Cultural Responsiveness and Engagement in Classrooms

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Increasing cultural responsiveness and engagement in our classrooms (whether traditional or virtual learning environments) can feel like a difficult endeavor, but hopefully, we can see it as an opportunity to maximize inclusiveness, engagement, dialogue, and joy. Culturally responsive instruction can be academically and socially empowering for all students and, in this white paper, I discuss the origins of this concept and how learning can become more culturally responsive, and I conclude by offering practical suggestions. I will address four areas related to culturally responsive instruction: (1) problems and challenges, (2) the research base behind culturally responsive instruction, (3) principles of culturally responsive instruction, and (4) research-driven practices which can be applied to literacy as well as humanities and various other subject area classrooms. Hopefully this brief will illuminate ways that culturally responsive instruction might be the answer to many of our questions about student engagement and achievement in the classroom.

Problems and Challenges

When I think about cultural relevance, I start with the problem of engagement instead of thinking about how we make texts more culturally relevant. The question we want to ask is, "Why aren't students engaged and how can we engage them?" Then we can begin to come up with better strategies for applying cultural relevance that really draws students in, ALL students. It's important that we don't segment students out but that everyone feels a part of the classroom and the conversation — students should feel that their strengths and interests are valued and that they are contributors. Therefore when you think about the teaching of culturally relevant texts, another question we have to ask is, "**Do students see themselves in the texts that they're reading?**" We want texts and articles to be more integrated in terms of female authors, authors of color, and regional authors. We also want the texts students read to be more integrated in terms of genres so, in addition to the essays, documents, novels, plays, and poems, we want contemporary genres like film, music, and the internet. **We also want to think about the questions we are asking of those texts.** Do the questions draw students in? Do the questions allow students to engage these texts with their own unique perspectives? What we don't want to have happen is that students feel like this text is culturally relevant for 30% of the students but not for them. We need to bring all students in and help them understand that many people bring unique ideas about the human condition to the writing of literature and different texts, and those who share your experiences or

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your beliefs or however that is defined, are included in this world of ideas.

Considering the problems and challenges we face, how might culturally responsive instruction provide answers? Many of us see academic inequity in education at the school, district, and national levels. There are students that we know can achieve but are not achieving their potential and unfortunately underachievement is often predictable along lines of class, race, ethnicity, language, and/or gender (NCES, 2020). Our aim is to make our classroom instruction and our curricular offerings more equitable so that we have equity in achievement for all students.

> **"As we become more intertwined around the planet, it is incumbent upon us, as educators, to think about how we can prepare our students to possess intercultural competence."**

The real challenge to academic equity is a lack of student engagement. Based on the research, there are several reasons why students are disengaged. The first reason is low confidence (Beers, 2003; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Likewise, a lack of perceived worth or self-esteem can contribute to disengagement and is connected to low confidence; however, they are not exactly the same. Confidence is the expectation of success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002); whereas self-esteem is a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965). The second reason is the lack of interest. By becoming culturally responsive educators, hopefully, we can eliminate low academic self-esteem and a lack of interest by understanding what engages and excites our students and by making connections to their lived experiences. Making these changes will reduce inequities and support the academic learning of all students, particularly those who are currently most disenfranchised. A third reason, which happens far less in classrooms than out in the world, is cultural misunderstanding and cultural intolerance. As we become more intertwined around the planet, it is incumbent upon us, as educators, to think about how we can prepare our students to possess intercultural competence. Our classrooms are not necessarily the spaces where we have the greatest

misunderstandings; rather, we see tremendous conflict in the world that is attributable to cultural misunderstanding and intolerance.

Another challenge we face is underrepresentation in the curriculum, which I prefer to think of in a positive way. There exists a beautiful yet untapped body of disciplinary knowledge in the world, and we have an opportunity to bring it into our curriculum. Of course, that would include not only the history, novels, plays, and poems we teach, but how might we incorporate primary sources, artwork, popular culture, and other artifacts for better representation?

Finally, how might culturally responsive instruction meet the challenges associated with the technological digital revolution? We need to think broadly about culture to include youth culture, popular culture, and media culture. What are the potential benefits? A culturally responsive instruction that incorporates technology and honors the many cultures within which our students participate can increase academic equity and lead to student engagement. It can also help students develop cultural and intercultural understanding. We can expand our body of disciplinary knowledge to be more representative, and we can be digitally or technologically responsive to students who are what we call "millennials" or members of the twenty-first century generation.

