

Being a Culturally Relevant Teacher

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Abstract: This paper is about how teachers should be more culturally relevant when it comes to teaching their students of different ethnicities, races, and cultures. Our schools are constantly increasing in diversity. Having the skills of incorporating students' cultures, ethnicities, languages, experiences, etc. into teachings is becoming more and more essential for student success. Being a culturally relevant teacher will help address all students and the different experiences and ideas they bring to the classroom.

Key Words: *Cultural Relevancy, Equity, Diversity, "What If", and socioeconomic status*

In order to increase a student's success rate and ability to learn, all teachers need to be culturally relevant. This is especially important in inner city and more diverse schools. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), teacher education programs have made it their main focus to prepare "teachers in ways that support equitable and just educational experiences for all students" (p. 466). Such programs of this kind of work exist in Alaska, California, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Using the culturally relevant theory of education, teachers can apply their students' cultures towards a productive way of connecting with their learning progress. If a teacher is aware of the background and culture of a student, they will be more understanding if a child is struggling when adjusting to the different methods of education. Not all cultures teach the same material and switching from one completely different way of learning to another can be hard on a student's abilities for obtaining needed information.

It is necessary for teachers to have the tools and information in order to successfully help students of different ethnicities feel comfortable in the different cultural settings. Teachers can apply their students' cultures towards a more productive way of connecting with their learning progress. In this particular article, Ladson-Billings (1995) wants to inform readers on the educational anthropological literature and suggest a new theoretical perspective to help teachers be more successful at enriching their African-American

students. Anthropologists have been able to prove that teaching has become more productive when teachers have a connection through the cultures of their students of color who haven't had great previous academic success. This type of a culturally appropriate connection can be incorporated into students' reading practices. An example of a tool for successful learning and academics is known as talk-story. This is when a teacher incorporates some familiarity, whether that is language or culture patterns, into preparing students for standardized reading tests.

Studies have shown that the subjects of literature and linguistics are a lot harder for students of different ethnicities to perform well in. Howard Tyrone's article "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ingredients for Critical Teacher Reflection" (2003) reflects on the importance of teacher education literature. It says how critical reflection is recommended because then teachers can incorporate issues of equity and social justice into the teaching thinking and practice. It aims at persuading readers or teachers at becoming more culturally relevant. Howard argues that being culturally relevant is dependent when critically reflecting about the race and culture of your students.

Since the United States is the largest for having immigrants, the nation needs to prepare its citizens and especially teachers about the changing ethnics and demographics. Since the students of color are approximately one third of the U.S. school population, educators have to face the reality that they will come into contact with their students' cultures, ethnic backgrounds, languages, races, and social backgrounds that will be completely different from their own. To aid teachers with these changes, educators need to create learning spaces where teachers are prepared and are provided the skills to help teach these more diverse students. The teachers need to be aware that race, ethnicity, and culture shape the learning experience of their students. Their lesson plans have to be relevant to the students' cultures.

There is a direct correlation between teacher effort and student success. According to Lisa Delpit (2013) and her article "Warm Demanders", she interviewed "a group of African American

men who were successful, but should not have been, based on their socioeconomic status, communities, and their parents' level of education" (p. 2). This article written explains how Delpit has visited a few poor schools that are predominantly African American and have received a fantastic level of education. Their success was due to a select few of their teachers efforts at pushing them to perform their best in school and encouraging them by saying they could do what anyone else could do. She continues to elaborate that teachers continue to push and "demand" that their students keep trying, even when the teacher themselves can't. These low-income teachers are aware that their students need the extra push because they are dependent on school.

Typically, students from lower academic schools can't help being a little slower or less motivated when it comes to learning. They are used to that environment. It all depends on the community they live in and what kind of environment they are being raised in. The sad thing is that not all teachers are aware of this and they don't tend to try as hard when it comes to their slower students. Success rates of students can have a negative effect on teacher effort. Low-income teachers should know that the less fortunate students are dependent on their schools to teach them everything in order to be successful. This isn't always the case though, especially in low performance schools. Delpit visited two public elementary schools in a southern city that served very low-income African American children. One school had high-test score and the other had low-test scores due to the quality and efforts of their teachers. If the teachers don't care about their students then the success of their students will plummet. The culture of the school determines the effectiveness of teaching and learning. It is a domino effect. If the teacher doesn't have motivation to teach the students because of the culture then the student will won't have the motivation to learn. It should be a main priority for educators across the nation to establish this concept, so teachers can help their students learning rates increase.

In another article, Erin Miller (2010) talks about the "If Only" mindset. This "If Only" mentality is the thought that if only the parents and families of the students I taught changed, schools and teachers could serve their children

better. This is a backwards and unrealistic way of thinking. It is not always a lack of the parents caring for a student to have success. There are several other negative stereotypical "If Onlys". Some are "The parents of poor students don't value education" and "parents of poor students will spend money on nice cars, but not on books" (p. 2). There isn't one parent who doesn't care somewhat for their child and their education. If they are from a different culture, they might not have the resources. Those resources could be money, education/knowledge of the subject, linguistic abilities, etc. Often they don't have the funds to give their child a good education. It would be a good idea for educators to think of ideas for fund raising. If students' families can't afford to give them a good quality education, then it is the job of the state and school board to take action and try to provide the best solutions. Language and reading is a very important learning ability for students of a different race and culture. Miller states his "If Only" mentality towards parents providing an authentic reading and writing experience at home and rely less on the "job" of the school to provide that curriculum.

Again it isn't always that simple. Several parents from a different culture weren't raised that way or don't know how to teach their child because they don't know the language well enough themselves. Educators need to be aware of this, so they can add extra practice and lessons for their students of different races and cultures. Some possible teaching positions could open up in this case. Hiring private tutors that are supplied by the schools or giving international or educationally challenged students the opportunity to have a classroom they can learn in based on their level of learning abilities. Educators need to stop thinking about the "What Ifs" and start thinking "What can I do to help".

What can we do as readers and future teachers to insure that our student's have all the capabilities of a higher-level education? We can persuade educators to provide their students with quality teachers who care about education in all forms. Teachers need to know about their students' backgrounds and abilities. The job of a teacher is to provide excellent insight and support for all different students. Those students could be of a different race, country, financial status, community, family support system, etc. It doesn't matter what background they have, all students

should be treated equally. This idea of equality relates getting rid of all parent biases. The "If Only" theory isn't something we should be thinking about once we are teachers. Teachers should be taught to think: "What can I do to improve my students success and ensure they are receiving the best education possible". All of these ideas relate back to being a culturally relevant teacher. Being aware of this concept earlier in your teaching career can help you decide what courses you take in college or practices you join. Since schools are constantly becoming more diverse over the years, teachers should be allowed to take additional courses to help them form strong relationships with students of different races and cultures. It would also be a good idea for teachers to take courses to learn about different cultures, courses for secondary languages, cultural histories, religions, etc. All of these articles have similar main ideas. The main idea is how important it is for a student, no matter what background they have, to receive a top grade education. The second point is to ensure that teachers know about students' backgrounds and incorporate those into their teaching styles and

methods. To ensure this, educators should supply their teachers with the necessary information and abilities to work with these kinds of situations. Ultimately, the student is the most important when it comes to all educators. All teachers and future teachers across the nation should know this and need to know this. Together we can make a difference in our students' lives and change the way education incorporates all learning abilities based off of all backgrounds.

References

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