

Creating Culturally Responsive Schools

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During the last 10 years, U.S. schools have experienced a rapid growth in ethnic and racial diversity. In the near future, the young people now filling classrooms will be paying taxes, working in the public and private sectors, and consuming the goods and services that fuel our economy. Given the increased diversity of the student population, how can schools ensure that all students master the social, emotional, intellectual, and technical competencies necessary to fulfill these essential roles?

What We Know

An increasing body of research demonstrates the importance of addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. Unfortunately, the cultural underpinning of schools in the United States is largely congruent with middle-class, European values (Boykin, 1994), leading many schools to ignore or downplay the strengths of diverse students and their families. Valenzuela (1999), after studying Mexican American high school students, defined this approach as *subtractive schooling*. For example, schools ignored students' knowledge of Spanish or even treated it as a deficit.

This cultural disconnect often leads to poor self-concepts, discipline problems, and poor academic outcomes for ethnic minorities. Part of the problem is that teachers unfamiliar with students' diverse backgrounds sometimes misinterpret cultural difference as misbehavior (Osher, Cartledge, Oswald, Artiles, & Coutinho, 2004). Several statistical studies have established that compared with their Caucasian peers, minority students are suspended from school more frequently and for longer durations (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000), punished more severely (Office for Civil Rights, 1992), and disproportionately referred for restrictive special education services (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Culturally responsive education can strengthen student connectedness with schools.

But research has also identified ways in which schools can serve students of color effectively. For example, studies of the AVID program in San Diego, California, show that rather than tracking ethnic and language-minority students into low-level classes, setting high expectations and providing a "scaffold" of support helps students of color succeed (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). AVID gives students direct instruction in the "hidden curriculum" of the school—which courses to take, which teachers to seek out, the importance of tests, how to study, and so on.

Another approach, supported by both experimental and quasi-experimental research, is creating an environment that enables teachers and students to connect with one another. For example, the Project STAR experiment in Tennessee found that students of color disproportionately benefited from reduced class size in 1st grade; these advantages persisted over time (Finn, Gerber, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001). Similarly, a six-district, quasi-experimental study of the Child Development Project found that building classroom community produced even more benefits for students of color than for Caucasian students (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000).

Perhaps the most powerful approach is making classroom instruction more congruent with the cultural value systems of a diverse student population. Ethnographic studies have demonstrated that *culturally responsive* education—defined by Gay (2002) as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and



effective for them”—can strengthen student connectedness with schools, reduce behavior problems, and enhance learning (Kalyanpur, 2003).

What You Can Do

Educators should consider the following approaches supported by the research to promote culturally responsive education.

■ Match classroom instruction to cultural norms for social interaction to enhance students' social skills development and problem-solving ability. For example, many African American youths thrive on intense and sensitive peer relations (Tharp, 1989). Teachers can make positive instructional use of these skills and behaviors by creating assignments that require group interaction.

■ When asking questions or giving directions, adjust wait time for students from different cultures to enhance classroom participation and the development of critical thinking skills. Rowe (1987) found that Pueblo Indian students took twice as much time to respond spontaneously to instruction as Native Hawaiians did. A teacher who moves on too quickly might falsely assume that Pueblo Indian students are unresponsive or do not understand the concepts being presented. In contrast, a teacher might inappropriately consider Native Hawaiian students' preference for short wait times and overlapping speech as "acting out."

■ Be sensitive to the cultural shifts that immigrant students, or other students with minority family and community cultures, must make as they move between school and home. This transition may be most difficult at the beginning of the school week, after students have been immersed in their home culture over the weekend. Teachers need to be sensitive to transition challenges and collaborate with families to develop mechanisms to ease the stress caused by them.

■ Help parents gain *cultural capital*—the skills to negotiate the education system and knowledge of the norms of

behavior that govern schools (Briscoe, Smith, & McClain, 2003). Without this information, many minority parents, especially new immigrants, may not feel competent to negotiate the system on behalf of their child or knowledgeable enough to support their child's efforts. Teachers can help by talking with parents directly rather than using more formal written communications, such as letters or notes. This is particularly valuable for families from relational cultures, in which personal connections and conversational language are the preferred ways of gathering information (Kalyanpur, 2003).

■ Use culturally responsive and respectful approaches in character education, social skill instruction, and discipline. For example, a school district located in the Navajo Nation built on tradition and created a Sweat Lodge Program that helped students with behavioral problems reflect on their behavior while they reconnected to a communal spiritual perspective. This enhanced both the students' self-esteem and their willingness to become responsible community members (Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2004).

Educators Take Note

Embracing the strengths and addressing the diverse learning needs of our increasingly multicultural, multilingual student population requires major transformation of our current school practices. The culturally responsive education practices outlined here can help establish a learning environment that promotes success for all students. **EL**

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