Research Base Behind Culturally Responsive Teaching

The research base for culturally responsive teaching consists of the following five areas that come together and converge: (1) culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education, (2) critical pedagogy, (3) sociocultural literacy, (4) social-emotional learning; and (5) new literacy studies.

Several leaders in the field of culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education who focus on integrating content include Gloria Ladson-Billings, James Banks, Sonia Nieto, and Geneva Gay. These scholars have helped us to think about the integration of disciplinary content, representation, and prejudice reduction. Their work, especially that of Ladson-Billings (1994), encourages us to ask questions such as, how can we increase academic excellence, critical consciousness, or the ability of students to ask questions from a particular perspective that's informed by their own lived experiences, and how can we develop cultural or intercultural competence?

The second area is critical pedagogy and the most well-known scholar in the field is Paolo Freire. He discusses the difference between a banking education, where students are passive, versus a problem-posing education where they are active and reading the word and the world (Freire, 1970).

Peter McClaren, I, and others have also worked in this area with the goal of helping students to feel empowered through literacy, not just to promote academic achievement. We want students to feel more efficacious in the world, so they can use their literacy skills to act upon the world in a different, more powerful way. The work that I do, around "student voice," is an expression that connects closely to culturally responsive instruction. After all, cultural responsiveness is not what we give students, but what we make possible for them to say and do (Morrell, 2008).

The third area, sociocultural literacy research, examines how context and locally specific social interactions and cultural activities shape learning. Scholars also ask how we can tap into the ways that students learn culture in their local iterations whether it is in the home, family, neighborhood, or a particular ethnic group or faith community. Luis Moll, Norma Gonzalez, and Cathy Amanti have studied the ways educators can connect to their students' cultural knowledge, which they call "funds of knowledge," and how this wealth of knowledge can be used as a bridge to academic learning (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

The fourth research base area is social and emotional learning, which is essentially how we move from awareness of self to engagement with others to a connection to the world (Selman, 2003). Often, the real barrier for students to access curriculum and the life of school is that they do not develop an awareness of self or care for themselves. They do not develop a sense of belonging in a supportive community and "for a child to flourish, she must know that she is a valued member of a community and that her unique voice is respected" (Allyn & Morrell, 2015). So how can we help students feel a sense of belonging, so they can take a leap and begin to consider others and connect to the larger world?

The fifth and final research area is new literacy studies that view literacy as a cultural practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984). Scholars in this field study literacy in all sorts of contexts, such as popular culture and everyday life, and think about the connections between the literacy you might see in a popular culture community, like a gaming community or music or film (Gee, 2014). They then ask if there are some similarities between those literacies and the kinds of literacies we want to teach in our classrooms.

Convergence of Research

We have decades of research across multiple areas. The convergence of research allows us to think about these areas collectively and implement practices that help students feel better about themselves, make meaningful connections to others, and connect out-of-school literacy practices with academic development. When this happens,

we see stronger achievement inside the classroom, but it is not limited to academic achievement. Students also feel better about themselves as civic actors and agents of change. Thirty years of research is converging on core principles in practices as outlined below:

- *All students possess languages and literacies and stories that matter to them:* All students have learned to be members of culture. They come to us, not necessarily with a mastery of culture, but with a membership in a cultural community. We can see that they have already learned. Linguists such as Noam Chomsky assert that the most intellectual challenge one might face in his or her lifetime is to learn a language, and almost every child, without exception, comes to school having learned a language.

- *Culturally responsive instruction is a curriculum and a pedagogy:* No curricular artifact, by itself, is culturally responsive. As we think about our role as teachers, it is important to have the right novels and the right songs, but culturally responsive instruction is what we do with students.

- *All students can become more engaged through culturally responsive instruction.* There is no one group of students more in need of culturally responsive instruction nor any group of students that should be alienated from it. Culturally responsive instruction can cohere and bring students together as they develop intercultural competence and learn from each other in a multicultural classroom community.

- *Students are simultaneously members of multiple cultural communities, and they are also unique individuals*: It is important to understand that it is a balance to say I understand something about students' backgrounds, such as their language, where they are from, or a sport they like. We want to see them as a member of a larger community, but they are also unique individuals. An important part of culturally responsive instruction is understanding each student's unique mix while at the same time recognizing that there are limited hours in a day... but how do we do our best?

- *Cultures are not static:* Cultures are fluid and changing. The idea of how to keep up with multiple cultures is challenging. We cannot say "I have my finger on the pulse of the culture," because it is always changing.

