6.2: Culture

Build a Bridge: Become a Culturally Responsive Teacher

by Jenny Pennington

Learning Targets

The reader should be able to identify how Culturally Responsive Teaching can be integrated into the classroom.

The reader should be able to recognize examples of different cultural norms that may conflict with standard classroom behavior.

The reader should be able to understand how typical teacher candidate training may create culturally insular educators.

The Increasing Need for Cultural Response

As our nation’s cultural diversity continues to evolve, teachers are finding it necessary to adapt their mindset and lesson plans to accommodate students with varying cultural identities and experiences. A common phrase for helping students from different backgrounds adapt to each other is building a cultural bridge. According to the “InTime: Integrating New Technologies Into the Methods of Education” (2002) website, teachers can become proactive in combining “academic
abstractions” and “lived sociocultural realities” through Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Today’s teachers have a greater responsibility to address the growing “melting pot” of students in their classrooms and to adapt lesson plans to respect the varying cultural identities of a heterogeneous group.

**What Is It?**

Culturally Responsive Teaching is “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them” (“Intime” par. 1). Being mindful of this type of teaching requires “teach[ing] to and through the strengths of students” (“InTime”, 2002, para. 1) by using “multicultural information, resources, and materials in all subjects” (para. 1).

Some characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching include:

- “Acknowledg[ing] the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum
- Us[ing] a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles
- Teach[ing] students to know and praise their own and each others’ cultural heritages” (“InTime”, 2002, para. 2).

**How CRT Affects Teachers**

Noted and oft-cited scholar in CRT studies, Gay contends teachers tend to be “culturally insular” (as cited in Edwards and Kuhlman, 2007, para. 3), or narrow-minded, and can learn how to use CRT as a “means for releasing the potential of ethnically diverse students by exploring both the academic and psychosocial abilities of the students” (para. 3). Gay finds teachers “often focus on what their students ‘don’t have and can’t do’ while claiming cultural neutrality, believing that their own personal experiences are normal” (para. 6). Furthermore, Gay explains the reason behind this mentality is that teacher candidates begin their teaching careers “with little preparation for working with children who differ from them racially, culturally, and economically” (para. 7). Obviously, Gay’s stance is not true of all teachers and their training. Yet it is worth questioning if teaching in an area where students’ backgrounds are similar to each other or similar to the teacher is the fault of either. It is hard to imagine anyone disputing the need for cultural sensitivity whether students experience different cultures firsthand or study them in class. Barnes (2006) notes in her article “Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach in a Culturally Responsive Way” that the “teaching force remains homogenous—predominantly white, female, and middle class” (para. 1). The perception that the teaching force is not heterogeneous highlights a
larger issue that isn’t addressed here, but the idea that those who typically choose to enter the teacher profession exhibit similar traits certainly does not mean the teachers are doomed to complacency in their lessons or apathy toward their students. There may be a “cultural discontinuity” between teacher and student (para. 1), but it can be inferred that as the diversity in our population increases, it will be evident among teaching staff, not just students. Diversity is more apparent in urban school settings; however, research indicates that teachers across the nation train through “curricula historically grounded in Euro centric traditional styles of pedagogy” (Barnes, 2006, para. 1). Therefore, until the teacher training curriculum reflects an understanding of different cultures (i.e. reading literature from authors with more diverse backgrounds), new teachers may have to adopt the practice that how they teach is not how they were taught. Respecting and having a passionate curiosity in each other’s cultures are ways to break the perceived disconnect in the teacher-student relationship.

Another factor that may account for a lack of Culturally Responsive Teaching in the past is the common “fostering” of individualism in U.S. school systems (Rothstein-Fisch, Greendfield, and Trumbull, 1999, p. 64), which “emphasizes information disengaged from its social context” (p. 64). Educators may recognize collectivistic values in some students, or values that “emphasize the interdependence of family members” (p. 64). Teachers see collectivism in students who tend to join or help others in a task so that they are “contributing to the success of any group they belong to” (p. 64). Collectivism may also account for students who relate school-based instruction to stories told in their home instead of discussing learned information in more “scientific language” (p. 66). Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Trumbull (1999) suggest that as part of “advocating cultural sensitivity [. . .] teachers recognize their own practices as cultural in origin rather than as simply the ‘right way’ to do things” (p. 66). Acknowledging cultural differences and how they affect learning is akin to the need to realize that everyone has an accent—everyone has a culture and we all should respect that if we wish to address the needs of all our students.

