



NASET's Classroom Management Series

Culturally Responsive Teaching

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This issue of **NASET's Classroom Management** series was written by Kaira Wheeler. Culturally responsive teaching refers to a style of teaching that takes into account a learner's background, language, and world experience in order to create more valuable and relatable learning opportunities. Research has shown that culturally responsive teaching is effective in improving educational outcomes and creating life-long learners in the community. Teachers using this model encourage students to relate course content and standards to their own cultural context. This approach is necessary and important in an increasingly diverse public school population. There is also a clearly disproportionate amount of students of color inaccurately labeled as disabled. This paper will examine what culturally responsive teaching is, why it is important, as well as strategies for implementation. Recommendations for future steps and training will also be made.

Abstract

Culturally responsive teaching refers to a style of teaching that takes into account a learner's background, language, and world experience in order to create more valuable and relatable learning opportunities. Research has shown that culturally responsive teaching is effective in improving educational outcomes and creating life-long learners in the community. Teachers using this model encourage students to relate course content and standards to their own cultural

context. This approach is necessary and important in an increasingly diverse public school population. There is also a clearly disproportionate amount of students of color inaccurately labeled as disabled. This paper will examine what culturally responsive teaching is, why it is important, as well as strategies for implementation. Recommendations for future steps and training will also be made.

Key Words: culture, culturally responsive teaching, pedagogy, diversity, disabilities, special education, people of color, teaching strategies

Introduction

As the cultural demographics in the United States continue to increase in variability, there is an urgent need for teachers to respond with culturally relevant and inclusive teaching in the classroom. According to an article published in *Education Weekly*, culture refers to the customs, languages, values, beliefs, and achievements of a group of people (Will & Najarro, 2022). Elaborating further on this definition, *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal* describes what culture means in different contexts: “Historically, culture is defined as social heritage or tradition that is passed on to future generations. Behaviorally defined, culture is shared, learned human behavior, and a way of life. Functionally, culture is defined as the way human beings solve problems or adapt to the environment” (Utley & Obiakor, 2011). Culture highlights different characteristics among individuals within groups and may include variables such as socioeconomic status, life experiences, gender, language, education, sexual orientation, psychological state, and political viewpoints.

Culture influences people’s behaviors, shapes how they see the world, and defines how they see themselves as learners in a classroom. In special education, culture also influences how the family sees disability and the goals they may have for their child (Darrow 2013). When a teacher is informed about a student’s cultural socialization and experiences and uses this to drive instruction, that improves the quality of the student’s educational opportunities and outcomes (Gay, 2002). This is called culturally responsive teaching or pedagogy.

Culturally responsive teachers must have an understanding of other cultures and how students from these cultures differ from one another. The primary goal of culturally responsive pedagogy and the curriculum is to incorporate an understanding of students' prior knowledge, experiences, and language to build strong connections to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds within family and community contexts (Utley & Obiakor, 2011). It's the kind of teaching that helps diverse students see themselves and their communities as belonging in schools and other academic spaces, leading to more engagement and success (Will & Najarro, 2022). In her book, Dr Geneva Gay discusses how to bring equity to instruction by using techniques that are compatible with many different ethnic groups, especially those who are marginalized and disenfranchised in schools. She explains that by using content that reflects students' cultural orientations, background experiences, and ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate their teaching and learning, teachers will significantly improve the educational quality of students of color in both special and regular education. Darrow (2013) adds to this by explaining that people with disabilities can be seen as a cultural group as well. This "disability culture" is a set of artifacts, beliefs, expressions created by disabled people to describe their own life experiences and should be considered in special education.

Why is culturally responsive teaching important and necessary?

The importance of adopting a culturally responsive teaching model in the United States is clearly supported by research and data. The population of teachers in public schools is not representative or informed about the population that is being taught. According to the *U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics* survey from the 2017–18 school year, 79 percent of public school teachers were White. Perhaps more shocking is that the majority of teachers were also White in schools where a majority of students were Hispanic (54 percent), Black (54 percent), Asian (60 percent), or American Indian/Alaska Native (61 percent). This means that the diversity reflected in the population of the student body is not reflected in the teachers. This creates a gap in understanding between the two groups. This gap is also reflected across different educational situations. On average, almost one-fourth of special education

teachers' students are from a cultural or linguistic group different from their own, and 7 percent are English language learners (Utley & Obiakor, 2011). By 2020, children of color will constitute 46% of the public school population (Darrow, 2013). The culture that many students experience at home is not always represented at school, or is often represented in a stereotypical way.

