Practitioner Brief Series

Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy



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NATIONAL CENTER FOR Culturally Responsive Educational Systems

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Why Do We Need to Address Diversity?

As more and more students from diverse backgrounds populate 21st century classrooms, and efforts mount to identify effective methods to teach these students, the need for pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive intensifies. Today's classrooms require teachers to educate students varying in culture, language, abilities, and many other characteristics (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). To meet this challenge, teachers must employ not only theoretically sound but also culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers must create a classroom culture where all students regardless of their cultural and linguistic background are welcomed and supported, and provided with the best opportunity to learn.

For many students, the kinds of behaviors required in school (e.g., sitting in one's seat and only speaking when called on) and types of discourse (e.g., "Class, what is the title of this book?") contrast with home cultural and linguistic practices. To increase student success, it is imperative that teachers help students bridge this discontinuity between home and school (Allen & Boykin, 1992). Moreover, a culturally responsive instructional environment minimizes the students' alienation as they attempt to adjust to the different "world" of school (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings,1994). This brief defines culturally responsive pedagogy and explains how it might be used effectively to address the instructional needs of a diverse student population.

What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?

Culturally responsive pedagogy facilitates and supports the achievement of all students. In a culturally responsive classroom, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement. Culturally responsive pedagogy comprises three dimensions: (a) *institutional*, (b) *personal*, and (c) *instructional*. The institutional dimension reflects the administration and its policies and values. The personal dimension refers to the cognitive and emotional processes teachers must engage in to become culturally responsive. The instructional dimension includes materials, strategies, and activities that form the basis of instruction. All three dimensions significantly interact in the teaching and learning process and are critical to understanding the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy. While all three dimensions are important, because of space limitations only a few points will be made about the institutional dimension. This brief focuses on the two most relevant for teachers' work: the personal and instructional dimensions.

The Institutional Dimension: What Must the Educational System Do?

The educational system is the institution that provides the physical and political structure for schools. To make the institution more culturally responsive, reforms must occur in at least three specific areas (Little, 1999):

1) Organization of the school—This includes the administrative structure and the way it relates to diversity, and the use of physical space in planning schools and arranging classrooms.
2) School policies and procedures—This refers to those policies and practices that impact on the delivery of services to students from diverse backgrounds.
3) Community involvement—This is concerned with the institutional approach to community involvement in which families and communities

are expected to find ways to become involved in the school, rather than the school seeking connections with families and communities.

Although all three areas in the institution must become more culturally responsive, a particular concern is the impact of school policies and procedures on the allocation of resources. As Sonia Nieto (1999, 2002/2003) noted, we must ask the difficult questions: Where are the best teachers assigned? Which students get to take advanced courses? Where and for what purposes are resources allocated? We must critically examine the educational system's relationship to its diverse constituents. Not only must changes occur institutionally, but personally and instructionally as well. The remainder of this brief addresses necessary transformations in the personal and instructional dimensions.

The Personal Dimension: How Do Teachers Become Culturally Responsive?

Teacher self-reflection is an important part of the personal dimension. By honestly examining their attitudes and beliefs about themselves and others, teachers begin to discover why they are who they are, and can confront biases that have influenced their value system (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Because teachers' values impact relationships with students and their families, teachers must reconcile negative feelings towards any cultural, language, or ethnic group. Often teachers are resistant to the notion that their values might reflect prejudices or even racism towards certain groups. When teachers are able to rid themselves of such biases, they help to create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance for students and their families, resulting in greater opportunity for student success.

Another important aspect of the personal dimension is exploration. It is crucial that teachers explore their personal histories and experiences, as well as the history and current experiences of their students and families. With knowledge comes understanding of self and others, and greater appreciation of differences. When teachers are unbiased in their instruction and knowledgeable about themselves and their students, they can better respond to the needs of *all* their students.

