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## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Towards Equity and Inclusivity in Schools**

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**Abstract:** *At present schools are heavily biased towards uniformity over diversity. Uniformity continues to dominate school practices despite acknowledgement and awareness of teachers about differences among learners. In view of the multi-cultural contexts in which our schools function, we need to redesign our school practices, particularly pedagogical one's, so as to make all students feel safe, comfortable and respected. In this context, implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, that takes into account students' home and community experiences, and characterizes, inter alia, the role of teacher, teaching strategies, student assessment process, seems relevant. Teachers need to be oriented how to adapt curricula, instructional materials, and assessment practices to relate them to the values and cultural norms of students.*

**Keywords:** *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Inclusive Education, Equitable Pedagogy, Knowledge Construction, Cultural Diversity.*

### **Cultural Diversity and School Practices**

Students bring their own individual approaches, talents and interests to the learning situation. An individual learner's culture, family background, and socioeconomic level affect his or her learning. The context in which someone grows and develops has an important impact on learning. In order to ensure that all students feel safe, welcomed and accepted, and inspired to succeed in learning, schools and classrooms must be responsive to culture. Culture has an important impact on the opportunities for success for every student in our schools. But in reality, despite acknowledgment of important differences among learners, uniformity continues to dominate school practices. Schools are heavily biased toward uniformity over

diversity. Teachers continue to treat all learners alike. More than 50 years ago, Cantor (1946/1972) observed that the public schools and colleges generally do what they consider to be the proper way of learning which is uniform for all students. Most schools still function as if all students were the same. Students use the same textbooks and the same materials for learning; they work at the same pace on the same quantity of material; they study the same content and work through the same curriculum on the same schedule. Teachers talk with whole groups of students, delivering the same information at the same time to everyone. Of course, given the task of educating large numbers of people, some consistency and uniformity in the process are essential. This is a realistic perspective, but in order to attain quality in the system, we must address the imbalance between uniformity and diversity.

An appropriate balance must be determined thoughtfully with attention to social justice rather than efficiency. We need to decide what should be uniform for all students and what should be diverse and strive toward putting into practice. Every student deserves to be treated with respect. Every student should have an opportunity to reach his or her individual potential. Every student should master specific basic skills. The challenge is to identify what should be the same in schools and what should be different. We need appropriate uniform standards but not standardization. It's important to decide: (i) What outcomes should be expected for all students? (ii) What experiences should every student have? (iii) What curriculum should be uniform? (iv) How can educators work toward a common mission while honoring diversity? These questions do not have simple answers, but we must explore them to accommodate individual differences in the classroom and to give all students the best opportunities for success.

### **Inclusion and Inclusive Pedagogy**

Over the last two decades, the terms 'inclusive' and 'inclusion' have been used in educational contexts. In the school sector, the term referred to the extent to which students with 'special educational needs' (DES, 1978) could be integrated into mainstream learning and teaching environments. Recently, many teachers and researchers have moved away from this narrow interpretation of inclusion as being concerned with only students with special needs. Alternative interpretations, such as that offered by Ainscow (1999), suggest that inclusive education should be concerned with "overcoming barriers to participation that may be experienced by any pupils" (p.218). He defines it as a "process of increasing the participation of pupils in, and reducing their exclusion from the cultures, curricula and communities of their local schools". This notion of inclusion, he argues, lays the foundations for an approach that could lead to the transformation of the system itself (p. 219). In other words, the learning environment should change, rather than the individual.

Inclusive pedagogy refers to the ways in which instructional process, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a wide range of differences based on gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status etc. and explores their effects on individual learning. This