- *A culturally responsive curriculum honors student choice and student voice*: We are more concerned with what students have the power to do than what we put in front of them. The more we allow students to choose, whether it is the books they read or the topics they

research, and the more we have them participate in small group and large group discussions, make the classroom responsive, because it is teacher-led but infused with the spirit of the students.

- *Representation matters and silences speak volumes:* Even though we are thinking about choice and student voice, what we choose to read as a class and what we choose to talk about says a lot about who matters in the world. We have to be careful. We may have a wonderful curriculum and canon but they can always stand scrutiny, and we can always aim to make them more inclusive and equitable. Our curriculum and our classroom and school libraries say a great deal about whose stories have value.

Research-Driven Practices

Below are several research-driven practices with explanations and examples. In the following section, I further elaborate on three of these research-driven practices: multicultural texts and multicultural readings of texts, polyvocal classrooms and student voice, and critical media literacies.

- *Student choice in independent reading:* We want to have classroom texts that we discuss as a whole group, such as primary sources, essays, articles, novels, poems, and plays, but there should be some time in the classroom, perhaps one day a week or 15 minutes a day spread across a few days of the week when students get to choose. Hopefully, we have diverse school libraries and diverse classroom libraries; students are able to bring books and articles from home or the local library, and we have conversations with students. Most importantly, there should be a time in the class when each student has made an individual choice about what text to read.

- *Interactive teacher-led discussions:* Teachers are leading discussions and modeling important behaviors but students are also giving input. Students get to ask hard questions of each other and the teacher, and the teacher is asking questions of the students. These interactions create a responsive pedagogy because the students are able to offer their opinions and insights, listen to each other, and interact.

- *Multicultural texts and multicultural readings of texts:* A text is not multicultural in and of itself; rather, it is the reading we bring to that text that is important. We can bring a multicultural reading to any text including informational, literary, classical, and canonical texts (Tatum, 2009).

- *Polyvocal classrooms:* These are classrooms where students are able to speak in many ways whether this occurs in whole class or small group discussions, formal presentations, mock trials/forensic debate, electronic communication, or other activities where students share their ideas, questions, and understandings with each other.

- *Incorporating popular culture:* More educators are incorporating popular culture into their teaching. I teach in a college English program and we are thinking about where news, film, popular music, and social media fit. We would not remove medieval, Shakespeare, early modern, 17th and 18th century, or contemporary texts from the curriculum, but we are trying to understand where popular cultural genres fit in our discipline. The question is not do they fit but where do they fit and how they fit.

- *Independent research projects:* We should allow students some choice in terms of the research they want to do and the type of independent research projects they want to create.

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- *Writing across genres (traditional and multimodal):* Students should have opportunities to write across genres in both traditional and multimodal ways for authentic audiences.

- *Critical Media Literacies:* Students are now largely navigating a digital environment. We should ask how they are making sense of the world and how we are helping them to do that responsibly. Additionally, how are we helping students to develop skills that are going to be crucial for them in the 21st century?

- *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):* When we have kids engage in YPAR, we are asking them what they see in the world that they would like to change. Perhaps as a class, you are reading a novel or acting out a play and there are key issues that relate to the world the kids live in today. We should be asking them, "What do you want to know more about? What do you want to change?"

- *Writing for authentic audiences in multiple voices:* It is important for students to master what we call the

"academic voice," but they should also have opportunities to write for their peers. Do they get to write for their community members? Occasionally, do they get to bring in multiple vernaculars in their writing?

• *Inquiry-based instruction:* This type of instruction is driven by student questions. We might say, "We are going to talk about (a particular topic) tomorrow and I'd love for everyone to bring in a question, and we'll start with your questions and then I'll add my questions on top of that."

• *Diverse classroom libraries and article repositories:* Drawing on Bishop's (1990) theory of the importance of diverse texts, classroom reading and text repositories and libraries should reflect the experiences, interests, and identities of the students to serve as "mirrors." Libraries and repositories should also include articles and books across multiple genres that reflect the cultures, experiences, and perspectives that differ from the students', serving as "windows" or "sliding glass doors."

Multicultural Texts and Multicultural Reading of Texts

All classrooms should strive to be inclusive in their texts of study to reflect the wonderful tapestry of the human condition. It is extremely important to see this as an opportunity rather than an obligation. So, how do we reach out and find these new texts? I have been teaching for 27 years from middle school through college, and each year there is something I read or someone I come across, such as Edwidge Danticat or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and I ask myself how I can include these authors in my curriculum to represent as many perspectives and experiences as possible.

