Culturally Responsive Teaching Matters!

by Elizabeth B. Kozleski

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

In 2000, Professor Geneva Gay wrote that culturally responsive teaching connects students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to academic knowledge and intellectual tools in ways that legitimize what students already know. By embracing the sociocultural realities and histories of students through what is taught and how, culturally responsive teachers negotiate classrooms cultures with their students that reflect the communities where students develop and grow. This is no small matter because it requires that teachers transcend their own cultural biases and preferences to establish and develop patterns for learning and communicating that engage and sustain student participation and achievement.

Part of the tradition of teaching is that teachers have the role of shepherding the next generation through a set of passages so that they can attain adulthood with a full complement of the knowledge, skills, and

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Culturally Responsive Teaching ...continued

dispositions necessary to be contributing citizens. When the cultural heritages and assumptions about what is valued, expected, and taught compete with other compelling realities, teachers take on a facilitator role while they relinquish their status as knowledge brokers. Becoming culturally responsive means that teachers as well as students have to negotiate new standards and norms that acknowledge the differences and the similarities among and between individuals and groups.

Teachers play a critical role in mediating the social and academic curriculum. While acknowledging what students already know, they connect it to frameworks and models for thinking and organizing knowledge that are embedded within disciplines such as literacy, mathematics, social studies, and the sciences. Culturally responsive teachers realize that mastering academic knowledge involves understanding that content maps can provide multiple avenues to understand and access information. History offers a particular example. U.S. students might study the expansion of the American West through the eyes of the pioneers and the politicians who supported the westward expansion. Yet, that same time frame could be studied through the perspectives of indigenous peoples who experienced a cataclysmic end to their ways of living that forced them off the lands that had belonged to their ancestors for centuries. Considering how to approach curriculum and incorporating multiple paradigms in the ways that curriculum are presented and experienced is an important part of culturally responsive teaching.

Equally important is the way that instruction is facilitated. When classrooms are organized into communities that are designed to encourage academic and cultural excellence, students learn to facilitate their own learning as well as that of their fellow students. This kind of classroom requires careful planning and explicit teaching around social interactions so that students learn to assume leadership for learning, feel comfortable exploring differences of opinion, and accept that they may need help from their classmates in order to be successful. Along the way, students learn to see the classroom and their interactions from more than one perspective so that they can identify potential difficulties that come from assumptions of privilege, the distribution of power (who gets to make the rules), and the assessment of performance and competence.

Key Terms

Curriculum: An educational term that describes the range of courses from which students choose what subject matters to study, and a sequence of study that includes specific approaches to teaching, learner roles, products, and behaviors, and the assessments used to guide and evaluate learning.

Indigenous Peoples: Defines individuals and groups of individuals whose culture and language existed prior to the current government and dominant culture of a territory or nation. Indigenous peoples, like American Indians, have maintained at least in part their distinct linguistic, cultural, and social organizational features. As a result, they are distinct to some degree from the surrounding populations and dominant culture of the current nation/state.

Mediation: Refers to the process of adjusting and balancing between two potentially confusing or competing ideas, programs, viewpoints, or perspectives.

Nondominant Culture: In classrooms, organizations, and communities, there are multiple cultures present with distinct rules for social interaction. Therefore cultures can be either dominant, the "norm" in a given context, or non dominant.

Paradigm: A way of thinking about and examining the world as well as a way of developing knowledge that is built on a set of theories, laws, and generalizations.

Power: The capacity to influence achieving specific outcomes or goals for a group or an individual. Power is defined through interpersonal relationships and transactions.

Privilege: The idea that an individual or group of individuals might experience unearned and un-asked for rights and statuses that are unavailable to other groups or individuals.

Sociocultural: Refers to the social and cultural aspects of human interaction and participation.

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Why Should Culturally Responsive Teaching Be the Norm?

The achievement gap in the US often separates groups of students by drawing differences between White, middle class students and their peers who may be American Indian, African-American, Asian American and/or Latino/a. There are many harmful effects of looking at performance in terms of gaps particularly because the gaps that are noticed privilege some kinds of knowledge over others. While the path to college is based on banking particular kinds of knowledge and using it to demonstrate competence, we cannot forget that practical and indigenous ways of knowing offer great insight and have ecological and social significance.

Culturally responsive teaching helps to bridge different ways of knowing and engages students from non-dominant cultures in demonstrating their proficiencies in language usage, grammar, mathematical knowledge and other tools they use to navigate their everyday lives. Further, by understanding the features of this knowledge, students from non-dominant cultures can learn how to translate the logical structures of their knowledge and map them onto the school curriculum.

By bringing alternative ways of knowing and communicating into schools, the curriculum as well as the students benefit. Culturally responsive teaching creates these bridges and in doing so, offers the possibility for transformational knowledge that leads to socially responsible action.

What are Non-Examples of Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Colorblind Motivational Models: Many classroom management approaches suggest a set of processes to follow to establish and maintain order in the classroom. Because these approaches assume that children have had similar histories and cultural modeling, approaches to behavior management can be color and culture blind. For instance, one approach may take the form of reminding students what the rules are in direct (i.e., Please take your seats now) or indirect (I heard the bell. Let's see who remembers what to do) comments. When students fail to respond, teachers are told to warn students by telling them what to do and what the consequences of non compliance are. In step three, teachers give out infraction slips, and then, in step four, are sent to the office. Even when teachers invest time in teaching the rules before they put these kinds of systems in place, the rigidity of the system makes it difficult for students who need many experiences to be able to predict what may be expected and then act accordingly. And, because of the nature of the system and individual psychological and cultural patterns, the very system itself can create resistance and avoidance.