broader view is now being used widely in the Indian education sector with reference to learners of all ages who come from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds. It includes disabled students, students from different religious backgrounds, different cultural identities and sexual orientations. Inclusive pedagogy rejects ability labeling, and offers an alternative framework for organizing learning. It urges teachers to create environments which do not limit the expectations of both teacher and pupils. Inclusive pedagogy is opposed to practices which address education for all by offering provision for most with additional or different experiences for some. Instead it demands that teachers extend what is ordinarily available so that it is accessible to all (Florian, 2010). The notion of inclusive pedagogy is not a call for a return to a model of whole class teaching where equality is notionally addressed by providing identical experiences for all. Instead it advocates an approach whereby the teacher provides a range of options which are available to everybody. Human diversity is seen within the model of inclusive pedagogy as strength, rather than a problem, as children work together, sharing ideas and learning from their interactions with each other. The inclusive pedagogical approach fosters an open-ended view of each child's potential to learn.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy is grounded in teachers' displaying cultural competence: skill at teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting (Diller & Moule, 2005). They enable each student to relate course content to his or her cultural context (Scherff & Spector, 2011). Culturally relevant teaching has been proven to be an effective form of pedagogy for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It provides a framework for building an inclusive education system and identifies ways to remove discriminatory biases and barriers to student achievement and well-being that relate to ethnicity and race, faith, family structure and socio-economic status as well as to sexual orientation, ability and mental health. By making education culturally relevant, it is thought to improve academic achievement (Curwin and Lynda, 2003). Although culturally relevant teaching is relevant to education at any level, majority of this practice is undertaken in school setting (Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey, 2008).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) introduced the term "Culturally Relevant Teaching" to describe teaching that integrates a student's background knowledge and prior experiences into the curriculum and the teaching and learning experiences that take place in the classroom. There are three central tenets underpinning this pedagogy: (i) holding high expectations for all students; (ii) assisting students in the development of cultural competence; and (iii) guiding students to develop a critical cultural consciousness. Other theorists (e.g. Gay, 2000; Villegas and Lucas, 2002) use the terms "Culturally Responsive Teaching" or "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy" to describe teaching that recognizes all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure and social or cultural identity. Theorists and practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy see student diversity in terms of student strengths; they

present it as opportunities for enhancing learning rather than as challenges and/or deficits of the student or particular community. Culturally responsive pedagogy is not about “cultural celebrations,” nor is it aligned with traditional ideas around multiculturalism. It involves careful acknowledgement, respect and an understanding of difference and its complexities.

Theorists write about three dimensions which comprise culturally responsive pedagogy: (i) Institutional; (ii) Personal; and (iii) Instructional. The *institutional* dimension refers to the administration and leadership of school systems, including the values developed and reflected in school policies and practices. It highlights the need to critically examine the formal processes of schooling which may reproduce particular patterns of marginalization. The *personal* dimension encompasses the mindset of culturally responsive educators and their practices in order to support the development of all students. The *instructional* dimension includes knowing learners well and considering the classroom practices which lead to a culturally responsive classroom. All three dimensions are foundational to the establishment of an inclusive school culture (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

### **Historical Perspective**

Culturally relevant teaching was made popular by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the early 1990s (Gay, 2010). The term she created was defined as one "that empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This has become more widely known and accepted in the education field in United States. The theory surrounding culturally relevant teaching is connected to a larger body of knowledge on multicultural education and helping culturally diverse students excel in education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Researchers argue that there are gaps in academic achievement between mainstream culture and immigrants or ethnic cultural groups. They suggest that the disconnection between these groups were due to student/teacher language difficulties or that ethnic cultures do not value education as heavily as the Western culture does (Schmeichel, 2012). In response to these challenges, some researchers and teachers believe that education should be adapted to match the cultures students bring with them from home (Castagno, & Brayboy, 2008). One key educational researcher who has contributed significantly to the progression of culturally relevant teaching is Geneva Gay. In her landmark book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Geneva Gay expanded the traditional view of culture beyond race and ethnicity. She wrote, "Even without being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave" (Reported in Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). In other words, culture is a student's beliefs, motivations, and even social groups and norms. Thus, the teacher who practices culturally relevant teaching understands that culture manifests in a variety of adaptations within how students prefer to learn. A culturally responsive teacher uses differentiated instruction to tailor learning to every aspect of a student's culture.

Many of the researchers and educators in the area of culturally relevant pedagogy support the constructivist theories of education because such perspectives recognize the value

of multiple cultural viewpoints (Kea, Campbell-Whately & Richards, 2006). In a constructivist perspective, learners are taught to question, challenge, and critically analyze information rather than blindly accept what it taught, which leads to exactly the type of teaching advocated by the originators of culturally relevant teaching (Banks, 2004). James Banks lays out five dimensions of multicultural education, viz. content integration, knowledge construction, cross-cultural interactions, equitable pedagogy, empowered school culture. These dimensions laid the foundation for the move toward culturally relevant teaching. Teachers, who achieve these dimensions, and thus realize the impact of culturally relevant teaching, cherish learners who question, seek answers through inquiry, and embrace a mindset of social justice. Thus, all these dimensions are the key components of constructivism (Flinders & Thornton, 2009). James Scheurich believes that culturally relevant pedagogy has a significant importance on our youth because it benefits students no matter what the ethnic background or culture of the students. In a video, James Scheurich explains how the success of our country is in the hand of our children and in a society where students of color will no longer be the minority. He expresses how teachers must teach to their audience in order for students to be successful (Scheurich James, N/A).

