

# Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: setting the stage

GENEVA GAY

University of Washington, Seattle

Two major premises are developed in this discussion. One is that many students of color are disproportionately assigned to special education because educators lack knowledge about or appreciation for their cultural values and socialization, and how these affect learning behaviors. The other premise is that the educational quality of students of color in both special and regular education can be improved significantly by using instructional programs and practices that reflect their cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives. Several components of this “culturally responsive teaching” are explained, along with some research findings about its effects on student achievement. These include critical cultural consciousness of teachers; culturally pluralistic classroom climates; diverse communities of learners; and multicultural curriculum and instruction. The author concludes that without culturally responsive teaching education can never be the best it should be for students who are not part of the majority and mainstream of schools and society.

## Introduction

Teachers’ knowledge about and attitudes toward cultural diversity are powerful determinants of learning opportunities and outcomes for ethnically different students. For some students they facilitate academic achievement; for others they obstruct learning. Holliday (1985) proposes that a *transactional perspective* should be applied in educating African-Americans because the relationship between them and teachers is dialectical, situational, culturally embedded, and mediated by perceptions, expectations, and attributions. Davis and Stiffman (1990) make a similar argument in their recommendations for using “an ecological perspective” (p. 16) to improve the mental health of ethnic minority adolescents. They feel that it is not enough to focus only on intrapsychic issues; the racial and cultural contexts of the individuals being treated have to be considered as well. Banks and Banks (2001, p. 293) add: “Exceptionality intersects with factors of gender and race or ethnicity in interesting and complex ways.”

One of these “interesting and complex interactions” is the fact that the “higher proportion of males and students of color in special education programs is related to the fact that mental retardation is a socially constructed category” (Banks & Banks, 2001, p. 293) Elaborating further on this idea Artiles and Trent (1994) claim that “mild learning disabilities” may indeed be a socially constructed category that functions as a dumping ground for high numbers of students of color. To support this contention they point out (Artiles & Trent 1994) that:

... a correlation between ethnicity, school failure, and placement in special education programs has been reported consistently in the literature.... This intricate interaction of variables has not yet been explained satisfactorily. We speculate, though, that stereotypes about the abilities of children of color are

maintained by this correlation, and to some extent perpetuate the placement of disproportionate numbers of minority students in special education classes. (p. 422)

Failure to recognize these basic facts all but assures negative results of efforts to improve the education and mental health of students of color.

These are the major assumptions underlying this discussion. It proposes an alternative approach to educating ethnically diverse students, which is *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT). Some of the current obstacles to implementing CRT are presented first, followed by a conceptual framework for it, and some of its major components and related research that provide evidence of its positive effects on student achievement.

### *Obstacles to CRT*

The best quality education for ethnically diverse students is as much *culturally responsive as it is developmentally appropriate*, which means using their cultural orientations, background experiences, and ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate their teaching and learning. This applies to students in both regular and special education. However, before culturally responsive teaching can be implemented effectively existing beliefs and practices that are obstacles to it need to be identified and eliminated. Two of these critical obstacles to culturally responsive teaching are negative teacher attitudes and expectations for students of color, and confusing disability with diversity.

### **Teacher attitudes toward and expectations of diversity**

U.S. society and schools are not known for their ready acceptance of differences. As Heward and Cavanaugh (2001) explain, “If a society can be judged by the way it treats people who are different, our educational system does not have a distinguished history” (p. 301). Instead, there is a strong resistance to diversity. Individuals are socialized to devalue, suspect, and pretend to ignore differences, especially those that derive from class, race, ethnicity, and culture. Much of this socialization equates differences with deficiencies that should be eradicated. The ultimate goal seems to be to make everyone believe, value, and act the same. The standard of this sameness is mainstream, European-American cultural norms.

The more variance that there is between students’ cultural, racial, ethnic, and intellectual characteristics and the normative standards of schools, the greater are the chances their school achievement will be compromised by low or negative teacher expectations. Children of color, poverty, and disability are highly variant on these criteria of normalcy, and are subjected to greater unfair teacher attitudes, expectations, and actions. Their differences that are most important for educational purposes (such as background experiences, perspectives, values, and cultural socialization) are not as readily apparent as physical traits. Therefore, they require a deep knowledge and understanding that many teachers do not have, or do not value.

