

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Why Focus on Cultural Competence and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

“My sense of cultural competence refers to helping students recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are more likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead”. – Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006)

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural competence is a system of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable teachers to work effectively with students in cross-cultural situations.

- The term includes using knowledge about individuals and groups to develop specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes to use in appropriate cultural settings to increase every student’s educational performance.
- The word **culture** is used because it implies the pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group.
- The word **competence** is used because it implies having the capacity to function effectively.

WHY ARE WE CONCERNED ABOUT IT?

Students from diverse backgrounds have cultural backgrounds that often differ from their teachers who are mainly white. They bring their home language and experiences with them. How educators **validate and affirm** a student’s home language and home culture for the purposes of **building and bridging** student success in the culture of school and mainstream society is a challenging job for most educators. If intentional interventions do not occur, frequently students are left to their own devices to make those connections. In other words, either they get it or not; they sink or swim on their own.

We recognize that achievement gaps are real, but frequently, we fail to see that students caught in this situation are too often **underserved**. Too many of these student are labeled underperforming versus underserved not because they failed, but because they failed to receive the full services a school should offer them if the school had been truly responsive to helping all students achieve.

One of the most pressing concerns of educators who work with students from cross-cultures, in

particular African American and Hispanic students who have been consistently underserved in the academic setting, is deciding what change needs to happen. There is concern about this question:

What major shift must take place in everyone’s mindsets to intentionally and deliberately expect and deliver change in how we move large groups of students from low performance to become large groups of students who demonstrate proficiency and performance well beyond the minimal expectation?

WHO SHOULD BE CONCERNED ABOUT CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

In the broader community, responsibility falls on many and includes: everyone in our global world community; every legislator who is concerned about economics and the well-being of their constituents; every citizen who desires a competent and productive workforce that will not put an undo burden on society; every parent who wants the best for each child entrusted to the school system; and every child who comes to school eager to learn in kindergarten, but is ready to drop out by Grade 8, long before completing high school because school doesn’t seem relevant.

Everyone in the educational setting - from professors in higher education who prepare preservice teachers, administrators who plan and supervise professional development for current teachers, to teachers on the front line of instruction who work most intimately with students - must challenge themselves to move past **preconceived mindsets** and past practices that have not worked, and begin to search for new ways to reach all students. Teachers must be willing to accept the challenge and equip themselves with new knowledge, tools, practices and strategies that are supported by decades of best-practice research. Only then can they move beyond reading and discussing theories about how traditionally low-performing and underserved students

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learn and begin to use culturally responsive best-practices that really work on a daily basis.

WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY?

Pedagogy is the art of how teachers teach. According to Geneva Gay, culturally responsive pedagogy is the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to, and effective for, them. Relevant classroom practices produce positive results that increase academic achievement and maximize each student's desire to learn and excel.

To do this, teachers must all commit to:

1. Accepting that culture does make a difference
2. Learning how to validate and affirm home and community culture through instructional practices and the environmental setting
3. Finding ways to bridge and build connections between home culture and school culture
4. Viewing students without mastery of standard English as **Standard English Learners** (SEL) and help them learn the language of school as a "second language." (See the work of Dr. Noma LaMoine)
5. Helping students embrace the value of **code-switching** their behaviors to fit the school's expectation for success
6. Improving use of culturally responsive pedagogy delivered to our students
7. Finding culturally responsive ways to manage a classroom
8. Stressing collective interactions rather than focusing mainly on individuality
9. Using purposeful text and materials that affirms the culture and experiences of students
10. Making learning more engaging
11. Increasing expectations of what students can learn and do
12. Increasing professional development to help teachers and staff integrate, use, and improve cultural competency skills and culturally relevant practices so they will all intentionally:
 - a) Show, discuss, and use data that is cross-tabulated by race and gender at each grade level to reveal which populations of students need deliberate intervention.
 - b) Improve delivery of standard-driven instruc-

tion with strategies that keeps students involved and engaged.