### **The Key Features of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

A number of authors, including Gay (2010) and Lipman (1995) have identified features of culturally relevant teaching. The important ones are as follows:

- ***Communicate high expectations:*** Make sure that you let each student know that you expect them to engage, perform, and achieve at high level, rather than making excuses for some students who do not participate at optimal levels at times.
- ***Actively engage your students in learning:*** Help your students to question, consult original material, relate content to their daily lives, write, read, build models, and make time to build relationships with them.
- ***Facilitate learning:*** Build students' capacity to handle new material, solve complex problems, and develop new skills by scaffolding what they already know through a series of increasingly complex experiences.
- ***Understand the assets and capabilities that students bring from their home:*** Understand the cultures represented in your classroom by getting to know your students. Visit the neighborhoods where they live. Listen to them and talk about their lives. Consistently engage in real conversation and dialogue with your students.
- ***Acknowledge membership in different groups:*** Teachers must recognize and acknowledge their affiliation with various groups in society, and the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to each group. Moreover, teachers need to assess how belonging to one group influences how one relates to and views other groups.

- ***Learn about the history and experiences of diverse groups:*** It is important that teachers learn about the lives and experiences of other groups in order to understand how different experiences have shaped attitudes and perspectives of various groups. Further, by learning about other groups, teachers begin to see differences between their own values and those of other groups. To learn about the histories of diverse groups, teachers can read literature written by those particular groups as well as personally interact with members of those groups.
- ***Anchor your curriculum in the everyday lives of your students:*** Connect their knowledge and skills to content knowledge. Spend time on helping students learn the content. Use real life, authentic texts. Engage students in inquiry about things that matter to them.
- ***Engage in reflective thinking and writing:*** Teachers must reflect on their actions and interactions that govern their behaviors. Understanding the factors that contribute to certain behaviors (e.g. racism, ethnocentrism) is the first step toward changing these behaviors. This process is facilitated by autobiographical and reflective writing in a journal.
- ***Explore personal and family histories:*** Teachers need to explore students' early experiences and familial events that have contributed to their understanding of themselves. As part of this process, teachers can conduct informal interviews of family members about their beliefs and experiences regarding different groups in society. The information can enlighten teachers about the roots of their own views.
- ***Visit students' families and communities:*** It is important that teachers get to know their students' families and communities by visiting their home environments. Moreover, by becoming familiar with students' home lives, teachers gain insight into the influences on the students' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, teachers can use the families and communities as resources that contribute to the educational growth of the students.
- ***Visit or read about successful teachers in diverse settings:*** Teachers need to learn about successful approaches to educating children from diverse backgrounds. By actually visiting classrooms of successful teachers of children from diverse backgrounds and/or reading authentic accounts of such success, teachers can gain exemplary models for developing their own skills.
- ***Develop an appreciation of diversity:*** To be effective in a diverse classroom, teachers must have an appreciation of diversity. They must view difference as the fact in society and reject notions that any one group is more competent than another. This entails developing respect for differences.

## **Teaching Learning Strategies**

In order to be culturally relevant, teachers must create an accommodating and inviting classroom culture. Classrooms need to become more and more diverse as generations of students enter the school system. It is important to integrate cultural awareness in the classroom. Teachers must demonstrate that they care for their students and their cultural needs (Gay, 2010). There are several ways teachers can make their classroom culturally relevant.

### ***Reciprocal Teaching***

This is a strategy through which teachers can make their classroom less intimidating. Here, students and teachers take turns leading the class discussions. In this method, the students' voice is heard, and the classroom teacher becomes more of a facilitator than a "director". Students feel more empowered, and autonomous in their own learning (Mayer, 2008). Reciprocal teaching gives students the opportunity to express themselves according to their cultural viewpoints, which is very important according to the constructivist and progressive educators (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2006).

### ***Cooperative Learning***

Many educators recommend cooperative learning methods as effective teaching strategies to promote culturally relevant learning (Diller & Moule, 2005). Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. Rather than fostering competitiveness among students, group learning strategies encourage collaboration in the completion of assignments. This way, students learn to work together towards common goals. Students learn important skills such as team work, and embracing other learning styles (Mayer, 2008). Many studies have been conducted in response to how students respond to teachers that exhibit the above characteristics within the classroom. The qualitative study conducted by Howard (2001), which included students' response, show that this is a positive and effective form of pedagogy.