Another model that lacks cultural responsivity reminds teachers to "catch students being good." Teachers are asked to acknowledge and reinforce students who are following classroom norms and rules. Often, a token economy is used so that students can collect "being good" tokens through the day, week, month, or quarter and cash them in periodically for high preference activities that the students themselves may have identified. For instance, students could get time in the library to work independently, opportunities to check out and use DVDs on key topics, go out to lunch with a favorite teacher, get to be at the front of the recess line, or any other assorted activities intended to be rewards. The system itself can create lots of cognitive dissonance for students who are confused about why adults would spend time setting up these kinds of reward structures when they are more familiar with approaches that teach through example, modeling, and story. It could be that students familiar with other approaches to living in a civil community assume that the systems are for other students. All kinds of misinterpretations can occur with little conversation. And, students may act on their own assumptions and appear to teachers as if they are being oppositional or defiant.

Culturally Responsive Behavior Management Systems

Viewing behavioral systems from a culturally responsive perspective means asking questions about what rules are being set, by whom, and for what purpose. Making sure that students are developing internal systems that guide their judgments about creating and sustaining inclusive communities is at least as important as policing student behavior. Students need mental models that help them manage their own emotions, control impulses, look at issues from other people's perspectives, and clarify their own interests. As they engage in developing these processes, students construct their own identities and roles within their communities.

Students and families need to be involved in setting behavioral and community norms for their schools so that expectations in schools build on and extend the positive and community oriented values and beliefs of community leaders and families. Teachers and other educators may be surprised about the kinds of standards that communities set for themselves and expect from schools and have to be willing to negotiate those norms that may or may not reflect the dominant, middle class standards that many teachers uncritically apply in their classrooms

What Are Key Features Of Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Communicate high expectations. Make sure that you let each student know that you expect them to engage, perform, and achieve at high level, rather than making excuses in your own mind for some students who don't participate at optimal levels at times.

Actively engage your students in learning. Coach your students to question, consult original material, connect content to their own lives, write to learn, read broadly, build models, test hypotheses, and make time to build relationships with them so that the disappointments that come from trying and not quite succeeding don't cause them to quit learning.

Facilitate learning. Build students' capacity to handle new material, solve complex problems, and develop new skills by scaffolding their learning from what they already know through a series of increasingly complex experiences that shift the locus of control from the teacher to the learner.

Understand the assets and capabilities that students' families bring to their parenting. Understand the cultures represented in your classroom by getting to know your students. Visit the neighborhoods where they live. Listen to them talk about their lives. Understand what and whom they care about. Consistently engage in real conversation and dialogue with your students. For example, if you have English language learners in your class, go to lunch with them.

Try to understand their reality by actively listening to them and the sense that they are making of the curriculum. Use small group, personalized instruction to help students develop their academic language skills.

Anchor your curriculum in the everyday lives of your students. Connect their knowledge and skills to content knowledge. Spend time on helping students learn the content. Use real life, authentic texts. Engage students in inquiry about things that matter to them.

Select participation structures for learning that reflect students' ways of knowing and doing. Put yourself in situations where you're not dominant, where you're a noticeable minority or in a group where you don't know the norms and unspoken rules. Recognize what that feels like and sit with the discomfort. Ask yourself these questions: What did I do to make myself more comfortable? What did I do to be effective or survive in that situation? What did others do that either helped or hindered my effectiveness? What would have helped me in that situation? Use the answers to these questions help you to structure how you include students.

Share control of the classroom with your students. Challenge yourself to see yourself in the opposite situation of which you identify. For example, if you see yourself in the non-dominant culture as a woman, in which situations can you see yourself as the dominant culture? Stretch yourself to expand your own self-definition. To help you see life from a different perspective, consciously read books or watch movies about groups other than your own. In addition, explore your own privileges and the impact those have on the organization and the people in it.

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.

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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 own values, they can better relate to their colleagues and students who bring different histories and expectations.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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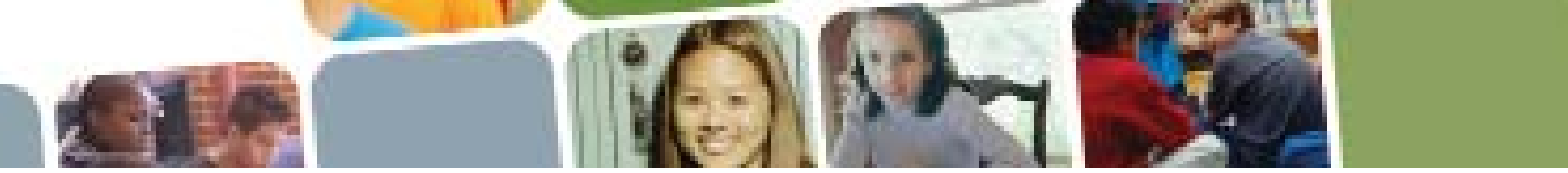

Where Can I Go to Get More Information?

Visit these three websites to get more information about becoming culturally responsive. For a small booklet on becoming culturally responsive, visit the NIUSI-*LeadScape* project at http://www.urbanschools.org/pdf/cultural.identity.LETTER.pdf?v_document_name=Cultural%20Identity%20and%20Teaching. To engage colleagues in learning more about culturally responsive literacy, check out this module produced by NCCRESt on culturally responsive literacy: http://www.nccrest.org/professional/culturally_responsive_literacy.html. To learn more about current issues in education that relate to culturally responsive education, subscribe to our Equity Matters newsletter http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/ea/equity-matters-newsletter.

Disclaimer

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