Furthermore, most children with learning disabilities look “normal,” and some of them even “act normal” except for selective areas of functioning, so why can they not “be normal and behave like regular kids.” So goes the thinking of many teachers. This line of thinking is similar to ones about cultural and ethnic differences that propose

that “You [referring to non-English speaking immigrant groups] are in America now so act and talk like Americans.” Or, “If we forget about racial differences and remember that we are all alike under the skin, then everything will be fine.” Or, “emphasizing differences is divisive, and is counterproductive to individuals getting jobs and living in U.S. society.” The unreasonable expectations and inappropriate pedagogical actions implied in these kinds of attitudes place students at an educational disadvantage. Applying this cycle of thinking specifically to learning disabilities Comfort (1992) explains that:

Teachers may not know how to plan for children who do not fit the mold, so they become scared and resentful of these students and their parents. Teachers may sense that they will not be able to provide the child with an appropriate learning environment, that their teaching may be criticized, and that they will be accountable for a child who they could not serve. Thus, teachers confront themselves on a daily basis with their own perceived failure. A teacher who is in this situation is likely to begin to blame the child for not learning. (p. 102)

Neither teachers blaming students for their own sense of incompetence, nor teachers expecting them to not measure up to other people’s cultural standards is a valid foundation for effectively teaching ethnic diversity in regular or special education. Instead, these negative and unfair expectations generate self-fulfilling prophecies (Good & Brophy, 1994) relative to the poor performance of students of color in special education (and elsewhere), which, in turn, are self-sustaining for conventional school practices. A vicious cycle is created where marginalized and under-achieving students are perpetually marginalized and perform poorly.

Research on general reactions to labeling (Foster, Schmidt, & Sabatino 1976), temperament characteristics (Cardell & Parmar, 1988), and social behavior (Center & Wascom, 1986) associated with learning disabilities indicates that teachers have negative perceptions and low expectations of students so identified. Foster, Schmidt, and Sabatino (1976, p. 60) found that “the label of learning disabled generates negative bias on the part of classroom teachers, and this bias is sufficient to alter teachers’ observations of actual child behavior.” Some teachers will even declare behaviors negative that are otherwise considered “normal” when students with learning disabilities exhibit them (Cardell & Palmar, 1988). The situation is even worse when the learning disabled students are poor European-Americans and students of color. Several researchers (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Gay, 2001; Good & Brophy, 1994; Grossman, 1995; Oakes, 1985) have found strong correlations among the educational quality students receive, their race, class, and ethnicity, and teachers’ social attitudes toward and expectations of them. Teachers tend to perceive European- and some Asian-Americans in regular and special education to have higher intelligence and academic abilities, and less disciplinary problems than African-, Native, and Latino Americans (Grossman, 1995). Sometimes personality, temperament, and social competence are more important than academic abilities in how teachers react to students of color. Holliday (1985) found this to be the case in her studies of the psychological processes, social competence, and academic achievement of African-American students. The results led her to conclude that a better understanding of how to improve the school achievement of African-American students can be accomplished by analyzing the ecological and behavioral structures of their lives in multiple settings.

### Confusing diversity with disability

Another current factor that operates to the detriment of educational quality for ethnically different students in special education is incorrect diagnoses. Heward and Cavanaugh (1993, p. 242) suggest that “a disproportionate number of students from culturally diverse groups have been inaccurately labeled disabled.” This happens because some of the attitudes, values, and behaviors that cause students from non-mainstream racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to be diagnosed and assigned to special education stem from *misunderstood incongruities* between their home and school cultural standards, rather than some biological malfunctions or intellectual limitations. Rachlin (1989) questions the credibility of the learning disabilities category, and wonders if it is merely a convenience for educators to remove problem students from regular educational practices. This mislabeling leads to persistent overrepresentation of poor African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in “soft,” nebulous, loosely defined, and highly subjective categories of exceptionality, such as mild mental retardation, speech and language impairment, socially maladaptive behavior, and emotional disturbances (Artiles & Trent 1994; Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001). Skrtic (1991) points out that these inaccurate diagnoses result from “a number of definitional and measurement problems, as well as problems related to the will or capacity of teachers and schools to accommodate student diversity” (pp. 154–155). Rather than considering these differences deficits or malfunctions, Comfort (1992) prefers to think of students who exhibit them as “unconventional learners.” There is nothing inherently deficient about their cultural and learning styles; the dilemma is in their incompatibility with school standards.

Researchers (for example, Boggs, 1985; Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1985; Gay, 2000; Shade, 1989; Spindler, 1987) who study the interactions among ethnicity, culture, and education of the students of color in regular classrooms arrive at similar conclusions. In his studies of Native Hawaiian children, Boggs (1985, p. 301) concluded that their “poor performance in school was a result of the lack of fit between the attitudes and behavior patterns of the children and those required by the school.” Gay (2001) attributes these inappropriate diagnoses to inadequate multicultural preparation in teacher education programs. She believes that:

... most graduates of typical teacher-education programs know little about the cultural traits, behaviors, values, and attitudes that different children of color bring to the classroom and how they affect students’ responses to instructional situations.... Therefore, they often mis-interpret these students as deviant and treat them punitively.... [This] places them at a learning disadvantage. (p. 211)

Several examples illustrate why and how cultural variances in behavioral styles may be mislabeled learning disabilities. The frequency and intensity with which some African-Americans interject motion, movement, and emotional energy into their thinking, communication, social relations, and variability in the formats of their self-presentations (Boykin, 1982; 1986; Gay, 2000) may be misdiagnosed as hyperactivity, attention deficit, irritability, attention-seeking, disruption, and being quarrelsome. The reluctance of some Latino students to engage in individual competitive learning activities may be perceived as a lack of motivation and aspiration instead of a possible indication of their cultural socialization toward cooperative groups and mutual aid actions in task performance. Asian-American children who do not engage

readily in conversations and activities with teachers and other students may be considered as exhibiting the social disability traits of being unfriendly, withdrawn, reclusive, insecure, and self-conscious.