### ***Games and Cross-Cultural Activities***

Games and cross-cultural activities allow students' personal interaction with different cultures. Participation of students in games and cross-cultural activities help them understand their school and classroom as unique and diverse communities (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2006).

### ***Family History Research***

In this strategy, students interview their own family members and learn about familial cultural influences on their lives.

### ***Reflective Writing***

In this strategy, students write and share their beliefs and cultural assumptions. These activities promote “meta-reflection”, which is very important to student learning about themselves and their peers (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2006). Students may choose to write about their cultural identity and its connection with their educational experiences, or they may choose to look at a different culture altogether, which they have learned from peers. This activity helps students learn about new cultures and can be very engaging for them (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2006).

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

Critical pedagogy is based on the assumption that students are not just young people for whom teachers should devise solutions. They are critical observers of their own condition and needs, and should be participants in discussion and problem solving relating to their education and future opportunities. Critical pedagogy provides an opportunity to reflect critically on issues in terms of their political, social, economic and moral aspects. It entails the acceptance of multiple views on social issues and a commitment to democratic forms of interaction. Thus, critical pedagogy facilitates collective decision making through open discussion and by encouraging and recognizing multiple views. This is important in view of the multiple contexts in which our schools function (NCERT, 2005, pp.22-23). A critical framework helps learners to see social issues from different perspectives.

Various instructional strategies suggested for teaching culturally diverse students, *inter alia*, prompt the teachers to:

- i. ***Use a variety of instructional strategies and learning activities.*** Offering a variety of instructional strategies provides the students with opportunities to learn in ways that are suitable to them. In addition, the variety helps them develop and strengthen other approaches to learning.
- ii. ***Consider students' culture and language in formulating learning objectives and activities.*** Provide learning opportunities for students with differing characteristics, e.g. race, sex, disability, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, or ability.
- iii. ***Incorporate objectives for affective and personal development.*** Provide opportunities for high and low achievers to boost their self-esteem and enhance their strengths and talents. Such opportunities can enhance students' motivation to learn and achieve.
- iv. ***Communicate expectations.*** Let the students know the classroom rules about talking, participation in teaching learning process, and questioning the teacher etc. Tell them how long a task will take to complete or how long it will take to learn a skill or strategy. Also, give them information on their ability to master a certain skill or complete a task. It may be necessary to encourage students who expect to achieve mastery.



- v. **Communicate the benefits of learning.** Explain the benefits of learning a concept, skill, or task. Ask students to tell you the rationale for learning and explain how the concept or skill applies to their lives at school, home, and work.
- vi. **Use advance and post organizers.** At the beginning of lessons give the students an overview and tell them the purpose or goal of the activity. If applicable, tell them the order that the lesson will follow and relate it to previous lessons. At the end of the lesson, summarize its main points.
- vii. **Provide frequent reviews of the content learned.** Provide a brief review of the previous lesson before continuing a lesson or entering in to a new and related lesson.
- viii. **Facilitate independence.** There are many ways to facilitate students' independence. For example, when students ask questions, the teacher can encourage independence by responding in a way that lets the student know how to find the answer. Asking students to evaluate their own learning or progress also promotes independence.
- ix. **Promote student on-task behavior.** Teachers can help students stay on-task in different ways, e.g. by starting lessons promptly and minimizing transition time between lessons, shifting smoothly and efficiently from one lesson to another, giving housekeeping tasks such as setting up audiovisual equipment. Keeping students actively involved in the lessons, for example, by asking questions also helps them to stay on-task.
- x. **Monitor students' academic progress during lessons and independent work.** Check with students to see if they need assistance before they ask for help. Ask if they have any questions about their learning tasks; and if they understand the contents of instruction. Also make the students aware of the various situations in which a skill or strategy can be used.
- xi. **Provide frequent feedback.** Provide feedback at multiple levels. For example, acknowledging a correct response is one form of feedback, while prompting a student who has given an incorrect answer by providing clues is another form. Thus, the teacher may give positive feedback as well as positive corrective feedback.