Specific Activities for Becoming a Culturally Responsive Teacher

(Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002)

1) ***Engage in reflective thinking and writing.*** Teachers must reflect on their actions and interactions as they try to discern the personal motivations that govern their behaviors. Understanding the factors that contribute to certain behaviors (e.g., racism, ethnocentrism) is the first step toward changing these behaviors. This process is facilitated by autobiographical and reflective writing, usually in a journal.
2) ***Explore personal and family histories.*** Teachers need to explore their early experiences and familial events that have contributed to their understanding of themselves as racial or nonracial beings. As part of this process, teachers can conduct informal interviews of family members (e.g., parents, grandparents) about their beliefs and experiences regarding different groups in society. The information shared can enlighten teachers about the roots of their own views. When teachers come to terms with the historical shaping of their values, teachers can better relate to other individuals.
3) ***Acknowledge membership in different groups.*** Teachers must recognize and acknowledge their affiliation with various groups in society, and the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to each group. For example, for white female teachers, membership in the white middle-class group affords certain privileges in society; at the same time being a female presents many challenges in a male-dominated world. Moreover, teachers need to assess how belonging to one group influences how one relates to and views other groups.
4) ***Learn about the history and experiences of diverse groups.*** It is important that teachers learn about the lives and experiences of other groups in order to understand how different historical experiences have shaped attitudes and perspectives of various groups. Further, by learning about other groups,

teachers begin to see differences between their own values and those of other groups. To learn about the histories of diverse groups, particularly from their perspectives, teachers can read literature written by those particular groups as well as personally interact with members of those groups.

5) ***Visit students' families and communities.*** It is important that teachers get to know their students' families and communities by actually going into the students' home environments. This allows teachers to relate to their students as more than just "bodies" in the classroom but also as social and cultural beings connected to a complex social and cultural network. Moreover, by becoming familiar with students' home lives, teachers gain insight into the influences on the students' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, teachers can use the families and communities as resources (e.g., classroom helpers or speakers) that will contribute to the educational growth of the students.

6) ***Visit or read about successful teachers in diverse settings.*** Teachers need to learn about successful approaches to educating children from diverse backgrounds. By actually visiting classrooms of successful teachers of children from diverse backgrounds and/or reading authentic accounts of such success, teachers can gain exemplary models for developing their own skills.

7) ***Develop an appreciation of diversity.*** To be effective in a diverse classroom, teachers must have an appreciation of diversity. They must view difference as the "norm" in society and reject notions that any one group is more competent than another. This entails developing respect for differences, and the willingness to teach from this perspective. Moreover, there must be an acknowledgment that the teachers' views of the world are not the only views.

8) ***Participate in reforming the institution.*** The educational system has historically fostered the achievement of one segment of the school population by establishing culturally biased standards and values. The monocultural values of schools have promoted biases in curriculum development and instructional practices that have been detrimental to the achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to participate in reforming the educational system so that it becomes inclusive. As the direct link between the institution and the students, teachers are in a pivotal position to facilitate change. By continuing a traditional "conform-or-fail" approach to instruction, teachers perpetuate a monocultural institution. By questioning traditional policies and practices, and by becoming culturally responsive in instruction, teachers work toward changing the institution.

The Instructional Dimension: How Does Instruction Become Culturally Responsive?

When the tools of instruction (i.e., books, teaching methods, and activities) are incompatible with, or worse marginalize, the students' cultural experiences, a disconnect with school is likely (Irvine, 1992). For some students this rejection of school may take the form of simply underachieving; for others, rejection could range from not performing at all to dropping out of school completely. Culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes and utilizes the students' culture and language in instruction, and ultimately respects the students' personal and community identities.

Specific Activities for Culturally Responsive Instruction

(Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999)

1) ***Acknowledge students' differences as well as their commonalities.*** While it is important for teachers to note the shared values and practices of their students, it is equally incumbent that teachers recognize the individual differences of students. Certainly, culture and language may contribute to behaviors and attitudes exhibited by students. For example, some cultures forbid children to engage in direct eye contact with adults; thus, when these children refuse to look at the teacher,

they are not being defiant but practicing their culture. However, for teachers to ascribe particular characteristics to a student solely because of his/ her ethnic or racial group demonstrates just as much prejudice as expecting all students to conform to mainstream cultural practices. Moreover, because each student is unique, learning needs will be different. Recognizing these distinctions enhances the ability of the teacher to address the individual needs of the students. The key is to respond to each student based on his/her identified strengths and weaknesses, and not on preconceived notions about the student's group affiliation.