Additionally, Native American students who frequently learn by observation and reserving task demonstration until mastery is assured (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1985; Philips, 1983) may be diagnosed as lacking motivation and interest in learning, and not having adequate strategies for attacking academic problems, which are characteristics attributed to learning disability (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1985). Speakers of what mainstream U.S. society perceives as low social status dialects (such as African-American English or Ebonics and Appalachian) and accents (Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong) are sometimes perceived to have linguistic deficits in phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics as opposed to different, rule-regulated cultural communication systems. The intellectual ability of these students may even be called into question because of their styles of speaking, the idea being that how one speaks is an indication of intelligence.

### *Culture education, disability, and diversity*

The ecological perspective on disability provided by Hallahan, Kauffman, and Lloyd (1985) is particularly helpful for understanding the relationships among culture, ethnicity, learning disabilities, and instructional actions. They explain that, since standards of normality and abnormality “vary among cultures and social groups and change with such factors as time, socioeconomic conditions, and political realities . . . one cannot arbitrarily classify a given social behavior as desirable or undesirable but must take into account the context in which the behavior occurs” (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd 1985, p. 142).

Culture simultaneously anchors and blinds us. It forms our center in the dynamics of living and interacting with others while leading us to assume that our own ways of being and behaving are the only right way. “Color and culture blindness” is extremely problematic in educating ethnically diverse students, regardless of whether it is understood as seeing no racial differences, or assuming the educational enterprise is cultural neutral. As Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) suggest, we accept European-American middle-class norms as universal: “we are likely to see deficits rather than difference within the rich variation of human beings” (p. 6). These presumptions of universality and deficiency are some of the major cause of inequities in the educational opportunities provided to students from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and ability backgrounds. In fact, our beliefs about how teaching and learning should occur and how we experience learning situations are mediated by cultural influences. In explaining the importance of the “cultural factor” in the educational process, Garcia (1991) notes that:

All classroom activities and features – classroom management techniques, instructional strategies, and, of course, self-concepts – operate on assumptions which are embedded in cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. There is no such thing as a culturally neutral or culturally free teaching activity . . . Teaching activities spring from unconscious assumptions one makes; they are based on one’s cultural perspectives. Likewise, students’ learning and behaving are influ-

enced by their cultural perspectives. What students learn and what teachers teach are ultimately filtered and strained through their cultural sieves. (pp. 6–7)

To attempt to ignore diversity in the classroom, or pretend that it is not an important variable in teaching and learning, merely submerges rather than purges differences and demeans the humanity of ethnically and culturally diverse students (Pai, 1990). Conversely, knowing and using students' cultural socialization and experiences in teaching improves the quality of their educational opportunities and outcomes.

Another important ecological factor that influences the instructional actions of teachers toward students is social behavior. Center and Wascom (1986, p. 420) propose that: "As one's perceptions of a student's behavior shifts toward inappropriateness, it would be expected that the teacher's opinion of the student's teachability will decline. No doubt this will affect the nature of the student/teacher interaction." Research findings confirm these suppositions. Students of color are perceived to have more social adjustment problems in school. This is evident by the fact that they receive more and harsher disciplinary referrals; the prominence given to social skill development and following rules in instructional programs designed for them; classroom management strategies that emphasize firm, directive, and controlling supervision; and being routinely exposed to learning experiences that are not very intellectually challenging (Good & Brophy, 1994; Harry, 1992; Oakes, 1985). It may very well be that some of the disciplinary problems created by these students are simply their resistance to the kind of social, personal, and academic treatment imposed on them by teachers.

The increasing numbers of students of color assigned to special education, mainstreaming special education students into regular classrooms, and the phenomenal growth of ethnic diversity among student populations add to the complexity and challenge of providing high-quality instruction in special education. According to Heward and Cavanaugh (2001), 91% of all students receiving special education are placed in the four disability categories of learning disabilities (51.1%), speech and language disorders (20.1%), mental retardation (11.4%), and emotional disturbance (8.6%).

