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# Culturally Responsive Teaching: Strategies for Inclusive Education

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## ABSTRACT

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a transformative approach that aims to create an inclusive and equitable educational environment by integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the teaching process. This paper explores the significance of CRT in fostering academic success among diverse student populations, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. It examines the key principles and strategies of CRT, including the importance of understanding cultural diversity, building cultural competence, creating inclusive learning environments, and implementing authentic assessment practices. By promoting equity and social justice in education, CRT empowers students to leverage their cultural identities as assets in their learning journey, thereby enhancing their academic outcomes and overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Culturally Responsive Teaching, Inclusive Education, Cultural Competence, Equity in Education, Social Justice, Authentic Assessment.

## INTRODUCTION

A diverse classroom is a challenge for many educators. This diversity often requires modifications in teaching methods and strategies. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a set of strategies that attempts to create an equitable classroom by utilizing students' cultural background in their education. The students' background includes a strong language foundation, different upbringing experiences (e.g., family emphasis on education or experiences with prejudice), and a sense of belonging to one or many cultures. CRT also includes the teachers' background and beliefs. When instruction is created and implemented through a cultural lens, students have a greater chance of experiencing success. With increased classroom pressures based on testing and accountability, the shift from culturally relevant education to culturally responsive teaching is an insulting and ignorant option. CRT attempts to avoid stereotyping students based on limited knowledge about their cultures. Instead, CRT encourages educators to determine many aspects of each student's background and choose the best instructional strategies based on that knowledge. Culturally responsive schools consider pedagogy, leadership, student engagement, curriculum, community involvement, and classroom climate. Curriculum and pedagogy are essential in culturally responsive schools [1, 2]. Teaching methods and materials used in class influence students' perceptions of the school regarding their relevance. Culturally relevant schools include students' culture as a rudimentary part of the curriculum. Students' cultural background must go beyond curriculum examples and materials. The structures of knowledge and science taught in schools are often based on middle-class European culture perceptions. Students are expected to learn another culture's cultural capital before receiving educational capital. Some students accomplish this bridge, while others lack the necessary experiences. In culturally relevant curricula, students are invited to explore and utilize their cultural tools in order to learn about other disciplines [3, 4].

## DEFINITION AND KEY CONCEPTS

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an approach that embeds cultural awareness into lesson planning, implementation, and assessment to reach all students. CRT views students through their

cultural lens, ensuring that a learning community that values students' cultures leads to culturally relevant pedagogy and CRT. Academic engagement is stimulated through enthusiastic encouragement of the recognition and amplification of students' cultural experiences and backgrounds. Culturally responsive building practices create educational environments in which taking advantage of cultural backgrounds is valued [5, 6]. The term 'minority' is culturally and politically loaded and does not capture the true diversity of the situation in a particular geographic area. Whenever possible, the term ethnic or ethnic group is used. Simply understood, ethnicity is social identity stemming from shared history or traditions that can manifest itself in culture sharing habits such as speaking different languages, valuing particular arts, or living according to distinct behavioral patterns buttressed and expressed by different institutions. At the same time people may share the same national (civic) identity but belong to different ethnic (cultural) communities. It is noteworthy, that apart from ethnic identity any national community may also include cultural minorities, either indigenous cultural minorities (e.g. native peoples), immigrants or their descendents (e.g. Jews, Chinese, Turks, Arabs in Europe and African American in the United States) [7, 8].

#### **UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM**

The classroom is a microcosm of society, and within this confined setting, students from a myriad of cultural backgrounds come together to share a learning experience. This diversity includes cultural heritages (e.g. African American, Irish, Italian, Slavic, Latino), socio-economic differences (e.g. low-income, working class, middle class), and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, Creole, Chinese). The breadth of diversity in a classroom setting can be overwhelming. However, it is also an opportunity to expose students to a spectrum of perspectives and approaches to the world around them. Culture informs the nature of life. One's view of the world is shaped through cultural experiences, and it affects how one relates to people and events. Cultural experiences impact aspects of identity including race, gender, socio-economics, religion, sexual orientation, and dis/ability. Because of this varying background, students' learning styles differ. Each student comes to the classroom with a framework that influences his/her understandings and experiences. Their cultural framework impacts how students perceive curriculum materials, interpret lessons, and interact with the teacher and peers [9]. The relationship between culture and pedagogy must be examined in order to understand how to support students in school. Educators are responsible for creating an environment that fosters learning for all students by implementing strategies that validate while challenging cultural prior knowledge. Research indicates that "working across cultures demands a radical transformation in the schools". The school must advocate for understanding and valuing differences rather than promoting for assimilation. Recent publisher advertisements aim to address this challenge. However, materials alone do not transform schooling practices. When cultural conflicts exist between schooling practices and the home culture, students may disengage from school. Many immigrant students experience cultural dissonance since the norms, values, and customs of the home culture differ from the school culture. More than a set of policies, it is the responsibility of the school district to implement change [10].