### **Implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: What Research Says?**

Summarizing previous research concerning culturally responsive literacy instruction (Au, 1993; Boykin, 1978; Gay, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1992; Osborne, 1996; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989) and analyzing his own research in the preparation of present and future teachers for culturally responsive instruction, Schmidt (2005) has explored the following conditions for successful implementation of culturally responsive instruction:

- **High expectations:** supporting students as they develop the knowledge and skills appropriate to their ages and abilities.

- **Positive relationships with families and community:** demonstrating clear connections with students' families and communities.
- **Cultural sensitivity curriculum:** connecting with the standards-based curriculum as well as individual student's cultural backgrounds.
- **Active teaching methods:** involving students in a variety of activities such as: reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing, throughout the lesson delivery.
- **Teacher as facilitator:** presenting information; briefly giving directions; summarizing responses; and working with small groups, pairs, and individuals.
- **Student control of the lesson:** talking at conversation levels around the topic being studied while completing assignments in small groups and pairs.
- **Instruction around groups and pairs:** completing assignments individually, but usually in small groups or pairs with time to share ideas and think critically about the work.

### **The Mindset of Culturally Responsive Educators**

Culturally responsive teachers share a particular set of dispositions and skills – a mindset, that enables them to work creatively and effectively to support all students in diverse settings. The major ones are as follows:

**Socio-cultural consciousness:** *An awareness of how socio-cultural structures impact individual experiences and opportunities.*

Culturally responsive educators understand their position in existing social, historical and political context through questioning their own attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. They understand the forms of discrimination which can affect the experiences of students and their families in multiple ways. Self-reflection is foundational to the examination and identification of one's own biases. It also helps us to recognize how our own social identity is constructed and to think about how social identities are shaped by society.

**High expectations:** *Hold positive and affirming views of all students of all backgrounds.*

Our perceptions about students' abilities have a significant impact on student achievement and well-being (Ladson-Billings 1994, 2001, 2011). Culturally responsive educators hold positive and affirming views of their students and their ability to learn and achieve academic success. They demonstrate genuine respect for students and their families as well as a strong belief in their potential. They consider the social identities of students as assets rather than as deficits.

**Desire to make a difference:** *See themselves as change agents working towards more equity.*

Educators who are culturally responsive see equitable and inclusive education as fundamental to supporting high levels of student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2004).

Consistent patterns of underachievement found amongst the students with special education needs or those from low socio-economic background, need to be seen as created by institutional barriers. Culturally responsive educators are committed to working to remove barriers and creating conditions for learning that are beneficial for all students.

***Constructivist Approach:*** *Understand that learners construct their own knowledge.*

Culturally responsive educators employ constructivist approach to teaching learning; and through this approach, they integrate locally situated learning into daily instruction and learning processes. They support students asking questions and creating new knowledge based on their natural curiosity about their own experiences. This results in making learning, contextual, relevant and accessible for all students in the classroom.

***Deep knowledge of their students:*** *Know about the lives of students and their families; know how students learn best and where they are in their learning.*

Culturally responsive educators recognize that parents and families know their children best (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). Therefore, they work to build strong relationships with their students' families. They promote mutual respect between home and school and embrace a collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Deep knowledge of students enables educators to integrate lived experiences into the daily learning of the classroom.

***Culturally responsive teaching practices:*** *Design and build instruction on students' prior knowledge in order to stretch students in their thinking and learning.*

A wealth of research is available both nationally and internationally on culturally responsive instructional strategies. At the core of these strategies is: (a) holding high expectations for learning; and (b) recognizing and honouring the strengths that a student's lived experiences and/or home culture bring to the classroom. As Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 27) observe about culturally responsive educators, "They use what they know about their students to give them access to their learning". Learning experiences are designed to be relevant and authentic, enabling students to see themselves in the daily learning of the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Not all educators favor culturally relevant teaching. There are many practical challenges to implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, including a lack of enforcement of culturally relevant teaching methods, and the tendency to view students as individual units, rather than seeing them as linked with their cultural groups (Gay, 2010). In culturally relevant pedagogy, new teachers must be taught how to adapt their curricula, teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessment practices to connect with students' values and cultural norms. Therefore, there is a need to prepare reflective practitioners who can connect with diverse students and their families (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2006). Educators must be

prepared to teach all students while also being committed to preparing students for the reality of a diverse global society. The journey towards equity and inclusivity in schools seeks to empower everyone in the learning environment. Such an approach validates and affirms the cultural capital that our students bring to the classroom each and every day. This journey also brings us closer to reaching our goal of providing relevant and authentic learning opportunities every day for every student in every classroom.

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