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Culturally Responsive Classrooms: Affirming Culturally Different Gifted Students

Each year, the U.S. Department of Education publishes its comprehensive report *The Condition of Education*. As I perused this year's edition, I was reminded of an important reality, one that all education professionals must be mindful of: Our nation and our schools are more racially and, thus, culturally different than ever before. The term *culturally different* is used instead of *culturally diverse* because every individual and group has a culture. An unfortunate reality is that those students having the least amount school success are often culturally different from the dominant or mainstream group, which necessitates that educators recognize, affirm, and respond to the differences and associated needs. In this article, I present a summary of our nation's ever-changing schools, and offer suggestions for educators in their efforts to increase the educational success and experiences of culturally different students. An important feature of such success is more culturally different students being screened, identified, and placed in gifted education. These suggestions offered are grounded in the need for educators to create culturally responsive classrooms.

Student Demographics: Ready or Not, Here We Are

The term *culturally responsive* has numerous meanings and interpretations. Fundamentally, it means responding proactively and empathetically to appeals, efforts, and influences (Ford & Kea, in press). When we are responsive, we feel an obligation, a sense of urgency, to address a need(s) so that

students experience success. When teachers are culturally responsive, they are student-centered; they eliminate barriers to learning and achievement and, thereby, open doors for culturally different students to reach their potential. In other words, to be culturally responsive means that teachers proactively and assertively work to understand, respect, and meet the needs of students who come from cultural backgrounds different from their own.

Despite the great diversity of our nation, professionals and laypersons remain uncomfortable talking about differences. Like the proverbial elephant in the room, differences are obvious but ignored. These feelings of difference—unfamiliarity, awkwardness, confusion, frustration, stress, and more—have been termed “cultural shock” (Oberg, 1954, 1960).

There is no need to travel outside of the United States to experience shock or witness cultural differences. A “foreign” guest to one's home, for example, can be challenging and disconcerting (Ford, 2005; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Kea, in press). And this is so in our schools as well. How do we make culturally different guests—students—feel welcome, respected, appreciated, valued, and understood (Ford, 2005)? How do teachers build effective relationships with them? What instructional strategies are effective and culturally compatible with their learning styles? What are some ways teachers can make learning meaningful and relevant to them?

The need to focus more assertively and proactively on students' culture—their values, beliefs, habits, customs, and traditions—may be greater now than ever before in our nation's history. For generations, the United States has witnessed significant demo-

graphic changes, and our school demographics mirror these changes. In 1972, students were predominantly White, representing some 78% of the public school student population, with the remaining 22% of students being culturally different—African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. More recent data indicate that classrooms look very different, not just in urban areas, but suburban areas as well. As of 2005, approximately 45% of students were culturally different (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). It is essential that educators consider the effectiveness of traditional practices with this culturally different or “nontraditional” student body (Ford & Kea, in press).

Despite the demographic changes nationally and among students, teacher demographics have remained relatively stable, with the majority of teachers being White (83%) and female (75%; Snyder, 2007). Collectively, the data should compel educators to consider their multicultural or cross-cultural efficacy relative to working with students who come from different backgrounds, and then take steps to be proactive. A poor sense of multicultural efficacy has been associated with teacher burnout and turnover in high-minority schools, as well as the underreferral of culturally different students for gifted education screening, identification, and placement (Ford et al., 2008).