It makes sense to oversample based on local student demography, which could be a particular ethnic group, linguistic group, or region. For example, if I taught in the Southwest it would make sense to bring in an author from Texas such as Gloria Anzaldúa. If I am teaching in the Northeast such as New York City, and students are interested in artists and authors from South Bronx and Queens, it makes sense to oversample by region. However, no student should only, or primarily, be reading a limited bandwidth of authors because culturally responsive instruction is also about stretching students. While we value comfort, which is why intercultural understanding is a really important component, we want students to encounter people from different places, times, and viewpoints because that is going to make them better able to understand and appreciate differences. At the same time, we want to make sure our students' lived experiences are also represented in the curriculum.

Students should have plenty of opportunities to choose texts and books to read independently that reflect their interests,

which can be accomplished by offering multicultural options. We can remind students that we bring a multicultural reading to any text, whether it is a current article, medieval literature, William Shakespeare, the Victorians, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, or Willa Cather in the same way we would bring a multicultural reading to a modern essay or literary text by Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, or Junot Díaz. There is no text that should be spared from scrutiny. It is not because we hate these texts; rather Toni Morrison (1993) reminds us this is an act of respect and an act of joy that we take these texts seriously and that we bring our own lived experiences into the reading of these texts. This can be done through various lenses such as a multicultural, postcolonial, feminist, or intersectional reading.

There are several strategies to make the reading of a text or historical source more thoughtful, nuanced, critical, reflexive or "complex." I advocate a three-part approach to reading with students. The first approach is reading within the text which is primarily what we do when we read the words on the page. The second approach is reading behind the text. Students can ask questions such as: (1) Who is the author?, (2) When did he/she write the text?, (3) What historical or contemporary events would have influenced the construction of the text?, (4) Who was the immediate audience of the text? What were/are the beliefs, values of the audience? How did/do they see the world?, (5) What purpose did the text serve?, and (6) How was the text received? What, if any, were the debates or contentions around the text? We want students to know who we are reading and where the author is coming from - as much of a biography as possible - because we need to know where the author is located so we can think about how our location connects with that particular author.

The third approach, reading in front of the text, is where critical theories are enacted. Every text contains some biases, even the essays, articles, books, and stories we love or cherish, so it is important to ask questions such as: (1) What are biases in the text? How might certain readers find the text problematic? What may they object to?, (2) What contradictions or debates has the text generated or is likely to generate?, (3) What are alternative readings or interpretations of the text?, (4) How might gender, race, culture, religion, or politics affect how readers might respond to the text? How do they affect how you, as a student, respond?, and (5) How might the text provoke or inspire new thinking and action? We can think about these questions individually, then have a conversation about them as we are trying to read in front of the text. Again, as Toni Morrison said, we should be reading critically as an act of respect and an act of joy.

Critical Media Literacy

Our children are members of the twenty-first century and

many of them will live to see the twenty-second century. It is a century where our young people, quite frankly, are addicted to the media. Critical media literacy work is not just about being a fan of the media; rather it is about helping our students to more critically engage with media and be more responsive participants in the media world. This is incredibly important because research from the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics shows there are serious challenges this generation of students are facing because of their overexposure and uncritical consumption of major media such as obesity, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. One way to address this pressing issue is to ask a set of questions of all media that we encounter, which can include TV commercials, social media sites, films, music, and more. The questions we can ask are:

- *What values or ideas are promoted and how is the audience constructed?* Follow up questions include: (1) What does it mean to be normal or cool?, (2) What does it mean to have power?, (3) What does it mean to be desired?, and (4) Who is marginalized or "Othered"? Who is on the outside?

- *How is the audience/recipient constructed?* Follow up questions include: (1) Who is targeted?, (2) What assumptions are made about the audience?, (3) How does the ad/image/artifact intend to make the recipient feel about him or herself?, and (4) What is an audience member compelled to do/believe?

The last question is extremely important because there is a motive for the construction and consumption of all media. We teach young people terms such as "media discourse," "ideology," and "bias" so they come to understand these are important questions and concepts in terms of critical media literacy.

Critical Media Literacy Practices

Below are descriptions of some of the practices I have observed and used within my own classes. I include examples of texts and explanations of how these can be enacted in the classroom:

- *Incorporating music and film into traditional units:* When teaching a traditional unit such as Romeo and Juliet or The Great Gatsby, or The 1920s, we can incorporate music, film, and television. The unit is still anchored by a novel or play but it is supplemented by other genres.

- *Critically interrogating media messages about biases:* We can teach students to understand that when they are reading media, they may encounter general biases or specific biases related to gender, race, and class, so it is important for them to understand that this media comes from a particular standpoint. There may be biases and they may be problematic.