#### **BENEFITS OF A CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOM**

The current climate of public education in the United States has sparked a great deal of concern regarding the quality of education that is being received by minority populations. Historically, these populations have always lagged behind their white peers in standardized assessments; most recently, it was reported in the National Assessment Report that, in 2015, minority 12th graders scored 25-30 points lower than whites on reading. Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) allows educators to "interrupt the narrative" and address this lack of achievement through a refined choice of instructional strategies. When instruction is created and implemented through the lens of culture, students have a greater chance to experience academic success [11]. Schools often reflect the larger society in which they exist. The current climate of P-12 education, both locally and nationally, emphasizes improved academic outcomes for all students, particularly low-achieving students. At the same time, schools are increasingly held accountable for the achievement of all student groups, particularly historically marginalized populations. Increasingly, schools with large populations of low-income and racially and ethnically diverse students are also seen as having a larger concentration of low-performing schools. The intersection of these two variables brings up important questions for educational leaders. What is the larger story behind these Statistics? What happened to aggregate these data? What is at the root of these disparities? What are schools doing to change these inequities? More importantly, what actions are being sought to interrupt the misinterpretation of research and data that perpetuates the large structural inequalities in school funding, quality provider networks, school choice options, and accountability? Educators need to

understand local and national contexts in which schools operate, as this content illuminates and shapes the aggregate data story [12].

### **STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

To effectively respond to youth of diverse backgrounds and propagate the fundamental tenets of equity, diversity, and inclusion within academia, educators must first cultivate cultural competence. This skill is anchored upon knowledge of source culture, target society, self-awareness/ethnocentrism, autonomous learning, and interpersonal/communication skills. There are four significant approaches to building cultural competence that educators utilize as strategies to cultivate this skill: proactive engagement in multicultural spaces, fostering relationships with bicultural individuals, adjusting communication style to be more inclusive between the minority and majority cultural groups, and avoiding stereotypes and generalizations. Such expertise allows individuals to critically reflect upon their own culture and effectively compare it to other cultures [13]. Adverse assumptions about cultures often promote division rather than understanding. Educators who intend to teach in culturally diverse and economically deprived learning spaces must actively seek and engage in multicultural/cross-cultural settings on a continuous basis. These experiences promote an understanding of cultural difference and the social ramifications of power disparities. Participatory encounters with diverse social groups promote empathy and sensitivity to difference. To effectively bridge the divide and build cross-cultural relationships, teachers must intentionally foster relationships with bicultural individuals who serve as bridges between groups. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties of biculturalism and the potential to be ostracized. However, it is also important to recognize the value that these individuals bring to society [14].

### **SELF-REFLECTION AND AWARENESS**

To support teachers in building cultural competence, professional practice strategies are offered. Building cultural competence is grounded in the self-reflective and awareness practice. To affect the quality of the transaction between the student and teacher, it is imperative for teachers to examine their own perspective, culture and biases through self-reflection to “unlearn what might be harmful, uninformed, or unproductive in cross-cultural interactions.” Culturally responsive teachers are encouraged to ascertain knowledge of their own cultural perspective and “growing edge” in understanding cultural perspectives different from their own. Armed with this knowledge, teachers may better understand their students. This understanding may assist teachers in knowing what supports they wish for their students and how to provide that support [15]. Teachers examine and reflect on their own cultural norms, expectations and behaviors that affect their perspectives, interactions and transactions between themselves and their students and their students’ families. After developing greater awareness of their own cultural perspective, culturally responsive teachers are encouraged to gain knowledge of the culture of their students. Teachers are urged to study how students’ cultures express themselves in the classroom in ways that support academic achievement [15].