Major Components of Culturally Responsive Classrooms: Responding to Needs

At its heart, culturally responsive classrooms (CRCs) are student-centered and, by default, culture-centered. A student-centered classroom cannot exist if culture is ignored or disregarded

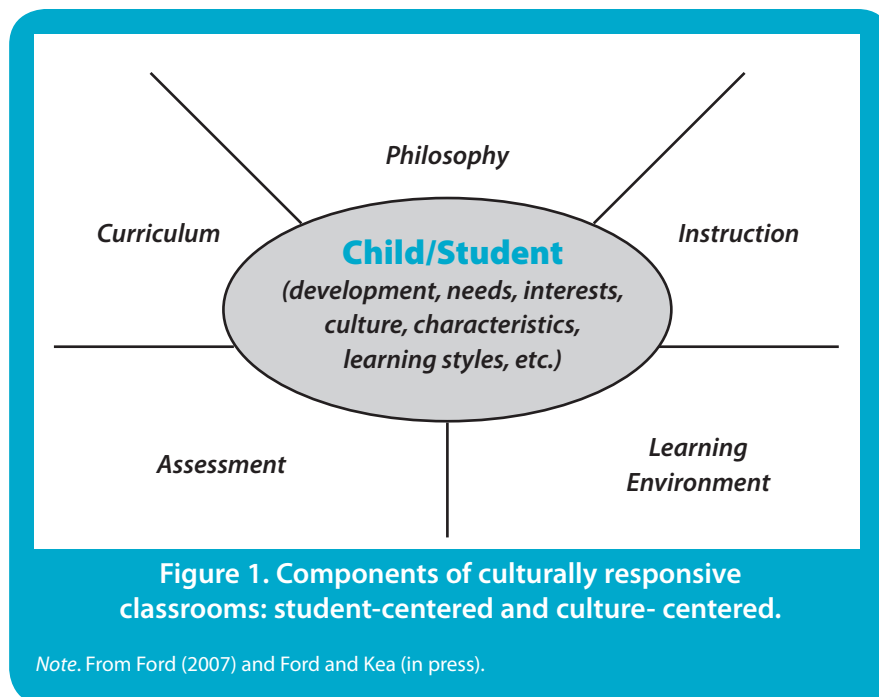


Figure 1. Components of culturally responsive classrooms: student-centered and culture-centered.

Note. From Ford (2007) and Ford and Kea (in press).

in any way. In every classroom, culture matters.

CRCs are characterized by at least five components (see Figure 1): teacher’s philosophy, learning environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Banks, 2006, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1999; Ford & Milner, 2005; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000, 2002; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Shade, 1989; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).

Culturally Responsive Teaching Philosophy

Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about teaching in general and teaching culturally different students in particular set the climate of the classroom (Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002). Teaching philosophies guide how teachers think learning occurs, how they think they can intervene in this process, the main goals they have for students, and what actions they take to implement their beliefs and intentions (Kea & Utley, 1998). In a culturally responsive classroom, a reverence for culture guides teachers’ philosophy.

The following questions can help teachers to develop and/or think about their culturally conscious teaching philosophy: Do teachers have a color-blind philosophy? Are teachers eager and enthusiastic about working with students who are different from them culturally? Do teachers put forth effort to build caring, nurturing, democratic relationships with culturally different students? How do teachers make sure to hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their backgrounds and differences? What do teachers need to change to be effective with their students (Ford & Kea, in press)?

Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

As with teacher philosophy, the learning environment sets the context and climate for the classroom. At its essence, the learning environment is about relationships, communication, and expectations—focusing specifically on students’ sense of membership and belonging. It includes classroom management

(e.g., Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008; Weinstein, 2003; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2005); the aesthetic dimensions of the classrooms (e.g., photos, drawings, posters, artwork, other visuals); and materials (e.g., flesh-colored crayons, paints, drawing paper, bandages).

Key questions guiding the learning environment include: Are visuals or displays modern, nonstereotypical, and representative of all cultural groups in the classroom? Are students and teachers respectful of each other? Do all students feel a sense of belonging, appreciation, and support? Are all students encouraged and expected to work collaboratively? Are grouping arrangements for assignments and activities made so that students from all backgrounds work together?

