

The Culturally Responsive Classroom

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Abstract

In the face of increasingly diverse public schools and a drastic difference in academic outcomes for students of color, teachers and educational researchers must develop practices to provide these students with better educational opportunities and experiences. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT; also referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy) involves shaping curriculum and pedagogy to validate, honor, and draw upon students' diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, literature review, teaching for equity, funds of knowledge

Review of Literature

Introduction

As the demographics of the United States become increasingly composed of racial and ethnic minorities, schools are also seeing a dramatic shift in their makeup. However, the education students of color receive is not equivalent to that offered to White students. Despite the oversimplified narratives that would attribute disparate outcomes to poverty, or the deficit narratives that would attribute disparate outcomes to cultures failing to value or prioritize education, the ongoing academic deficits of students of color can largely be blamed on deeply embedded racism in our education system. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) offers a powerful means of counteracting this institutional racism with everyday classroom practices.

Context

The makeup of the American public school is changing rapidly. In particular, so-called “Hispanic” students have grown from 16% to 27% of the K-12 public school population between fall 2000 and fall 2018; White students have dropped from 61% to 47% (Hussar et al., 2020, p. 63; Irwin et al., 2021, p. 12). Meanwhile, 79% of public school teachers were White in 2017-2018 (Irwin et al., 2021, p. 16). Clearly, many public school teachers do not share a cultural background with most of their students. This cultural barrier leads to discomfort and awkwardness at best, and overt racial bias at worst (Gutiérrez, 2015).

Furthermore, we continue to see enormous disparities in academic outcomes between White students and students of color. National metrics like test scores and graduation rates show Native American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Black students performing consistently below White and Asian students (Hussar et al., 2020, pp. 71–101). Meanwhile, racially marginalized students are placed in special education and subjected to discipline and incarceration at

substantially higher rates than their peers (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). And beyond what these statistics can tell us are deep underlying *deficit narratives* about the cultures, languages, families, and communities of students of color (Adiredja, 2019). These narratives perpetuate beliefs that students of color are inherently intellectually inferior, if not by nature then by nurture. The implicit and explicit bias resulting from these narratives reinforces poor treatment and outcomes for these students (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). The linguistic, social, and cultural “discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school” demonstrates to students that they cannot succeed academically without in some way compromising their cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159).

In the face of these inequities, teachers and researchers have been developing strategies for several decades to improve inclusion, opportunities, and outcomes for students of color. These strategies span teacher training, school management, curriculum, and pedagogy, and range in scale from single lessons to underlying philosophies (for example, Driscoll et al., 2016; Esmonde, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2013; Louie et al., 2021). One powerful and flexible framework is *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT; also referred to as *culturally relevant pedagogy* and *culturally sustaining pedagogy*).

What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

The phrase “culturally relevant teaching” was introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings in her 1994 book *The Dreamkeepers*, in which she presents case studies of eight teachers who show remarkable warmth, sensitivity, and affirmation to their Black students. She describes culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings was not the first to recognize the value of this form of teaching

or to publish research on it—she cites many who preceded her—but her book brought the concept into the mainstream of education research.

A foundational premise of CRT is an *asset-based approach* that serves as a direct contradiction of deficit narratives. That is, in order to compassionately and effectively teach students of color, it is vital to approach “students’, families’, and communities’ ways of knowing, including their language and culture [...] as intellectual resources” (Celedón-Pattichis et al., 2018, p. 375; see also Adiredja, 2019; Gay, 2000; Gutiérrez, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This linguistic and cultural capital is often referred to as *funds of knowledge* (Celedón-Pattichis et al., 2018, p. 375). Integrating students’ funds of knowledge in teaching can be as small as encouraging them to use their home language in class or as big as conducting community-based projects where family and community members are treated as valued contributors (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2019).

Geneva Gay also made substantial contributions to the scholarship on culturally responsive teaching, including with her eponymous book *Culturally Responsive Teaching* in 2000. Gay describes five key elements of CRT, which provide an effective scaffolding for elucidating it:

1. “developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity”
2. “including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum”
3. “demonstrating caring and building learning communities”
4. “communicating with ethnically diverse students, and”
5. “responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction” (Gay, 2002, p. 106).

1. Diverse Cultural Knowledge

Gay emphasizes that successful implementation of CRT would require a foundation of intensive teacher training about different cultural backgrounds, something that most multicultural education courses in teacher preparation programs barely touch on (Gay, 2002, pp. 106–107). The cultural knowledge teachers attain must go beyond anthropological study; they must be able to apply this cultural knowledge in their teaching practice.

One could, in effect, add a third dimension to the “*pedagogical content knowledge*” (PCK) concept first proposed by Lee Shulman in 1986. Shulman recognized that the intersection between pedagogical knowledge (“how to teach”) and content knowledge (“what to teach”) was more important than each individual axis: a teacher must have the relevant information and know how to effectively convey it, but the *how* depends greatly on the subject (1986). In CRT, the intersection of cultural knowledge (“who you’re teaching”) with PCK is equally vital. The resulting *cultural pedagogical content knowledge* reflects that teachers don’t teach in a vacuum, and the makeup of their audience necessarily informs the nature of their teaching.

2. Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Students are motivated to learn “that which [is] most meaningful to them” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). When course materials are almost all by and about white people, when learning is detached from real life, and when students are expected to set aside their cultural identities in class, students of color don’t have much reason to be engaged. Teachers can connect to students’ interests by “making links to human experiences [...] drawing on cultural activities [...] incorporating stories with relatable characters [...] addressing community based concerns [...] and situating mathematics [or other subjects] in the context of social justice issues” (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2019).

3. Caring and Community

Gay also mentions the importance of “demonstrating caring and building learning communities” in culturally responsive teaching. In her view, this means not only compassion and collaboration, but also high expectations: teachers must “care so much [...] that they accept nothing less than high-level success” from students of color (p. 109). This kind of caring eschews the “benign neglect” that may arise from deficit thinking (Gay, 2002, p. 109) in favor of strong positive regard that can help restore students’ confidence and self-efficacy. These qualities are further supported by the development of *learning communities*, which make students active partners in their learning and foster a sense of group responsibility (Gay, 2002, p. 110; Henley, 2010, pp. 32–42).

4. Culturally Aware Communication

Effective communication is absolutely vital to successful teaching. “[D]etermining what ethnically diverse students know and can do, as well as what they are capable of knowing and doing, is often a function of how well teachers can communicate with them” (Gay, 2002, p. 110). In a diverse classroom, however, communication problems abound. While it’s easy to recognize potential language barriers for English language learners, more subtle and pervasive are the communication barriers between those who, superficially, speak the same language fluently. Different cultures may speak the same language, but *how* they speak it varies enormously: “contextual factors, cultural nuances, discourse features, logic and rhythm, delivery, vocabulary usage, role relationships of speakers and listeners, intonation, gestures, and body movements” are all important “discourse features” that can cause immense difficulty for teachers who are unaware or judgmental of these nonverbal elements of communication (Gay, 2002, p. 111).

Different norms about discussion patterns can lead to conflict if, for example, a student regularly makes comments or asks questions during a lecture. Whereas the typical American classroom has very structured “*passive-receptive*” communication that (implicitly) instructs students to wait until the teacher is done speaking and then raise their hands and speak one at a time, many communities of color have “*active-participatory*” communication that involves running commentary and where “[t]he roles of speaker and listener are fluid and interchangeable” (Gay, 2002, p. 111). An ignorant teacher might interpret these seeming interruptions as rude and forbid them, preventing students from engaging fully in class and likely generating resentment. The culturally aware teacher not only permits diverse communication styles, but also actively welcomes and cultivates them.

5. Thoughtful Instructional Strategies

Gay’s final element of CRT is “responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction”—that is, the pedagogy and lesson structures (Gay, 2002, p. 111). Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that there is no single best practice; more important than the specific elements of instruction are the “philosophical and ideological underpinnings” of the teaching practice (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). This means developing a dynamic teaching style that responds to the unique needs of each group of students that enters the classroom. The classroom community provides a solid foundation for this work.

Universal design for learning (UDL) was developed to provide teachers with tools for teaching disabled students alongside their nondisabled peers in general education classrooms (CAST, 2018). However, UDL can readily be applied to CRT. The fundamental premise of UDL is that all students have strengths and weaknesses that diversified pedagogical strategies can help scaffold: offering information in several different formats, allowing students to process

information in several different ways, and assessing students' learning via several different methods (CAST, 2018). In the context of CRT, this would mean recognizing that students of different backgrounds may take in information, grapple with new ideas, and demonstrate their learning in myriad ways, and creating space in the classroom for all students to have an opportunity to engage in ways that feel natural to them.

In some classrooms, it may be beneficial to encourage students to “express themselves in language (in speaking and writing) with which they [are] knowledgeable and comfortable”—whether an English vernacular or another language altogether—then practice *code-switching*, translating their work into “standard” English (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). This is an example of supporting students to “both play the game and change the game”: practicing the type of English that will be expected in standardized tests and college applications, but first embracing whatever language is most familiar and treating it as a learning tool rather than a deficit (Gutiérrez, 2015, para. 15).

Advocacy & Activism

The concepts of *playing the game* and *changing the game* suggest an additional layer to culturally responsive teaching: advocacy, activism, and politics. Gutiérrez suggests that political *conocimiento* (i.e., knowledge, savvy, understanding) is vital to any urban teacher of mathematics—I would argue that it is vital to any teacher, period (Gutiérrez, 2013). Teaching does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it contained within the four walls of a classroom. Politics and greater society shape what happens in schools, and schools have the potential to shape what happens in politics and greater society. Teacher unions, Me Too, the Department of Education, gun violence, Black Lives Matter—these are all present in the classroom, whether they are acknowledged or not. CRT demands that the sociopolitical context be acknowledged: that

teachers recognize their social positionality and that of their students, address current events that affect their students regardless of whether they're "relevant" to class, empower their students to be socially or politically involved, and act as advocates for their students beyond their classroom walls.

Conclusion

The shifting demographics of our public schools have highlighted longstanding inequities in the education that students of color receive and their eventual academic outcomes. Culturally relevant teaching offers a guiding framework to counter these inequities. Through knowledge, curriculum, community, communication, pedagogy, and advocacy, teachers can foster a learning environment that nurtures students of color and gives them high expectations to meet.

As CRT and related pedagogies become more widespread, additional research is needed to examine and validate the application of various practices in various settings (race and ethnicity, but also age, subject, school status, teacher training, and more). Ladson-Billings and others have demonstrated the success of CRT in specific case studies, but it would be valuable to determine how CRT might be deployed on a larger scale, in entire schools, districts, or across the nation.

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