### **CREATING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Creating an inclusive learning environment is not just nice to have; it’s essential to the success of all students in school. To have a truly inclusive environment where all students feel respected, valued, and empowered, a lot of things need to come together, such as effective policies, active outreach to families, and hiring a diverse staff. However, many students can benefit from some basic things being in place, even if that’s not the case in their school settings. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2000) defined their intrinsic motivational framework as follows: [16].

- Establishing inclusion, which refers to employing principles and practices that contribute to a learning environment in which students and teachers feel respected by and connected to one another.
- Developing a positive attitude, which refers to employing principles and practices that contribute to a favorable disposition toward learning.
- Enhancing meaning, which refers to bringing about challenging and engaging learning.
- Engendering competence, which refers to employing principles and practices that help students authentically identify that they are effectively learning something they value.

Although many people and organizations have come to believe that educational outcomes are unacceptable for some groups of students, the focus has usually been on what those students need to do differently and less on what must change in classroom instruction. Even that, at times, is still very general and not easily translated into practice. With that in mind, one has been wrestling with exactly what the classroom instruction context was that worked for a wider diversity of students [17].

### **PROMOTING EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The active promotion of equity and social justice within inclusive learning environments lives up to the most democratizing possibilities of education by attending to and challenging systemic inequalities. At

the broadest level, this means doing actively, persistently, and unapologetically everything possible to advocate for the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all students while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have historically and systematically contributed to such treatment. It further means to empower students to become actively engaged in their local communities to enact social change and to make commitments to use their power for social good, thus contributing to the collective efforts to address barriers to a more just and equitable society. This is essential work, as schools are one of the few institutions wherein students come together from diverse sectors of society and are thus well-positioned to enact positive social change [18].

#### **ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION IN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING**

The assessment of students' learning is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the teaching and learning process. Traditionally, assessment practices consisted of pre-tests, formative assessment, summative assessment, and placement tests. Students' cultural backgrounds were not, and are still not, taken into account with respect to assessment practices. This makes assessment procedures somewhat controversial. Within Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), the question arises: what practices of assessment and evaluation are in use, and to what extent do the perceptions of teachers with respect to cultural background and cultural difference play a role in this? According to the four principles formulated above, it is assumed that a CRT approach in the assessment of students' learning, is first and foremost a matter of acknowledging the cultural differences between students, and as a consequence, adjusting the method of assessment to these differences [19]. As a second component, it is assumed that the cultural background of students is not only taken into account with respect to the assessment methods and tasks. TEFL teachers with a CRT approach in the assessment of students' learning also reflect on the assessment criteria and reflect on the importance of acknowledging students' cultural backgrounds in teacher-student interaction. A final component of CRT in assessment is that the outcomes of the assessment of students' learning are used for motivational purposes, with attention for personal growth and the future development of students vis-a-vis certain professions or study paths [20].

#### **AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT PRACTICES**

Assessment practices in culturally responsive teaching. Coming to know students as individuals is critical for culturally responsive pedagogy, as assessment practices can create "a cultural mirror or a cultural lens" for student growth. Consequently, assessment methods need to offer a snapshot of student knowledge in various social contexts and how knowledge is informed by demographics. Furthermore, assessment methods need to reflect student experiences and provide opportunities to demonstrate holistic perspectives. There are multiple definitions of authentic assessment, including a clear understanding of what students should be able to do, offering educationally relevant judgments of student capabilities, transcending standardization, containing descriptions of judgments that display adequate content area knowledge, and including procedures for interpretation and use of the judgments [2]. Authentic assessment entails observing what students can do or demonstrate with their knowledge rather than relying on standardized testing techniques or testing bluntness of knowledge. In professionally oriented undergraduate programs, the educational environment often emphasizes varied authentic assessment methods. Authentic assessment may support the implementation and practice of culturally responsive pedagogy. However, existing assessment practices may limit the possibilities of learning and growth for particular cultural groups and could hinder the transformational potential of culturally responsive pedagogy [21].

#### **CONCLUSION**

Culturally Responsive Teaching offers a powerful framework for addressing the educational disparities that exist within diverse classrooms. By acknowledging and valuing the cultural identities of students, educators can create learning environments that are not only inclusive but also conducive to the academic success of all students. The strategies discussed, from building cultural competence to implementing authentic assessment practices, are essential for fostering a more equitable education system. As schools increasingly reflect the diversity of the broader society, the adoption of CRT practices becomes imperative in ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their cultural or socio-economic background. Through CRT, educators can contribute to the broader goal of social justice, preparing students to thrive in a multicultural world.

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