

Culturally relevant teaching

BY HEATHER COFFEY

Culturally relevant teaching is a term created by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) to describe “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”¹ Participating in culturally relevant teaching essentially means that teachers create a bridge between students’ home and school lives, while still meeting the expectations of the district and state curricular requirements. Culturally relevant teaching utilizes the backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences of the students to inform the teacher’s lessons and methodology.

History and theory

National statistics reveal that the population of the United States is becoming more ethnically diverse, but the teaching force remains mostly white, mostly female (see National Center for Education Statistics). Teachers must to accept the reality that many of their students will come to their classrooms with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds that are different from their own. When faced with the heterogeneous mixture of students in their classrooms, teachers must be prepared to teach all students. Identified as a way to provide for the academic success of African American and other children not served by America’s public schools, the term “culturally relevant teaching” was originally introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1992.² However, other anthropologists, socio-linguists, and teacher educators, searching for ways to find links between the students’ home culture and the school, described this type of schooling as *culturally appropriate*³, *culturally congruent*⁴, *culturally responsive*⁵, and *culturally compatible*.⁶

After identifying several exceptional teachers in public schools in low-socioeconomic, mostly African American school districts, Ladson-Billings spent time observing and trying to explain their success with students who are typically pushed to the margins by public education. Ladson-Billings found that all of the teachers shared pride in and commitment to their profession and had an underlying belief that all children could be successful.

The participating teachers maintained relationships with their students that were “fluid and equitable” and often attended community events in order to demonstrate support for their students. These teachers also believed in creating bonds with students and developing a “community of learners,” which means that all students worked collaboratively to become responsible for each others’ learning. Ladson-Billings maintains that in order for teachers to use culturally relevant pedagogy successfully, they must also show respect for students and “understand the need for the students to operate in the dual worlds of their home community and the white community.”⁷

Similarly, Geneva Gay stresses that culturally relevant pedagogy is imperative

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because it uses, “The cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective... It teaches to and through strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming.” Gay identifies the power of caring as being one of the most important components of culturally relevant pedagogy.⁸

Tyrone Howard suggests that “Teachers need to understand that racially diverse students frequently bring cultural capital to the classroom that is oftentimes drastically different from mainstream norms and worldviews.” Also, because teachers and students often come from seemingly dissimilar backgrounds, in order for teachers to connect with and engage students, they must “construct pedagogical practices in ways that are culturally relevant, racially affirming, and socially meaningful for their students.”⁹

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Principles of culturally relevant teaching

Ladson-Billings contends that culturally relevant pedagogy has three criteria:

- Students must experience academic success.
- Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence.
- Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.¹⁰

ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Regardless of social inequities, students must be provided with the tools to achieve academic proficiency. Furthermore, in order to participate in a democratic society, students need to develop skills in literacy and numeracy and to expand their technological, social, and political abilities. Ladson-Billings maintains that culturally relevant teaching “requires that teachers attend to students’ academic needs, not merely make them ‘feel good’” and that it is imperative to have students “choose academic excellence.”¹¹ By focusing on the importance of academic success in the world, teachers can foster a desire for intellectual achievement.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Teachers who focus on developing cultural competence, encourage students to learn to maintain their “cultural integrity.”¹² In their study of African American students in a Washington, D.C., Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu noted that African American students feared “acting White,” which meant they would try not to show interest in and succeed in school-related tasks.¹³

Many African American and other non-white students perceive school as a place where they cannot be themselves because their culture is not valued in American schools. Ladson-Billings contends, “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning.”¹⁴ Teachers who use culturally relevant pedagogy provide students with a curriculum that builds on their prior knowledge and cultural experiences.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Ladson-Billings contends that culturally relevant teachers “engage in the world and others critically,” and in order to do this, “students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities.”¹⁵ Simply having individual success is not engaging in citizenship, and Ladson-Billings suggests that providing opportunities for students to critique society may encourage them to change oppressive structures. (See “critical literacy.”)