Perhaps the most important reason for a culturally responsive teaching approach is the disproportionate amount of students of color who are inappropriately placed in special education programs. This happens because educators lack knowledge about how cultural differences can affect learning behaviors. According to Geneva Gay, "some of the attitudes, values, and behaviors that cause students from non-mainstream racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to be diagnosed and assigned to special education stem from misunderstood incongruencies between their home and school cultural standards, rather than some biological malfunctions or intellectual limitations" (2002). Utley & Obiakor (2011) add that culturally and linguistically diverse students have behavioral patterns that frequently result in misdiagnosis, deterioration of respect between teachers and students and ill-defined classifications and labels. These students are subjected to greater unfair teacher attitudes, expectations, and actions.

Linguistic differences also contribute to this. Approximately 40 million people in the United States speak a maternal language that is not English. According to the IRIS center, teachers should familiarize themselves with students' styles of communication, always remembering how challenging education can be for those students whose communication happens to differ from that of the school culture. Speakers of African-American English or Ebonics and people with accents are sometimes perceived to have linguistic deficits in phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics compared to what mainstream U.S. society perceives as proper dialect. The intellectual ability of these students may even be called into question because of their styles of speaking, the idea being that how one speaks is an indication of intelligence (Gay 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching is necessary because it works. Geneva Gay claims that there are strong positive correlations between culturally responsive teaching and the academic

performance, social adjustment, school satisfaction, self-concept, and confidence of students with color (2002). Will & Najjarro add to this claim that engaging in culturally affirming practices led to positive increases in students' understanding and engagement with academic skills and concepts. A teaching style that makes content relevant to students helps them succeed both in terms of quantitative measures such as high test scores, as well as qualitative measures such as attitude toward learning and ability to ask critical questions (2022).

Strategies for culturally responsive teaching

Each piece of literature that discusses the need and importance of culturally responsive teaching also puts forth strategies and guidelines for doing so. Almost all sources agree that the most important part is understanding that culture has a role in education and being willing to learn about students' cultures and communities.

The IRIS center claims that teachers should make curriculum content culturally relevant by teaching about the histories, contributions, experiences, points of view, and concerns relevant to students from diverse backgrounds, as well as using a number of sources in addition to textbooks to provide curriculum content. Making these connections between background knowledge and content standards can teach students to respect their own and others' cultural identities and differences. Geneva Gay makes a similar argument in her recommendations, "Students learn better content that is familiar, has high interest appeal, is challenging, and is presented in ways that are linked directly to their prior knowledge and ways of knowing" (2002). Godwin & King (2002) argue that parental involvement is key. Parents want to be more involved in their child's education and know their child best. It is essential to create strong relationships with parents in order to learn more about what is important to their family, and goals they may have for their child. This article recommends planning a series of parent and teacher team building seminars and activities to promote family involvement.

Utlely & Obiakor (2011) give many strategies for culturally responsive teaching as well, including conveying high expectations for all students, creating positive relationships with

families and communities, using active teaching methods that involve students in lessons, giving student control of portions of the lesson, and providing opportunities for students to collaborate. Darrow (2013) specifically lists strategies for helping a diverse student population with learning disabilities such as using respectful terminology when referring to students with disabilities, challenging stereotypical views of disability played out in the media, and acknowledging students' abilities as well as their disabilities.

Conclusion

One way to bridge the gap between teachers and culturally diverse students is by providing proper culturally responsive training to school personnel, which is necessary because proper training is frequently not provided to teachers. Utley & Obiakor (2011) claim that after a survey, 51 percent of recently prepared special educators said their preservice programs did not address the needs of a diverse student population. According to Geneva Gay (2002), "Professional preparation programs for regular and special education teachers, as well as inservice development, must be much more aggressive and diligent about including knowledge about and skills for teaching ethnically and culturally different students, and then hold teachers accountable for implementing these changes in classroom practice." Darrow (2013) argues that teachers who are comfortable examining their instructional practices and their own beliefs about and attitudes toward students from diverse backgrounds are most likely to aptly respond to the needs of all students. This "comfort" comes from proper training and knowledge. The IRIS Center states in their modules about culturally responsive teaching that it is often the case that unperceived cultural differences in the classroom lead teachers to choose instructional methods that may conflict with the needs of their students. Some of the major problems pointed out by Utley & Obiakor (2011) could be easily remediated with proper training. These problems include misreading of students' intent or abilities as a result of differences in cultural styles, utilizing styles of instruction and/or discipline that are at odds with community norms, stereotyping, assuming that the failure of a child to thrive intellectually is due to a deficit in the child rather than a deficit in teaching, maintaining ignorance about community norms of parenting, and

failing to authenticate the histories and realities of children and communities of color in the communities and educators' minds.

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