Culturally Responsive Curriculum

The curriculum is the road map for what will be taught, when it will be taught, and the materials that will be used (Ford & Kea, in press). When designing and using culturally responsive curriculum and materials or resources, which build upon the important goal of differentiating instruction for gifted students, it is essential to focus on rigor and relevance (see Banks, 2008; Ford, 2005; Ford & Harris, 1999; Ford & Milner, 2005). When developing curriculum that engages culturally different students and has meaning for them, it is important to consider the following questions and others: How have teachers tried to ensure that all students are interested, engaged, and motivated by what is taught? In what ways can teachers make connections between what they must teach—the formal, written, mandated curriculum—and what culturally different students want to learn? Have teachers presented a balanced, comprehensive, and multidimensional

view of the topic, issue, and/or event? Have multiple viewpoints been shared and discussed? Have teachers addressed stereotypes, distortions, and omissions in the curriculum (Banks, 2008)? A final fundamental question specific even more specific to gifted students is: To what extent is the curriculum rigorous—does it challenge students and promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills *and* is it multicultural? (See Ford & Harris, 1999, and Ford & Milner, 2005, for sample multicultural gifted education lesson plans.)

Culturally Responsive Instruction

The central focus of instruction is on ensuring student learning and success, which raises questions such as: How compatible and responsive are teaching style(s) and learning styles? Which individual students or groups of students are not experiencing school success using traditional teaching styles and strategies? What changes can teachers make so that instruction is culturally responsive and compatible for all students, so that instruction is differentiated?

Culturally responsive teachers recognize and accept that cultural differences dictate making modifications (e.g., differentiation) that are responsive to and address differences, as defined earlier. For instance, when instruction is culturally responsive, teachers modify their teaching styles to accommodate and affirm learning styles, employ flexible grouping, collaborate more with students, and focus more on creating a climate that is cooperative and family like (Ford & Kea, in press).

Culturally responsive instruction (CRI) consists of scaffolding—using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles of culturally different students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them

(Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) asserted that CRI is validating to culturally different students and emancipatory in that all students learn that there is no single version of truth, thus, they have many opportunities to explore alternative and opposing perspectives, models, theories, paradigms, and research. More specifically, culturally responsive instruction respects culturally different students and honors their differences; minimally, it includes the following features:

1. CRI acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritage(s) of culturally different groups, both as legacies that affect students' attitudes and approaches to learning, and as content worthy to be taught in the formal, mandated curriculum;
2. CRI builds bridges of relevance between home, community, and school experiences; the learning experience becomes seamless;
3. CRI uses a range of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles, preferences, and needs;
4. CRI teaches students to know, respect, and appreciate their own cultural heritage, and the heritage(s) of others; cultural pride is nurtured; and
5. CRI incorporates multicultural information, materials, and resources in all school subjects and activities. (Gay, 2000, p. 29)

Culturally Responsive Assessment

Tests play an integral role in decisions about gifted students—referral, screening, identification, and placement. Because too many culturally different students are not scoring well when evaluated, it is important that teachers create and use tests and assessments that are culturally responsive (Ford, 2004; Whiting & Ford, 2006). Assessment should be guided, in part, by the following queries: Are the mea-

asures valid and reliable for the specific culturally different students and group? How can educators decrease bias in the measures (e.g., tests, checklists, forms, etc.) that they use or must adopt for evaluation and gifted education decisions? Relative to the notion of differentiation, have all students had opportunities to be evaluated in ways that are compatible with how they learn and communicate? Do students have opportunities to show their learning via speeches, presentations, skits, research, and other modalities?

Final Thoughts

Cultural clashes in classroom settings are inevitable when teachers and students are culturally different. However, the good news is that teachers can *decrease* cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication with culturally different students when they become more self-reflective, recognize cultural differences between themselves and students, work to become more culturally competent professionals, and create classrooms that are culturally responsive rather than assaultive. Such classrooms, as presented in the previous five major components, hold much promise for motivating and engaging culturally different students, ideally resulting in higher achievement, and their being identified more often as gifted. But, it is not only the students who benefit when classrooms are culturally responsive and their teachers are culturally competent, teachers also benefit, as does society at large. **GCT**

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