al.*, 2019). If a teacher remains unappreciative of the diversity of cultures, they may unwittingly reinforce stereotypes and prejudices in the classroom (Samuels, 2018). The teachers therefore must be committed to achieving cultural competence and see themselves both as facilitator of the learning process as well as a learner.

B. *Sociable Classroom Atmosphere*

According to Cowden *et al.* (2021), creating a friendly classroom atmosphere where students can introduce themselves to each other without necessarily divulging personal information, will help them establish some level of trust between them, and create the awareness of shared values for human lives, (value for peace, work, family, friends, leisure time and politics), Zaidi (2020) noted that encouraging students to share ideas and experiences about certain concepts taught in lessons helped to explore and establish similarities among the cultures of diverse students represented within the classroom. Ethically, it is important to find out what our similarities and differences are so we can value and respect each other. There are cultures that are connected to others, establishing this will help build relationships between people

and culture. An essential aspect of active dialogue among students to foster culturally responsive learning is the ability to ensure collaborative learning during the exchange, (Samuels, 2018).

C. *Developing an Inclusive School Culture*

An inclusive school culture is one that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the broader school community and implements supportive, influential, and easily understood policies and practical measures against racism and stereotypes; defaulting them frowned upon. This includes maintaining a school culture where students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social groups feel that they are heard and valued. Cowden *et al.* (2021) opined this to be achievable if teachers are informed about the different communication patterns of the individual students in their classes. Additionally, encouraging students to assess projects and classwork from their peers will generate a deep insight into their thought patterns and cultural experiences. Group-related teaching techniques can be adopted by teachers to ensure that students work together and are responsible for one another (Krasnof, 2016). Inclusive school culture recognizes the uniqueness of every learner, and the need to include different approaches to support their specific needs, and this can only be achieved with a clear understanding of each individual learner (Education Review Office, 2018).

D. *Representative Media to Boost Cultural Awareness*

In 2018, The Education Review Office of the New Zealand government discussed cultural responsiveness with implications, that there should be some level of cultural awareness embedded in the school curriculum which should be reflected in classroom activities to sensitize students to the nature of their experiences of diversity in the society. Research carried out by Zaidi (2020) elaborately showed that the use of multi-lingual books will not only help students understand the content of the lessons, but also help them learn about different languages and create room for curiosity. This concept known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is classified under innovation of teaching resources to achieve a culturally responsive learning environment, irrespective of the subject (Bruen & Kelly 2016; Díaz, 2018). The studies conducted in the Educational Review suggested printing classroom instructions in multiple languages or pictograms. Certain studies have stated that organizing culture celebration events for students to share interesting aspects of their culture, with poems or songs in the mother-tongue, food and native attires, is beneficial for cultural enlightenment and sensitivity, celebrating students' cultures and values (Education Review Office, 2018).

VI. CULTURAL COMPETENCE RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

Kirkhoff and Cloud (2018) carried out among students in a Master of Education Course in the United States Urban University who were also in-service teachers, using discussions, completed lesson plans and self-inquiry to find out the degree to which these teachers in training understand and implement global teaching practices. The study used a focal and control groups with the focal groups receiving lessons in global competence. Results from the study showed that the in-service teachers were able to help students cultivate cultural identity by creating wholesome learning

content and resources.

Samuels (2018) carried out qualitative research to determine the perception of 200 in-service k-12 teachers in the United States on culturally responsive teaching, over a period of 4 months. The research revealed a lot of advantages of applying culturally responsive teaching with the limitations of time and relevant materials. However, the advantages exceeded the disadvantages with the responses on the ability this method had to help students appreciate diverse cultures, build trust, and ensure inclusiveness for all, while welcoming different world views from students. The students felt connected, included and valued, based on the responses of the in-service teachers.

Additionally, the works of Bruen and Kelly (2016); and Zaidi (2020) all experimentally show that more academic successes were recorded by teachers who practiced culturally responsive teaching, finding out the strength of each student because of the participation it enhanced. Every learner is different and has something to offer, and with adequate attention paid, were encouraged to express themselves and work with others.

There are many benefits to the inculcation of culturally responsive teaching into the Czech Education system. Effectively managing and harnessing student diversity will ultimately lead to:

1. Preparing students to become global citizens
2. Building collaboration and teamwork among students
3. Developing respect and love for others
4. Reducing prejudices and stereotypes
5. Providing a safe learning environment
6. Encouraging healthy relationships now and in the future
7. Building confidence and self-esteem
8. Acceptance and empathy
9. Acknowledgement and expression of individual differences

Whereas the inability to handle it properly will essentially lead to cases of bullying, stereotype threats, isolation, increased stress levels for students who are victims of isolation or negative stereotypes which will ultimately lead to poor academic performance.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made for the purpose of ensuring the adoption of culturally responsive teaching within the Czech schools:

1. The School Education Program should contain content about the changing conditions of society.
2. The school board and management should develop inclusive educational policies that address diversity in the classroom.
3. Educators of teachers at the Faculties of Education should intentionally teach how to achieve cultural competence both in theory and practice.
4. The teachers in the Czech Republic should embrace culturally responsive teaching, as doing that has shown a better academic performance of students (Zaidi 2020).
5. The society, both locals and foreigners, should cooperate with educational institutions; providing resources

that would help achieve a culturally responsive learning environment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As more migrants have moved into the Czech Republic over the past decade, it is expected that the educational system start to make plans to accommodate the new diverse nature of the classrooms. The Czech Educational system provides some level of autonomy to classroom teachers, whilst monitoring the general school curriculum, providing teachers the opportunity to innovatively develop ways to manage learner diversity, become competent in the cultural awareness, and ensure that individual learning needs and techniques of the students are met. Teachers, as the facilitators of the learning process, should indulge in self-evaluation of the influence of their personal sociocultural experience on teaching techniques employed in the classroom, their knowledge of individual students and cultures represented within the classroom and their response to different students' behaviour. The major challenge of adopting culturally responsive learning techniques is teachers' resistance to new reforms and changes from traditional or familiar methods of instruction. If embraced by the society, with teachers pioneering the venture, students and the society at large will be prepared to reap the benefits of a diverse society. Students who are culturally diverse tend to achieve better academic success if encouraged to think and understand basic classroom concepts in their native language and from their pool of cultural experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors of this work acknowledge the contributions of Lene Janaki Jarstein, for editing and organizing the paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this work declare that we do not have any conflict of interest with any individual or organization as regarding the writing or publication of this work.

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