A further compounding factor is the demographics of the teaching profession. Many teachers differ significantly from the students they teach, including their racial and ethnic identities, cultural heritages, age, educational levels, social class, worldviews and points of reference, background experiences, and residential location. The teaching profession is overwhelmingly European-American, female, middle class, suburban, and monolingual, although students are increasingly members of ethnic groups of color, poor, urban residents, and multilingual (Gay, 2000, 2001). And, teacher education programs have yet to incorporate multicultural education thoroughly enough for it to make a significant difference. These social gaps and cultural divides are major issues that must be confronted directly and critically if both regular and special education for ethnically diverse students is to be improved significantly.

### *CRT in special education*

Several kinds of instructional reform are imperative to bring about these changes. Four of them are discussed here. They are *critical cultural consciousness*, *culturally responsive classroom climates*, *learning communities*, and *multicultural curriculum content and culturally con-*

*gruent instructional strategies*. Together, these changes comprise the general recommendation for implementing *culturally responsive special (and regular) education*. The essence of this proposal is acknowledging and understanding the influences of race, culture, and ethnicity in teaching and learning, and using the cultural experiences, perspectives, traits, and contributions of different ethnic groups as instrumental tools for teaching academic and social knowledge, values, and skills to diverse students. Culturally responsive teaching is a comprehensive endeavor that is engendered in all dimensions of the educational enterprise, including diagnosing students' needs, curriculum content, counseling and guidance, instructional strategies, and performance assessment (Gay, 2000).

### **Critical cultural consciousness**

Of utmost importance in this approach to educating students is for teachers to become critically conscious of their own cultural socialization, and how it affects their attitudes and behaviors toward the cultures of other ethnic groups. Louise and George Spindler (1993, 1994) have developed a technique called cultural therapy that can help to expedite this consciousness-raising. It combines critical cultural consciousness with pedagogical skill development. The emphasis is on teachers revealing and analyzing how their cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs shape their behaviors in educational settings, as well as determining ways to minimize the negative effects of these influences. For example, recognizing how racial and gender prejudices distort the learning opportunities they offer to males and females from different ethnic groups, the assumptions that underlie these prejudices, and what can be done to eliminate them from instructional practices. Once this self-awareness is apparent, teachers are better able to recognize different cultural elements and nuance in their students' behaviors and then use these insights to enhance their teaching skills. It is as important for teachers to acquire accurate knowledge about the cultures, experiences, and contributions of other specific ethnic groups, as about as their own. These mandates to know self and others apply to teachers of color as well as European-Americans. Many of them are in the same situation of not understanding their cultures and how they shape their instructional behaviors, and not having adequate knowledge of the cultures of their diverse students. Consequently, *critical cultural consciousness of self and others for all teachers is an important pillar of culturally responsive teaching*.

Some elements of the cultures of diverse ethnic groups are more important for teachers to know than are others. These are the ones that have direct implications for teaching and learning. They include values, communication styles, learning styles, contributions, social problems, and levels of ethnic identity development and affiliation (Gay, 1994). For example, knowing about the religious backgrounds of various Native-, Latino, African-, Asian-, and European-American groups is important to ensure that these traditions are not violated inadvertently in classroom activities. But this issue is something that occurs periodically for most groups. Of even greater significance are those elements of cultural diversity that operate habitually and routinely in classrooms, such as how students from different ethnic groups determine what is important and worthy of learning, how they engage in the process of learning, and how they organize thoughts and convey information. Understanding the attributes of the storytelling motif that some students of color routinely use in communicating ideas and interacting with others, and how they try to do the same thing in their written

work in schools, will help teachers to better determine the students' thinking strengths and weakness.

Furthermore, if teachers know how the attributes of ethnic learning styles are manifested in study habits and intellectual task performance, they will be able to teach ethnically diverse students how to study more effectively, and perform better on teacher-made and standardized tests. This improved performance may prevent some students from being referred to special education, and help others to transfer back to regular education programs. For instance, many African-American students engage in stage setting mechanisms prior to performing tasks. The uninformed teacher may see this "cultural necessity" as task avoidance, lack of academic preparedness, and off-task behaviors, and admonish the students for non-engagement, with the expectation that this chastisement will facilitate more task-focused behaviors. In fact, such a response from the teacher may simply frustrate the students and prolong the process, since the initial efforts were aborted, and they will have to reinitiate setting the stage for performing the required tasks.