2) ***Validate students' cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials.*** Teachers should, to the extent possible, use textbooks, design bulletin boards, and implement classroom activities culturally supportive of their students. When the school-assigned textbooks and other instructional materials perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., African Americans portrayed as athletes) or fail to adequately represent diverse groups (e.g., books containing no images or perspectives of Native Americans, Latinos(as), and other non-Anglo Saxons), teachers must supplement instruction with resources rich in diversity and sensitive in portrayal of individuals from different backgrounds. By utilizing images and practices familiar to students, teachers can capitalize on the strengths students bring to school. The more students experience familiar practices in instruction and are allowed to think differently, the greater the feeling of inclusion and the higher the probability of success. For example, in some communities, members work together in a supportive manner to accomplish many tasks in their daily lives. Reflecting these home practices in instructional approach, such as the use of cooperative learning (Putnam, 1998), increases the likelihood of success for these students.

3) ***Educate students about the diversity of the world around them.*** As the "village" in which students live becomes more global, they are challenged to interact with people from various backgrounds. When students are ignorant about the differences of other groups, there is a greater probability of conflicts. Particularly in the classroom where student diversity is increasing, students need the skills to relate to each other positively, regardless of cultural and linguistic differences. Teachers need to provide students with learning opportunities (e.g., have students interview individuals from other cultures; link students to email pals from other communities and cultures) so that they might become more culturally knowledgeable and competent when encountering others who are different. Furthermore, students will develop an appreciation for other groups when they learn of the contributions of different peoples to the advancement of the human race. A word of caution, this requires active research and planning by teachers so that cultural stereotypes are not inadvertently reinforced.

4) ***Promote equity and mutual respect among students.*** In a classroom of diverse cultures, languages, and abilities, it is imperative that all students feel fairly treated and respected. When students are subjected to unfair discrimination because of their differences, the results can be feelings of unworthiness, frustration, or anger, often resulting in low achievement. Teachers need to establish and maintain standards of behavior that require respectful treatment of all in the classroom. Teachers can be role models, demonstrating fairness and reminding students that difference is normal. Further, teachers need to monitor what types of behaviors and communication styles are rewarded and praised. Oftentimes these behaviors and ways of communicating are aligned with cultural practices. Care must be taken so as not to penalize a student's behavior just because of a cultural difference.

5) ***Assess students' ability and achievement validly.*** The assessment of students' abilities and achievement must be as accurate and complete as possible if effective instructional programming is to occur. This can only be accomplished when the assessment instruments and procedures are valid for the population being assessed. In today's schools students possess differences in culture and language that might predispose them to different

communication practices and even different test-taking skills. Hence, assessment instruments should be varied and suited to the population being tested. When this does not occur, invalid judgments about students' abilities or achievement are likely to result. Further, tests that are not sensitive to students' cultural and linguistic background will often merely indicate what the students don't know (about the mainstream culture and language) and very little about what they do. Thus, the opportunity to build on what students do know is lost.

6) ***Foster a positive interrelationship among students, their families, the community, and school.*** When students come to school they bring knowledge shaped by their families and community; they return home with new knowledge fostered by the school and its practitioners. Students' performance in school will likely be affected by the ability of the teacher to negotiate this home-community-school relationship effectively. When teachers tap into the resources of the community by inviting parents and other community members into the classroom as respected partners in the teaching-learning process, this interrelationship is positively reinforced. To further strengthen their bond with the students and their community, teachers might even participate in community events where possible. Moreover, everyone benefits when there is evidence of mutual respect and value for the contributions all can make to educating the whole student.

7) ***Motivate students to become active participants in their learning.*** Teachers must encourage students to become active learners who regulate their own learning through reflection and evaluation. Students who are actively engaged in their learning ask questions rather than accept information uncritically. They self-regulate the development of their knowledge by setting goals, evaluating their performance, utilizing feedback, and tailoring their strategies. For example, by examining his or her learning patterns, a student may come to realize that reviewing materials with visual aids enhances retention, or that studying with a partner helps to process the information better. It is important, therefore, that teachers structure a classroom environment conducive to inquiry-based learning, one that allows students to pose questions to themselves, to each other, and to the teacher.

