

Relevant: Beyond the Basics

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Monica Edwards was frustrated.

As a teacher in an urban elementary school, Edwards faced a class that was largely African American and Latino: she was neither. She often felt that she wasn't effectively reaching them, and she was beginning to get discouraged. (Monica Edwards isn't her real name. She's a real teacher who told me her story privately.)

After hearing a colleague briefly mention her success in using culturally relevant instructional strategies, Edwards decided to try her hand at the same. She bought a commercial CD called Multiplication Rap, which promised to teach mathematics based on repetition and rhyme, hand-clapping and a hip-hop musical style. She was sure the CD would appeal to her students' interest in the rap music genre.

In the classroom, however, things didn't go quite as planned. Students focused on the music itself, paying little attention to the math objectives. Several were unimpressed with the CD, and commented on the poor audio quality and amateurish lyrics. Except for the musical debate, nothing much happened. The failure rate on Edwards' weekly exam did not change.

Sadly, Edwards' experience is not uncommon. Many teachers have a cursory understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, and a desire to see it succeed in their classrooms. The problem is that in many cases, teachers have *only* a cursory understanding, and their efforts to bridge the cultural gap often fall short.

"Culturally relevant pedagogy" is a term that describes effective teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. It can be a daunting idea to understand and implement. Yet even when people do not know the term, they tend to appreciate culturally relevant pedagogy when they see it.

Think of the film *Stand and Deliver*, in which Edward James Olmos, as teacher Jaime Escalante, teaches his students about negative numbers using

the example of digging and filling holes in the sand on the California beach. He tells his mostly Latino class that the Mayan civilization independently invented the concept of zero. When the students begin to catch on, the audience is inspired by this moment of epiphany.

Most people understand intuitively that this type of teaching engages and motivates students. Teachers want to be a Jaime Escalante for their own students — and they leap at the chance to try new techniques or tools designed to bridge a cultural gap.

Often, these well-meaning educators assume that culturally relevant pedagogy means simply acknowledging ethnic holidays, including popular culture in the curriculum or adopting colloquial speech. And many are afraid to take it farther than that. Why? Largely because they believe the following myths:

- Only teachers of color can be culturally relevant.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy is not appropriate for white students.
- Caring teachers of diverse students have no classroom management skills.
- The purpose of culturally relevant pedagogy is to help diverse students “feel good” about themselves.
- Culturally relevant teachers attend to learning styles by addressing African American male students’ need for kinesthetic activities or by allowing Asian American students to work alone.

These myths and misperceptions often result in awkward classroom moments, ineffective instructional practices and counterproductive teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships.

Let’s tackle the biggest myth first. Culturally relevant teaching may indeed boost the self-esteem of your students, but that’s not the main reason you should adopt it. You should take a culturally relevant approach because it will maximize student learning.

A culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the premise that learning may differ across cultures and teachers can enhance students’ success by acquiring

knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and translating this knowledge into instructional practice.

Culturally relevant pedagogy has theoretical roots in the notion that learning is a socially mediated process and related to students' cultural experiences. Culture is an important survival strategy that is passed down from one generation to another through the processes of enculturation and socialization, a type of roadmap that guides and shapes behavior. If new information is *not* relevant to those frameworks of culture and cognition, people will never remember it. If the information *is* relevant, they will never forget it.

The March To the Mailbox

Let me give you an example to show how culturally relevant pedagogy works, and why it works for all students.

A teacher in a low-income school once told me about her struggle with that age-old task: teaching students to write a business letter. Her textbook offered what sounded like some pretty good advice for making this task relevant to students. Bring a toy catalog to class, it said, and let students write letters placing an order for a Game Boy or other item.

The teacher tried to picture this working with her students. Most of them couldn't afford a Game Boy. And who orders catalog items with a business letter these days? She decided that this exercise, so seemingly good in theory, would seem completely pointless to her students.

So she found another, more appropriate task. She told her students they were going to write letters to the mayor, asking for changes that would make life better in their neighborhood. She told students not to rely solely on their own perspectives: they should go into the community and ask relatives, neighbors and church leaders about the problems in the community. The students did their research — learning about their community and strengthening their bonds with family — and wrote their letters. The teacher held a “march to the mailbox,” mailing their letters with great ceremony. And not long afterward, the mayor was on the phone with the principal, asking when he could visit the class and address their concerns in person.

The cultural norms and behaviors of schools are based on a very specific set of mainstream assumptions. When there is a cultural mismatch or cultural incompatibility between students and their school, certain negative outcomes

might occur, such as miscommunication; confrontations among the student, the teacher, and the home; hostility; alienation; diminished self-esteem; and possibly school failure.

In the case above, someone assumed that all students had the means to envision themselves ordering a Game Boy. Perhaps just as important, it assumed that young people are interested only in acquiring toys — that they had no interests or lives outside of getting and spending. The teacher's solution to this problem was truly culturally relevant because it drew on the students' resources and experiences. It worked extremely well for this group of students, who got to see their own knowledge, and that of their community, honored in the classroom. But clearly it would have worked well even in other communities.

What could Monica Edwards have done differently? Culturally relevant teaching requires the teacher to possess a thorough knowledge of the content *and* employ multiple representations of knowledge that use students' lived experiences to connect new knowledge to home, community, and global settings.

What do we mean multiple representations? Teachers need to find pertinent examples in students' experience; they need to compare and contrast new concepts with concepts students already know; they need to bridge the gap between the known (students' personal cultural knowledge) and the unknown (materials and concepts to be mastered).