Similar needs and effects are apparent without knowing the contributions and achievements of ethnic groups. We know that children respond positively (both socially and academically) to the inclusion of complimentary information about individuals and deeds of their ethnic groups. These are the sources from which we select role models, mentors, and heroines and heroes who exemplify key educational principles and values for students to emulate. However, teachers cannot select appropriate cultural heroines and heroes from or for different ethnic groups if they are not familiar with their achievements or how potential candidates embody their ethnic groups' cultural values and standards of success. By definition, a cultural hero or heroine is one who personifies the highest cultural values and standards of his/her ethnic group. This is a powerful element of all culturally responsive teaching for ethnically diverse students in regular and special education. But it is counterproductive when the selections are not culturally appropriate. An illustrative case of inappropriateness is when a person chosen as a hero or heroine for a particular ethnic group is confused about, disaffiliated from, or denies his/her ethnic identity. This violates principles of culturally responsive teaching that acknowledge the legitimacy of ethnic identity, developing positive self-ethnic identity, and teaching students cultural competence for functioning within their own ethnic groups

### **Classroom climate**

The physical features, psychoemotional tone, and quality of interactions among students and between students and teachers have a tremendous impact on how or whether learning occurs. Classroom climates that are "cold," hostile, isolative, and stressful are not conducive to the best learning for ethnically different students. In fact, most students of color perform much better in emotionally warm, caring, and supportive classroom climates (Gay, 2001). Kleinfeld (1974, 1975) found evidence of these results in her research on Athabascan Eskimo and Indian children. The most effective teachers were those who demonstrated personal caring and concern for students while simultaneously demanding and facilitating high academic performance. She called these teachers "warm demanders" because they created emotional warmth in their classrooms; developed positive interrelationships with students; extended their caring and connections with students beyond the school; and conveyed their commitment to



and support of students through the frequent use of explicit verbal declarations and positive nonverbal acts such as smiles, gentle touches, teasing, and making themselves accessible to students. Foster (1995, 1997) and Ladson-Billings (1994) observed similar traits among effective teachers of African-American students. Personally, I have observed a special education colleague routinely refer to children receiving services in her areas of expertise with a form of endearment – “they are so precious.”

In effect, creating these kinds of caring classroom climates as a part of culturally responsive teaching is analogous to “tough love” among parents and their children. In these relationships, parents are diligent about embracing, supporting, and protecting their children from harmful influences, but not coddling them or absolving them from assuming responsibilities for their own actions and high-quality standards of behavior. This tough love and unequivocal caring in the classroom means teachers are diligent and creative in their efforts to do everything possible to ensure that students achieve to the best of their ability. They keep raising the bar of achievement standards, within reasonable and reachable levels. They reach and teach toward success for all students without imposing the identical indicators of success onto everyone. Children in these classrooms know that they are valued; that the classroom is an emotionally “safe” and supportive place where they can be themselves; that learning is an exciting and joyous journey of discovery; and that there is no negative or privileged stigma attached to the varying levels or kinds of ability or disability. Rather, these varieties are viewed as mere conditions of existence, not statements of identity or indicators of predetermined limitations.

To create these kinds of classroom climates and promote positive self-concept for ethnically diverse students, regular and special education teachers need to attend to two other major components. These are the physical environment and stress factors. Students should be routinely surrounded with images, sounds, and symbols of their ethnic and cultural diversity. Most teachers (especially those in elementary schools) have a really good sense of the importance of the visual stimulation in learning that comes from using wall decorations and multimedia materials to complement and embellish their verbal teaching. Tremendously powerful lessons are taught by and through what is on display in the classroom. These images and artifacts provide multiple avenues for students to learn similar content and skills. A videotape demonstration of a concept or skill that is available for students to view repeatedly until they “get it” relieves the teacher from having to engage in endless repetitive teaching. Allowing students to do demonstrative teaching on videotape is a viable and creative way to incorporate peer coaching and cooperative learning when more conventional approaches are not possible. These also are imaginative ways of using technology (something that students – including those in special education – are highly amenable to and competent at) to develop instructional archives that can be used repeatedly with different groups of students, and to which students can help to extend over time. Images of a variety of ethnically diverse individuals symbolizing a wide range of accomplishments, and positions of power, influence, and leadership convey to students profound messages about the reality and desirability of ethnic diversity in their lives. These ecological approaches to teaching may capture the interest of some special education students who have not demonstrated any interest in conventional approaches to teaching, and their presumed learning disabilities will be disavowed and high levels of intellectual competence unleashed. This has been known to happen when imaginative teaching strikes a responsive cord in previously hard-to-teach students.

Many students of color encounter race-related stress in schools and classrooms. They are bombarded with implicitly and explicitly stated racial prejudices and stereotypes on a daily basis, emanating from both society and schools. These conditions do not create conditions that are most conducive to the best academic and social performance. In fact, the reverse is true. Racial stereotypes have a strong negative effect on the academic achievement of the students whose ethnic group is the target of the stereotyping. Steele (1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) calls this racial prejudice in educational settings “stereotype threat.” He has conducted research that validates its negative effects on the achievement of the “academic vanguard” (highly accomplished students) in colleges and universities. His research indicates that the mere introduction of stereotypes of ethnic groups derails the academic performance of members of these groups, even when the individuals do not believe the stereotypes apply to them personally. If this happens to college students with a history of academic success, one can only imagine the effects on special education students who know that they are not expected to be very good at most school things. Students are not unaware of teachers’ perceptions and expectations, or the racial biases against their ethnic groups in society.