In “Cultural and Academic Excellence Leaves No Child Behind,” Stickney (2003) states that “[e]ffective educators understand the verbal and nonverbal communication styles of cultures other than their own” (para. 6). Cultural norms may dictate students perform or react in ways anathema to what teachers expect, which is using “eye contact, tak[ing] turns, speak[ing] one at a time, and us[ing] body language that shows they are being attentive” (para. 6). One example of this perceived deviation is in African American cultures in which students “sometimes use call-and-response banter when communicating (a self-explanatory practice in which someone speaks and another replies = banter), [in] Latino cultures [when students] at times talk along with speakers to show support for what is being said, and [in] Hawaiian cultures [when students] communicate more effectively by storytelling than by quick replies” (para. 6). Teachers will need to research the cultural norms of their students—such norms are far too varied and complex to be summarized here, and new norms may emerge each year as new students enter our classrooms. In general, students’ behavior in classrooms will “depend upon cultural norms regarding what is polite or respectful, [even] culturally accepted gender roles” (para. 7). If one is to incorporate cultural sensitivity in his or her teaching, “lesson plans need to blend information on how students can become comfortable with American culture with ways that other students can become culturally responsive to members of diverse cultures” (para. 7). As the U.S. population diversifies, an inspiring definition of American culture will be just that—diversity, the idea of the “melting pot” becoming a lived reality in more and more places.
What Can CRT Do?

CRT can capitalize on cooperative learning (“InTime”, 2009, para. 11) as students “become social critics” (para. 10) with “more caring, concerned, and humane interpersonal skills” (para. 12). Students can benefit from CRT by gaining a “better understanding of interconnections among individual, local, national, ethnic, global, and human identities” as well as “acceptance of knowledge as something to be continuously shared, critiqued, revised, and renewed” (para. 12). “The Knowledge Loom” (2009), a site created by the Education Alliance at Brown University, maintains CRT is “premised on the idea that culture is central to student learning” (para. 1), and also suggests CRT is a means to “recognize, respect, and use students’ identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments” (para. 1). One can deduce that the CRT concept negates the groundbreaking notion that students’ minds are a blank slate, or tabula rosa (“The Knowledge Loom”, 2009, para. 4), since background and experience are integral factors in the learning environment—and can provide richer learning experiences for student and teacher.

In the Classroom

The premise of a learning community can come to fruition in a culturally responsive classroom. Since CRT can expand to all subjects, teachers can collaborate to make students’ experiences multidimensional through: “curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments” (“InTime”, 2009, para. 6). In fact, teachers of varied subjects like language arts, science, social studies, and music can collaborate “in teaching a single cultural concept, such as protest” (para. 6). Cooperative learning lends itself not just to student groups but to a group of teachers who can work together to strengthen cultural understanding.

CRT and NCLB

A strong correlation between the No Child Left Behind act and Culturally Responsive Teaching is the result of higher test scores because “educators’ integration of cultural nuances and acceptance of different cultural communication styles in classrooms positively correlate with improvements in time on task, attending behaviors, participation in classroom dialogue, concept mastery, recall of factual information with greater accuracy, and more student enthusiasm and confidence in learning” (Stickney, 2003, para. 4). Proponents of the NCLB act promote CRT since they consider “students from less dominant cultures [. . .] to be at particular risk for school failure” (para. 1). Cooperative learning through students working in groups helps students get to know each other’s backgrounds while working together to
complete a task or meet a goal. If anyone can argue against a student feeling accepted into a diverse group, it may be from a homeogenous mindset a la speaking in Standard English or all people using/speaking the same language.

**Conclusion**

Studies of Culturally Responsive Teaching indicate that teachers’ “perceptions of culturally relevant teaching varie[s]” (Edwards and Kuhlman, 2007, para. 27), but one can integrate CRT in the classroom in the same vein one works with students “who may have emotional and physical problems” (para. 28)—i.e., by continuing to acknowledge and accommodate diversity among student populations. Edwards and Kuhlman (2007) urge teachers to “know that the process of becoming a culturally responsive teacher is nurtured by living, experimenting, traveling, and reading” (para. 28). Combining teachers’ knowledge of different cultural norms with classroom application creates an “opportunity to insert education into culture rather than culture into education” (para. 11). Imagine a classroom in which the teacher and student stir who they are, where they come from, and what they believe into the collective pot, creating a respectful school culture where diversity is the accepted norm.

**Questions**

1. What is a proven benefit of culturally responsive teaching as it relates to the No Child Left Behind act?
   
   A. great cultural diversity
   
   B. call and response system
   
   C. increased student productivity
   
   D. higher test scores

2. A student who decides to help another student in a task such as cleaning a chalkboard is participating in what norm for certain cultures?
   
   A. Serving others before self
   
   B. Possessive personality
   
   C. Collectivism
   
   D. Accepted gender norms

3. A secondary school English course instructor incorporates materials from the standard literary canon of typically white, male authors. The instructor’s teacher training probably stems from what focus?
   
   A. Euro-centric
B. Collectivism

C. Culturally responsive

D. Multicultural

4. The season of Spring is fast approaching. How might teachers of different subjects collaborate to create a learning community for elementary age children studying the season?

A. The teachers join the students outside on the first sunny day for field day sports.

B. The history, art, and physical education teachers create a lesson to teach students about May Day.

C. The school has a fundraiser selling flower bulbs to the community.

D. The Easter bunny visits students and hands out candy during lunch.

References


CC licensed content, Shared previously