- *Creating documentary films:* Students can create documentary films as part of a final assignment. They can still have a traditional assignment such as an essay, along with a documentary film.

- *Using social media to start a social movement:* Students can use social media to start social movements and to advocate for causes they care about. I have seen students do this in my own classes and this work was taken all the way to the US Senate and Presidency. Students feel empowered because their voices are heard. We see this in the movements around climate change and violence in schools. Young people are using social media as a powerful platform to use their voices.

- *Incorporating media into class presentations:* Students can incorporate media into class presentations such as Google Slides™ or other new media artifacts to amplify their presentations. The media artifacts do not necessarily take the place of traditional presentations but can serve as an accompaniment.

- *Music and poetry:* Poetry units can include hip-hop, corridos, and other popular music. For example, we could have medieval poetry right next to Kendrick Lamar or Trippie Redd. It is a spectrum and the students enjoy seeing how their own contemporary art forms connect to classic and ancient art forms.

- *Coding and programming:* Students of all ages can design games and programs that teach social messages through free websites such as scratch.mit.edu.

- *Creating digital formats:* Similar to incorporating media into class presentations, students can create digital formats to present their work which can complement or accompany traditional formats.

Multimodal Theme-Based Unit

In addition to an anchor text, I offer ten components that can be incorporated into a multimodel theme-based unit. The anchor text might be a novel or a play, but we can also include the following: poems, such as written or spoken word, films, TV shows, websites, popular music, social media, magazines, news, and informational texts. Students might create traditional projects which could be an essay or a character analysis, but they also develop multimedia projects that culminate with taking some form of social action.

Polyvocal Classrooms and Student Voice

Student voice is important for so many reasons. It develops community and increases engagement. It develops speaking and listening skills and improves student confidence. There are four areas where I have tried to work on this in

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the classroom. The first way to improve classroom talk is through whole class discussion, which is interactive and teacher-led. Second is small group discussion when we teach students how to be better speakers and better listeners. They learn how to be better curators of their small community of three to six students so that no one feels left out and they are able to agree and disagree in a way that is harmonious and builds community. Students can also learn how to do formal presentations. They may be scared of speaking — even adults continue to be scared — but we can help them to develop a skill set that allows them to be successful. Finally, students can participate in civic discussions, mock trials, or forensic debate because it is important to put students in situations where they have to disagree so they understand that just because we have different viewpoints does not mean we do not like each other. It just means we have different viewpoints. The most important takeaway for students, which we can not reiterate enough, is that you can have really smart people on multiple sides of a debate.

Student Voice

How do we help students understand that they are not just able to speak to others in their classrooms, but that they can speak out to the world? One way is through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and social action projects. We begin with basic questions such as, "If you could change the world, what's one thing you would do? If you could change your community, what is one thing you

would change?" We have a ten-step process that begins with identifying a problem, developing a question, designing a study, collecting and analyzing information, making claims, and providing evidence. We send students out into the world to do this kind of work. They create products but they also have a responsibility to disseminate those products and take some form of social action.

One example of these types of projects was done in Los Angeles while reading Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Students developed oral history projects by interviewing elders in their communities about migration from the Southwest into the city of Los Angeles or immigration from another country. Students were able to connect the novel they were reading with their own families' and communities' experiences of migration and immigration. They assembled an amazing set of artifacts and then turned around and presented their projects to the community. It was extremely powerful for the students to make connections to the novel, develop powerful literacies, and experience intergenerational connectedness.

This example is one I've done with students all over the country, which is creating mock trials and debates based on a particular novel. For *Native Son* by Richard Wright, the students put Bigger Thomas on trial. They studied the law, prepared case books, and then acted out a trial. They engaged in legal research while looking at issues of race and justice in their own communities. The students' case books were sometimes 40-50 pages and included complex arguments. Students understood the novel better, but they also had a much better sense of issues of justice in their community and how to critically analyze a complex literary text.

Conclusion

When we use the term "culturally responsive instruction," we are essentially talking about how to select curricula that engage students and how to create instruction that is academically and socially empowering for all students. We have an incredible opportunity to weave inclusiveness, dialogue, and joy into our daily practices to address some of the most pressing challenges in today's classrooms. By understanding the research base and principles of culturally responsive instruction, learning about research-driven practices, and examining our own practice, we can transform our pedagogy and classrooms. We can help all of our students become actively engaged in their own learning and classroom community and experience a deep and satisfying sense of personal growth and academic achievement.

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