In one of my texts, *Culturally Responsive Lesson Planning*, my colleagues and I present culturally relevant and transformative lesson units in four subject areas that are aligned with content area standards. Examples include:

- teaching weather and other scientific concepts by first helping students to understand the connections between their culture and weather as portrayed in myths, folklore, and family sayings;
- teaching social studies by helping students in urban communities to analyze and report voting patterns in their neighborhood and execute a voter education project.

There is a widespread myth that teachers who care about a culturally relevant classroom are *not* the ones who care about rigor. In reality, culturally relevant pedagogy is perfectly aligned with high standards in the content areas. Just look at the standards of the National Council for Teaching of Mathematics [4].

The first of NCTM's principles and standards is the Equity Principle, which states: "Excellence in mathematics education requires equity — high expectations and strong support for all students."

Culturally relevant teaching isn't about lowering those "high expectations." It's about providing strong supports by approaching effective instruction through a cultural lens. I believe that many diverse students fail in schools not because their teachers don't know their content, but because their teachers haven't made the connections between the content and their students' existing mental schemes, prior knowledge and cultural perspectives. In helping learners make sense of new concepts and ideas, culturally relevant teachers create learning opportunities in which students' voices emerge and knowledge and meaning are constructed from the students' perspectives.

Monica Edwards, the teacher in the opening of this story, is a good teacher. She wanted her students to learn, and she correctly identified the student/school cultural gap as a possible reason for their lack of learning gains. She and her colleagues deserve support in the form of professional development that helps them achieve their goals. Not superficial, one-day teacher workshops on diversity or multiculturalism: these often do more to maintain stereotypes and biases about culturally diverse students and their families than to change them. Not a focus on international festivals and once-a-year programs honoring Black History Month or Cinco de Mayo. Teachers need to be encouraged to question the curriculum and the pedagogy.

Educated Guesses

Culturally relevant teachers form caring relationships with their students.

I remember an incident that occurred while I was observing a preservice teacher at work in a mostly-black elementary school in the South. The topic was classification: students were supposed to show ability to sort out like and unlike objects and consonant sounds. When the teacher showed students a photograph of a wrinkly, cabbage-like vegetable, she expected them to identify it as *kale*. Students were stumped, though some guessed that it was *collard greens*. Later the teacher showed the students a picture of broccoli, which the students also could not identify. (Not everybody cooks broccoli. I grew up in Alabama, and I never saw broccoli on a plate until I was in college.) The teacher couldn't hide her shock that the students didn't recognize this vegetable: the students began to suspect that they were being lured into a game they couldn't win. Soon the students were acting up, and the teacher, upset, was storming out of the room.

I searched my mind for something to do. I recalled hearing students talking, before class, about the cars they'd seen in the school parking lot that morning. I asked them if they could name the various types of cars they'd seen. As it turned out, they had quite an extensive knowledge of brands and makes of cars. We classified the information we collected, sorting the cars into vehicles driven by first-grade teachers, vehicles driven by second-grade teachers, and so on. We even did a little geography, with students using a map to point out where various cars came from. Students had some trouble finding Sweden, but they knew Volvos came from there. We talked about what a hypothesis was — an educated guess — and as homework, I asked them to look over their data about cars and make a hypothesis about the difference between principals and new teachers. The next day, many students hypothesized, based on the cars in the parking lot, that principals make more money than teachers.

You could say I got lucky in this situation. But if you have a true, caring relationship with your students, you don't have to be lucky. You will know what their interests are, what information they relate to. Even in an abstract discipline like mathematics, relationships with students matter. When you're talking about distances, it certainly helps to be able to say, "I heard you talking about your cousin Miguel. How far do you think you go to visit him?"

Culturally relevant teachers recognize that they do not instruct culturally homogenized, generic students in generic school settings. Teachers armed with a repertoire of generic teaching skills often find themselves ineffective and ill-prepared when faced with a classroom of culturally diverse students.

Teachers need to re-envision their roles in schools. Culturally relevant teachers are systemic reformers, members of caring communities, reflective practitioners and researchers, pedagogical content specialists and antiracist educators.

As systemic reformers, culturally relevant teachers must lead, not simply respond to, the call for whole school reform. Educating and mentoring peers is part of that. All teachers, not just novices, benefit from the expertise and guidance of master teachers who observe their classes and coach them on a regular basis. In addition, teachers need release time to observe master teachers in their classes and periods for conferencing and planning.

They also need to make time to reflect on their classroom experiences. Reflection enables teachers to examine the interplay of context and culture as well as their own behaviors, talents and preferences. Reflective teachers are

inquirers who examine their actions, instructional goals, methods and materials in reference to their students' cultural experiences and preferred learning environments. The culturally relevant teacher probes the school, community and home environments searching for insights into diverse students' abilities, preferences and motivations. This type of reflection assists teachers in confronting their misunderstandings, prejudices and beliefs about race that impede the development of caring classroom climates, positive relationships with their students and families, and ultimately their students' academic success.

Thinking of culturally relevant teachers as action researchers extends another important component of the reflection process. Action research is inquiry conducted *by* teachers *for* teachers for the purpose of higher student achievement. Action research requires teachers to identify an area of concern, develop a plan for improvement, implement the plan, observe its effects, and reflect on the procedures and consequences.

Finally, student achievement is not the only purpose of a culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant teachers must also assist students to change the society, not simply to exist or survive in it. For some teachers, this can be very challenging. When teachers promote justice they directly confront inequities in society such as racism, sexism and classism. Far too many teachers appear to be not only colorblind, but also unable or unwilling to see, hear or speak about instances of individual or institutional racism in their personal and professional lives.