- c) Help students make connections to the relevance of what they are being taught
- d) Find the strengths students bring with them from their culture to school rather than reinforce a deficit perception of what students don't have, don't know, and can't do
- e) Build meaningful relationships with students
- f) Help students bridge their culture to ways of finding success in the school culture.
- g) Build learning communities that **deliberately** focus on addressing issues related to delivering culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP).

HOW DO TEACHERS BECOME CULTURALLY PROFICIENT?

The first key is understanding that cultural proficiency does not happen in a short period of time. It is a process that requires willingness to change attitudes and beliefs.

*Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) define **cultural proficiency** in schools as:*

- "A way of being that enables both individuals and organizations to respond effectively to people who differ from them."
- "A way of being that enables people to successfully engage in new environments."
- "An approach to addressing diversity issues that goes beyond political."

They further state that several essential elements contribute to a system or institution's capacity to become more **culturally competent**. These components are found at every level of an organization and are evidenced and reflected in:

- Policy making
- Administrative decisions
- Practices used throughout the system
- Attitudes, structures, and policies impacting services delivered by the organization and those employed by the organization

Cultural competency occurs when all employees:

1. Assess culture. **And can ...** Name the differences.
2. Have the capacity for cultural self-assessment. **And can ...** Recognize that we all have a culture.

3. Value diversity. **And can ...** Claim the differences.
4. Are conscious of the dynamics involved when cultures interact. **And can ...** Find ways to bridge differences.
5. Have institutionalized culture knowledge. **And can ...** Change to make a difference.
6. Make adaptations to meet the needs of those they service, and provide those services while reflecting a clear understanding of cultural practices. **And can ...** Continue to adapt as needed.

In other words, **culturally responsive teaching** can be found when teachers in learning communities are equipped to:

1. Develop and embrace a knowledge base about cultural diversity and the reality of the cultural experiences that students bring to the classroom
2. Own their own culture and the feelings, beliefs and values that they have about other cultures
3. Include ethnic and culturally diverse content in the curriculum
4. Demonstrate and build caring, safe, and inviting learning communities
5. Respond to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction based on state expectations
6. Communicate effectively with ethnically diverse students, parents, and community partners

Understanding Cultural Competence and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy leads us on a path or journey to find the answers to two important questions:

1. Why is it important for our students to see themselves mirrored in the curriculum and in the instructional strategies that teachers use in their learning environments?
2. Why is it important to use strategies that meet our students **where they are** and take them on a journey to **where they need to be** to have successful academic experiences?

To prepare and provide a learning environment that addresses these questions, particular focus and attention must be directed toward developing culturally relevant practices that:

- **Equip school leadership** to model culturally responsive practices
- **Improve school climates and cultures** so that children are valued and affirmed and optimal achievement is expected from all students
- **Empower teachers** with effective teaching and learning strategies
- **Strengthen relationships** between students, teachers, parents, and community

These four areas specifically address the need for focusing on cultural competence and implementing



culturally responsive pedagogy or practices so that educators will become culturally proficient and engaging. This then is the admonishment to all educators: If what was tried in the past has not yielded the desired results, then that disconnect should provide great motivation to try some new strategies and move toward implementing culturally responsive practices that value and affirm all students and subsequently lead to the outcomes that we all desire.

The Historic Journey Project offers an answer to some of these pressing questions about culturally relevant pedagogy and practices. How we teach is just as important as what we teach.

- *The Historic Journey: Yes We Can* and its standards-based companion Teacher's Curriculum Guide, connect the election of the first African American President Barack Obama to the struggle and story of those who came before him to make this historic event possible. It is an exciting tool to help school districts address accountability and to engage students with information that leads to their increased cultural understanding.
- This project has led to students demonstrating the audacity to hope for an excellent education as they become engaged in relevant assignments linked to mastering state standards while being connected with events and issues that they care about, and activities that personally capture their interests.

Gwendolyn J. Kelley, 2010

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