Culturally responsive teaching promotes and models antiracist education. It begins this agenda by removing stereotype threat from the climate of the classroom. Instituting no-tolerance racial prejudice policies, identifying racial and ethnic stress-provoking elements of classroom climates, instructional strategies, curriculum content, and assessment procedures, and replacing them with bias-free programs and practices does this. In effect, then, the classroom becomes a laboratory for learning how to construct and live in an environment without ethnic prejudices. Creating more desirable multicultural climates for living and learning is a form of social action to promote social justice, which is another critical dimension of culturally responsive teaching.

### **Communities of learners**

Culturally responsive teaching questions the integrity and viability of persistent individualistic and competitive learning. It is nonproductive to continue to operate on the premise that some students have to fail in order for others to succeed. And the assumption that individuals learn by their own volition is simply false. A more accurate perception is that a great deal of cooperation and collaboration are involved in virtually every learning situation whether it is acknowledged or not. Furthermore, people from different cultures, social groups, and backgrounds need to learn how to work together to deal with common concerns. Two of these that are central to living and learning in an ethnically pluralistic society such as the United States are learning how to get along with diverse people, and improving their school performance.

Culturally responsive teaching develops a sense of interdependence and feelings of community in which students understand that their lives and destinies are closely intertwined, and feel it is a moral and political obligation to help each other learn. This sense of reciprocity is analogous to the “we win/I win” ideas that permeated the civil rights philosophy and actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. In these communities students pool their intellectual resources and work diligently to help each other learn. They are taught that the learning of each individual is not complete until all members of the class have learned to the best of their ability. Therefore, members of learning

communities are teachers and learners, as well as producers and consumers of knowledge.

Another salient feature of learning communities in culturally responsive teaching is multifaceted skill development. In addition to academic excellence, students learn about their own and each other's cultural heritages, how the lives of different ethnic groups are connected, moral and ethical dimensions of living and learning, and skills needed to engage in social and political reform actions. In other words, students are taught that being educated involves more than academics, and it carries with it the responsibility to use knowledge to bring about social change. This change process begins with the place where students are – in the classroom, and it exemplifies principles of building coalitions and networking as essential needs of effective communities by having students practice them in helping each other through the learning process.

Research on cooperative learning (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Slavin, 1995) indicates that students from all ethnic groups, ability levels, and areas of schooling benefit positively from it in multiple ways, including higher academic performance, stronger feelings of personal efficacy, greater satisfaction with school, and improved interpersonal relations across ethnic groups. Ladson-Billings (1994) provides another strong testament to the pedagogical power of cooperative and communal learning. She found that African-American students' performance in particular skill areas, such as the mastery of academic knowledge, increased as multiple areas of learning (i.e., cultural competence, social action, moral responsibility and ethical behaviors) were taught simultaneously. Researchers such as Boggs, Watson-Gegeo, and McMillen (1985), Au (1980, 1993), Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan (1974), and Tharp and Gallimore, who studied the Kamehameha Early Education Program for Native Hawaiian (KEEP) children, repeatedly reported improved school performance for the participating students. KEEP included culturally relevant content and instructional techniques to teach Native Hawaiian students reading and language-arts skills. Among these techniques were building communities of learners in which students worked closely together in schools, as they were accustomed to doing in their home cultural communities, to help each other understand and master academic skills.

Learning communities also have been shown to be effective with high school and college students. For example, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program used strong elements of communal identity, cooperative learning, and reciprocal responsibilities in teaching college preparatory English curriculum to low-achieving African-American and Latino students. The program has had a significant positive impact on the participants' grade-point averages, performance on advanced placement tests, college attendance, and completion of degrees at four-year colleges and universities (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996). Similar striking results emerged from the Mathematics Workshop Program. It was initially developed at the University of California at Berkeley to help African-American and Latino students enrolled in first-year calculus to improve their successful completion of the course, and subsequently extended to other colleges and high schools in California and elsewhere. A distinguishing feature of this program was students working together in study groups with tutorial assistance. The study groups held meetings regularly in which the participants helped each other with their homework, and explained the processes they used in solving calculus problems. Talking through problem solutions with each other was the most salient feature in significantly improving the achievement levels of the students. Fullilove and Treisman (1990) attribute this success factor

to its compatibility with the communalism that is evident in the cultures of Latino Americans and African-Americans.

While none of the community of learners programs cited here involved students identified as special education, it does not require a big stretch of the imagination to envision their applicability to special education programs for diverse learners. The transfer potential is located in the fact that these programs involved low-achieving, ethnically diverse students who often are at risk for identification as students with mild mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional/behavior disorders. Moreover, the teaching techniques used in the programs were culturally familiar to the students and academically appropriate for improving their school achievement.