8) ***Encourage students to think critically.*** A major goal of teaching is to help students become independent thinkers so that they might learn to make responsible decisions. Critical thinking requires students to analyze (i.e., examine constituent parts or elements) and synthesize (i.e., collect and summarize) information, and to view situations from multiple perspectives. When teachers provide opportunities for students to engage in this kind of reasoning, students learn how to think "outside the box." More important, these students learn to think for themselves. These students are less likely to accept stereotypes and to formulate opinions based on ignorance. To foster these skills, teachers might devise "what if" scenarios, requiring students to think about specific situations from different viewpoints.

9) ***Challenge students to strive for excellence as defined by their potential.*** All students have the potential to learn, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, ability or disability. Many students often stop trying because of a history of failure. Others, disenchanted with a low-level or irrelevant curriculum, work just enough to get by. Teachers have a responsibility to continually motivate all students by reminding them that they are capable and by providing them with a challenging and meaningful curriculum. Low teacher expectations will yield low student performance. It is important to engage students in activities that demonstrate how much they can learn when provided with appropriate assistance. As students progress, teachers need to continually "raise the bar," giving students just the right amount of assistance to take them one step higher, thereby helping students to strive for their potential.

10) ***Assist students in becoming socially and politically conscious.*** Teachers must prepare students to participate meaningfully and responsibly not only in the classroom but also in society. Meaningful and responsible participation requires

everyone to critically examine societal policies and practices, and to work to correct injustices that exist. Students must be taught that if the world is to be a better place where everyone is treated fairly, then they have to work to make it so. This is their responsibility as citizens of their country and inhabitants of the earth. To foster this consciousness, teachers might have students write group or individual letters to politicians and newspaper editors voicing their concerns about specific social issues; or students might participate in food or clothing drives to help people less fortunate.

What Are the Implications of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?

Teachers have a responsibility to all their students to ensure that all have an equal opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability. If instruction reflects the cultural and linguistic practices and values of only one group of students, then the other students are denied an equal opportunity to learn. Instruction that is culturally responsive addresses the needs of all learners.
The educational system plans the curriculum for schools, and teachers as their "institutional agents" transfer the prescribed content to their students. This daily contact with students provides teachers with a unique opportunity to either further the status quo or make a difference that will impact not only the achievement but also the lives of their students. Indeed, teachers must recognize their "power" and use it wisely in teaching other people's children (Delpit, 1988). Although the curriculum may be dictated by the school system, teachers teach it. Where the curriculum falls short in addressing the needs of all students, teachers must provide a bridge; where the system reflects cultural and linguistic insensitivity, teachers must demonstrate understanding and support. In short, teachers must be culturally responsive, utilizing materials and examples, engaging in practices, and demonstrating values that include rather than exclude students from different backgrounds. By so doing, teachers fulfill their responsibility to *all* their students.

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References & Resources

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Additional Resources

Lesson plan ideas and strategies

- New Horizons for Learning, A Culturally Responsive Lesson for African American Students http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/hanley2.htm
- Teaching Diverse Learners, Culturally Responsive Teaching http://www.lab.brown.edu/tdl/tl-strategies/crt-research.shtml
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Ways of Knowing: Native Knowledge and Western Science http://www.nwrel.org/msec/nwteacher/winter2003/resources.html
- McGraw Hill Higher Education, Culturally Responsive Teaching: Lesson Planning for Elementary and Middle Grades http://www.mhhe.com/catalogs/0072408871.mhtml
- Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/
- Rethinking Schools http://www.rethinkingschools.org
- Teaching Tolerance http://www.teachingtolerance.org
- Teaching Diverse Learners http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/

School Organization and Curriculum

- Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/standards/standards.html

  This Web site is an illustration of standards developed by Alaska Native educators to provide a way for schools and communities to examine the extent to which they are attending to the educational and cultural well-being of the students. These "cultural standards" provide guidelines or touchstones against which schools and communities can examine what they are doing to attend to the cultural well-being of the young people they are responsible for nurturing to adulthood.

Notes

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