In the classroom

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Focus a great deal of positive attention on the groups in the class that have the power to influence their peers. Ladson-Billings explains that one of her participant teachers “challenged the [African American] boys to demonstrate academic power by drawing on issues and ideas they found meaningful.”¹⁶

Setting high expectations for all students has also been shown to be an effective strategy for developing aspirations for academic success. Starting with small goals and scaffolding upon student knowledge, teachers can create opportunities for students to experience academic success. Once students realize they can achieve academic success, they may feel that they are taking less of a risk with a more challenging task.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

One of the participating teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study connected her love of poetry with the students’ love of rap music. Students brought in lyrics from “non-offensive rap songs” and they performed the songs while discussing the literal and figurative meanings and other characteristics of poetry.¹⁷

Another way to provide for the development and maintenance of cultural competence is to involve parents in the classroom. Teachers can find out the talents and gifts of parents and invite them into the classroom as “in-residence” experts in areas in which teachers may not be that skilled or knowledgeable. Using the skill provided by the parent or community members volunteering in the classroom, the teacher can create research opportunities for students to learn more about the topics that are familiar and important to their culture.

For example, a teacher in Ladson-Billings’ study invited a parent known for her ability to make sweet potato pie to come in and teach students how to make these desserts. The teacher then planned an entire unit around conducting research on the culinary arts and George Washington Carver’s sweet potato research, devising a marketing plan for selling pies, and writing thank you notes to the community volunteer.

Ladson-Billings points to the deliberate decisions of the participating teachers to utilize parents and family members as resources in the classroom. “[The students] also learned that what they had and where they came from was of value.” Another way of facilitating cultural competence is to “encourage students to use their home language while they acquire the secondary discourse of ‘standard’ English.”¹⁸ By teaching students how to switch back and forth between their home dialect and the ‘standard’ form of English, teachers can provide them with an invaluable skill that

will help them become more successful in school and the world beyond.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Instead of focusing on the fact that textbooks are out of date and unrepresentative of many of the cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom, teachers in Ladson-Billings' study "critiqued the knowledge represented in the textbooks, and the system of inequitable funding that allowed middle-class students to have newer texts."¹⁹ Teachers and students wrote letters to the editors of local newspapers informing the community of the paucity of adequate materials and resources. Teachers can also bring in articles and resources that represent the knowledge that supplements that which is presented by the textbook.

Notes

1. Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teaching for African-American students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 17–18. [\[return\]](#)
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3. Au, K., & Jordan, C. (1981). "Teaching reading to Hawaiian children: Finding a culturally appropriate solution." In H. Trueba, G. Guthrie, & K. Au (Eds.), *Culture and bilingual classroom: Studies in classroom ethnography* (pp. 69–86). Rowley, MA: Newbury House. [\[return\]](#)
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5. Au, K., & Jordan, C. (1981). "Teaching reading to Hawaiian children: Finding a culturally appropriate solution." In H. Trueba, G. Guthrie, & K. Au (Eds.), *Culture and bilingual classroom: Studies in classroom ethnography* (pp. 69–86). Rowley, MA: Newbury House. [\[return\]](#)
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7. Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). "But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy." *Theory into practice* 34:3, pp. 159-165. Quotations from pp. 162 and 163. [\[return\]](#)
8. Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press. Quotation from p. 29. [\[return\]](#)
9. Howard, T. (2003). "Culturally relevant pedagogy: ingredients for critical teacher reflection." *Theory into practice* 42:3, pp.195-202. Quotations from p. 197. [\[return\]](#)
10. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 160. [\[return\]](#)
11. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 160. [\[return\]](#)
12. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 160. [\[return\]](#)
13. Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). "Black students' success: Coping with the burden of 'acting White'." *Urban Review* 18, pp. 1–31. [\[return\]](#)
14. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 161. [\[return\]](#)
15. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 162. [\[return\]](#)
16. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 160. [\[return\]](#)
17. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 161. [\[return\]](#)
18. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 161. [\[return\]](#)
19. Ladson-Billings (1995), p. 162. [\[return\]](#)