### **Multicultural curriculum and culturally congruent instruction**

In addition to using culturally responsive climates and structural arrangements, multicultural curriculum and instruction are other essential components of culturally responsive teaching. Common sense, professional experiences, and research findings tell us that students learn better content that is familiar, has high interest appeal, is challenging, and is presented in ways that are linked directly to their prior knowledge and ways of knowing. Nor is it difficult to understand relationships among students' time on task, interest in learning and disciplinary behaviors, and the relevance of the curriculum and instruction they experience in both regular and special education. This means that culturally responsive teaching for ethnically diverse students should include information about the histories, cultures, contributions, and experiences of different ethnic groups in all subjects. Skeptics may counter this suggestion with arguments to the effect that, "There is some content that students should know which can't be culturally diversified, such as math and science skills, or ancient history. Or, for that matter what is culturally specific about reading, writing, or being good citizens and workers." The answer to these challenges to culturally responsive teaching lies in what is taught, why, and how.

There is very little, if any, factual content that is taught simply for its own sake. In most cases, content serves an instrumental purpose in that it illustrates and transmits skills, principles, theories, concepts, ideals, values, beliefs, and generalizations. If the order of teaching were shifted so that the primary focus would be on these substantive elements instead of the content in which they are embedded, then it would be easy to find entrees for the inclusion of multicultural education. A wide variety of ethnically and culturally diverse examples, scenarios, and vignettes would be used to embody and demonstrate the concepts, principles, skills, and ideas being taught. As an example, if war is really about cultural collisions and conflicts of power, then these concepts can be taught using samples of wars in any parts of the world and any time periods, without feeling obligated to use conventional teaching approaches to teach the First and Second World Wars and the Civil War in United States History classes, thus promoting student interest, curricular relevance, and mastery of the content.

A student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for improving reading comprehension should include samples of reading materials written by and about his or her own and other ethnic groups that can be used to identify, teach, practice, and demonstrate mastery of these skills. The Multicultural Literacy Program (Diamond & Moore, 1995) and the Webster Grove Writing Project (Krater, Zeni, & Cason, 1994) provide

some instructive guidance on how to accomplish these changes, and the positive effects that may result from them. These projects used literature of African-, Asian-, Latino, and Native Americans to teach reading and writing skills to low-achieving students of color. The results were multidimensional and positive on all counts. Students improved their scores on state and district level standardized reading and writing tests; showed more enjoyment of and positive attitudes toward reading; read more frequently and with greater speed; had improved reading comprehension; had greater knowledge of different forms, structures, and uses of written language; wrote with more length, cohesion, and clarity; and were more self-confident and positive about their own and others' ethnicity and culture.

Math skills can be learned by using situations and experiences students encounter in their lives on a day-to-day basis as content. The Algebra Project (Moses & Cobb, 2001) demonstrates how this technique works, and the positive effects it has on student achievement, by using public transportation to teach pre-algebra and algebra to middle school students. None of the students who participated in this program was identified as gifted and talented. In fact, the educational quality and achievement levels of some of the students in the Mississippi Delta were so low that they probably would have been assigned to special education in other school communities. Yet, almost all of the participants in the Algebra Project completed the program with grades high enough for them to enroll in advanced math courses such as geometry and trigonometry in high school.

Therefore, a multicultural curriculum is a critical component of culturally responsive teaching. It is important for all students, but is even more imperative for students of color in special education, since their education is even more imperiled, in many ways, than their peers in regular education. However, a multicultural curriculum alone is not enough. Instructional quality, or pedagogy, is of greater significance, since instruction is necessary to activate the curriculum. The essence of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students is using *multiple and varied culturally informed techniques* in teaching African-, Asian-, Native, and Latino Americans. Most of the instruction that is currently occurring in schools is shaped by and centered in Eurocentric cultural values and points of reference. This is a key reason why European Americans perform better than students of color in every category of achievement in every educational setting. Some Asian-Americans are exceptions to these trends, due to some elements of their socialization that are more compatible with mainstream school culture than those of other groups of color (Tong, 1978). Culturally responsive pedagogy simply tries to bring more equity to instruction by using techniques that are compatible with many different ethnic groups, especially those who are marginalized and disenfranchised in schools.

For the most part, cultural responsive pedagogy can be operationalized by matching teaching styles to the learning styles of different ethnic groups. Learning styles derive directly from cultural values, characteristics, and socialization. Teachers can match their instruction to students' learning styles only to the extent that they understand, and then craft, their teaching to respond directly to the cultural characteristics and orientations of their students of color. Thus, the earlier discussion on building communities of learners among African-, Asian-, Native, and Latino American students make good pedagogical sense because a strong group emphasis, collaborative effort, and a value of communalism are embedded in the cultures of their ethnic groups. Since cultural specificity by ethnic group is necessary to explain how matching teaching styles with learning styles operates in actual practice, and space does not

allow for all groups to be addressed here, some examples for only African-Americans are presented to illustrate this principle and practice.

