

# National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

## THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

*This Month's Topic:*

### Creating a Classroom for Diverse Learners

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#### Introduction

Culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students are the topic of much discussion in education forums, creating many avenues for research of this topic. Current research points to the imminent need for culturally relevant teaching practices to be better utilized in successfully including these students in the classroom environment. Disproportionality, the cultural divide, and the achievement gap are all very real issues facing minority students. The articles and research reviewed prove to educators that these problems exist, as well as strategies to improve upon them. This issue of **NASET's Practical Teacher** was written by Kaitlynn M. Penner from Florida International University and focuses on creating a classroom for diverse learners

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#### Abstract

Culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students are the topic of much discussion in education forums, creating many avenues for research of this topic. Current research points to the imminent need for culturally relevant teaching practices to be better utilized in successfully including these students in the classroom environment. Disproportionality, the cultural divide, and the achievement gap are all very real issues facing minority students. The articles and research reviewed prove to educators that these problems exist, as well as strategies to improve upon them.

# Creating a Classroom for Diverse Learners

In education, educators and scholars alike tend to use the term inclusion loosely. An inclusive classroom is one that welcomes diverse learners and creates an environment where each individual student can thrive. Inclusion is not simply being there, but being given the necessary instruction and supports to be successful. Teacher attitudes and awareness about this idealistic image of inclusive education are what drives or hinders this from becoming a reality. In saying that, “the problem lies in the gaps between policy, theory, and practice (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Scholars seek out the best practices and theories and prove them. Policy makers and politicians use these evidence-based practices as the basis for the laws, but how the educators put this into effect is the most important piece of the puzzle. Here in lies the importance for discussion of strategies to help educators include diverse learners, more specifically students who are culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically different.

There are many issues in education that relate to minorities and that of culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. The fact is that the majority of educators are Caucasian females (87%), which is a mismatch for the high percentages of students of ethnic and racial minorities (approximately 33%) in our education system. This fact, known as the cultural divide, only proliferates issues such as achievement gaps and disproportionate representation in both special and gifted education programs (Griner & Stewart, 2012). With no response, this divide is catastrophic for these students, hindering them from educational success due to lack of connection to the teacher and the curriculum. With an inclusive attitude, it is the job of educators to bridge this gap through culturally responsive teaching.

Disproportionality refers to the under and overrepresentation of certain groups in particular educational placements and disability categories. For instance, African-American students are greatly overrepresented in categories such as learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and emotional/behavioral disorder (Griner & Stewart, 2012). On a larger scale, African American students account for 20% of the special education population across all disability categories, while they only account for 14.8% of the population of students of school age (Irvine, 2012). On the opposite end of the spectrum, statistical research has proven that minorities are also underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. In addition, underrepresentation is evident for minority children in early intervention and early childhood education (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2012). It is sure to be the same factors that contribute to both this under and overrepresentation. In identifying this disproportionate representation, it is evident that there are a great number of misplacements and inappropriate referrals to special education. If a student is not learning in the general education environment because of a cultural disconnect, an inappropriate referral to special education services is only going to multiply the problems. These hasty referrals have been shown to lead to lower expectations, lack of opportunities, learned helplessness, and essentially a deprivation of the student’s right to learn in the least restrictive environment. All of these factors create what is known as the achievement gap.

The achievement gap is the difference between the success of the majority race and that of minority races. It is caused by many factors that have built up over time. “Small differences in early achievement are magnified by the current structure of schools” (Yeh, 2010). Because of the cultural divide and lack of culturally relevant pedagogy, these small differences in achievement add to an obvious problem of unjust underachievement for minority students. Educators have the sole responsibility to attempt to counteract this issue by actively and consciously making an effort to ensure the use of culturally relevant teaching practices.

Culturally responsive teaching practice is a broad term used to explain a strategy whose purpose is to counteract these greater issues. “[It] can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Griner & Stewart, 2012). For educators this means accessing all prior knowledge and actively seeking out new information in order to alter their own teaching in a responsive manner that benefits the students, dependent on their culture, race, and ethnicity. In addition, “not only do teachers need to recognize cultural influences on students’ learning, they also need to consider their own concepts of self and others, how they structure social relations, and their own concepts of knowledge. And they need to teach for equity, diversity, and

social justice” (Gimbert, Desai, & Kerka, 2010). This means realizing how one’s own culture affects how they portray the curriculum. Just as the cultures of students affects their connection to what they should be learning, teachers cultures and beliefs shape how they portray things on a subconscious and even conscious level. Bringing conscious awareness to this and its effects is the first step to being culturally aware.

In saying that, creating an environment of equitable educational opportunities for all students, by providing culturally relevant experiences and instruction, educators can lessen the achievement gap and the disproportionality in specific special education programs.

A culturally relevant educator takes time to get to know each student as an individual, taking into account the cultural, racial, and linguistic factors that attribute to the way they learn best. In addition, it is important that teachers maintain high expectations of all learners, use multiple forms of engagement to ensure students are motivated, use a variety of resources that relate to all students, and promote learning through family engagement (Irvine, 2012). This includes approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Response to Intervention (RTI). Both approaches highlight the fact that all students can learn when provided with high-quality instruction that caters to individual students strengths and uses multiple means of presentation of instruction to ensure every student can relate. These frameworks cater to students of diversity and allow them to thrive in the least restrictive general education environment.

Revealed by the research done by Griner and Stewart (2012) and based on parent perspectives the results concluded that outreach, representation, and classroom management are the three most important themes of culturally responsive teaching. It also revealed that teachers believed that parental involvement is an extremely important piece in providing a culturally relevant educational experience for all students. Parents are the piece to understanding their children and they can help bridge the gap between students and teachers. A healthy relationship between parent/family and teacher can nurture cultural understanding and reduce tensions between the two parties. However, this can only work if parents involve themselves in their child’s education. It is somewhat of a catch 22 because without parent involvement it makes the process difficult, but parents often prefer not to involve themselves due to the cultural divide. That being said, it is very important that educators put forth all efforts that push for this and create an understanding and respect between themselves and the family.

Years of research suggest that parental involvement in education increases student academic success (Chen & Gregory, 2011). The study conducted by Chen & Gregory (2011) proved this exact fact. It found that parental involvement in the pre-referral process improved student outcome as well as decreased the likelihood that they would be referred to special education. This fact alone can counteract some of the easily avoided, incongruous referrals. The specific revelation joins other studies that prove that parental involvement is key for all students, especially those with disabilities and those of minority cultures.

Culturally relevant teaching is eminent for the future success of minority students. Because of the reality that most students of minority races are educated at least in part, by Caucasian teachers, this is the only way to mend the cultural divide and bridge the achievement gap. Based on the literature and research reviewed, it is important that these efforts are continued because on this subject there are miles and miles to go. Looking ahead, it is important to highlight urban education. Because a high percentage of minorities live in urban settings, this is where most of the work needs to be done. Action research of effective teacher strategies can help fill the gap between policy, theory, and practice. Educators need to be actively seeking new ways to create a classroom that welcomes diversity. Culturally relevant teaching embodies an inclusive environment where all students can learn.

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## About the Author

**Kaitlynn Penner** is a graduate student at Florida International University. She is pursuing her MS in Special Education with a specialization in Autism Spectrum Disorders. She received her BS in Special Education and a teaching credential from South Carolina State University. She currently works as a behavioral therapist and resides in Santa Barbara, California.