Research on African-American culture (Boykin, 1986; Gay & Baber, 1987; Kochman, 1981; Pasteur & Toldson, 1982; Smitherman, 1977) identifies core characteristics and values such as dramatic aestheticism, kinetics, relational, flair and style, exuberance and energetic, dynamic, spontaneity, contextualism, verbal dexterity, affectivity, social orientation, and the integration of thought, feeling, and action. These emphases translate into learning-style features typically associated with field dependency (Hollins, King, & Hayman, 1994; Shade, 1989), which is characterized by preferences for social contexts for task performance; content related to human issues; general patterns and trends instead of concrete details; inductive reasoning; aural, visual, and tactile stimulation; talking over writing; performance demonstration of mastery of academic skills; and using a storytelling approach to communicate that is also known as topic-chaining (Au, 1993; Michaels, 1981). Given these characteristics, it is readily apparent why some African-American students who are functioning normally within their own cultural frame of reference may be diagnosed as having language disorders, hypersensitivity, attention deficit, and learning disabilities.

A growing body of research over the last 30 years or so provide supportive evidence that when teaching techniques are compatible with their learning styles, African-American students who are having academic difficulties in school are able to reverse them and become easy, attentive learners, and high achievers. For example, Guttentag and Ross (1972) were able to expedite the mastery of simple concept learning, such as over, under, above, below, and behind, for 4-year-olds by having them perform the behaviors associated with the concepts. Thus, the students crawled under and over a table when they were working on those respective concepts. Foster (1989) and Piestrup (1972) found that African-American students were able to better understand the concepts being taught and engaged more fluently and effectively in classroom conversations as their teachers' interjected more African-American discourse features (such as rhythm, shared background experiences, vocabulary, delivery, and metaphorical analyses) and nuances in their instructional explanations and illustrations.

Boykin and some of his colleagues at Howard University (Albury, 1992; Allen & Boykin, 1991; Allen & Butler, 1996; Boykin 1982; Boykin & Allen, 1988) have conducted a series of studies examining the effects of instructional compatibility with cultural characteristics on the academic achievement of African-American elementary students. The variables they studied include motion and movement, cooperative learning, novelty, frequently changed and varied formats in learning activities, and the inclusion of ethnic content in instruction. In all instances the results have been positive. When instructional strategies reflect the cultural values, traits, and socialization of African-American students, their attention spans, quality of academic efforts, and achievement outcomes increase significantly. Although none of the students involved in these studies was enrolled in a special education program, there a strong likelihood that similar culturally responsive teaching techniques will be equally, if not more, beneficial for students with a disability. Although these examples reflect understandings of African-Americans, it stands to reason that such techniques will be effective for students of color from other ethnic groups sharing similar academic and behavior characteristics. These changes have merit, given that other attempts to reverse the achievement trends of students of color that are not culturally responsive are repeatedly ineffective.

## Conclusion

Teacher attitudes, expectations, and actions toward ethnically diverse students are tremendously powerful in determining the quality of the education they receive. Similarly, there are strong correlations between culturally responsive teaching and the school achievement of students of color. The higher the one the greater the other on all measures including academic performance, social adjustment, school satisfaction, self-concept, and students' feeling of confidence and efficacy. Undoubtedly, some students of color are able to prevail in the absence of culturally sensitive teachers, and relevant curriculum, instruction, and learning environments, and perform quite well academically. But why should they have to when their middle-class, European-American counterparts do not have to operate with the same handicap. Furthermore, they still are not being educated as completely as they should be since they are denied opportunities to learn about their own and others' ethnic and cultural heritages. These situations affect student in special education as much as they do in regular education, if not more so.

Whether teachers will act to implement culturally responsive teaching with special education students is strongly influenced by their own knowledge of and comfort with ethnicity and diversity, as well as their confidence about being able to do culturally responsive teaching. Such knowledge and skills do not occur automatically; they have to be learned, which also means they must be taught. Here, then is a critical imperative for improving the education of ethnically diverse students. Professional preparation programs for regular and special education teachers, as well as inservice staff development, must be much more aggressive and diligent about including knowledge about and skills for teaching ethnically and culturally different students, and then hold teachers accountable for implementing these changes in classroom practice. The needs for and components of culturally responsive teaching included in this discussion should be some of the major elements of these professional development programs. If teachers become more culturally conscious and competent then fewer African-, Asian-, Latino- and Native American students will be misplaced in special education, their disproportionate representation will diminish, and those who are appropriately assigned to special education will have a better chance of receiving the quality of education they rightfully deserve. This we must achieve in order to act in accordance with our commitment to educational equity and social justice for all students.

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