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# Culturally Responsive Teaching For Significant Relationships

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## Culturally Responsive Teaching for Significant Relationships – What Does It Look Like?

“No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” (James Comer)

Although Comer’s (2001) quote has inspired teachers across the country to connect with their students, where have teachers specifically learned how to make this happen with all students? How do we define a significant relationship? Does this relationship look the same for a middle class child as it does for a child of poverty? In defining a significant relationship between a teacher and a student, how are aspects such as respect, humor, communication and comfort enacted in a classroom? Some teachers seem to have a knack for creating a welcoming environment often referred to as a learning community but how can we help these successful teachers know why their magic works so they can replicate it? How can other teachers learn from these teachers who are able to form significant relationships? A key starting place is for teacher educators to define, describe and help develop the critical elements necessary for relationships that are essential to successful schooling. Today’s classrooms look radically different from those of just a decade ago. As the student population becomes increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic level, teachers are challenged to meet the academic, cultural and community needs of tomorrow’s citizen. However, the demographics of most educator preparation programs do not reflect the diversity of the classrooms. With 84% of our nation’s P-12 teachers coming from White backgrounds (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2011), and the percent of our nation’s students of color projected to be 39% by 2020, educator preparation programs must consider ways to provide tools to our White teachers to adequately meet the needs of our nation’s students. Educator preparation programs must prepare teachers to build on student strengths and cultures to appropriately challenge and develop students who will be competing in a rapidly changing global society. The changing dynamics of the classroom require changes in the preparation and ongoing development of teachers. Traditionally, teacher education programs have focused on developing teacher knowledge and skills (Brophy & Good, 1986; Daresh & Playko, 1992; Rosenshine & Furst, 1973; Shulman, 1986). However, research indicates that the success of a professional educator ultimately may depend on the development of necessary dispositions, such as caring for others, sensitivity to student differences, fairness, and strength in making decisions and getting things done (Burden & Byrd, 2003; Cotton, 1995;

Grant & Gillette, 2006; Sockett, 2006; Stronge, 2002; Wildy & Louden, 2000). According to Villegas (2007) dispositions are “tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs” (p. 373). To develop teachers who are prepared to meet the challenges of today’s classrooms, teachers must engage in ongoing critical reflection and learning in order to create a productive learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

Teacher education programs must embrace the challenge of developing programs that are not only pedagogically responsive to the needs of the increasingly diverse students in our nation’s classrooms, but are culturally responsive to their needs as well (Irvine, 2003). Culturally responsive teaching provides the pathway for teachers to connect with all students for academic success. This idea is firmly supported by scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1992; 2009) who describes culturally relevant teaching and Gay (2010) who discusses culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000) suggests developing the potential of diverse students by exploring both the academic and psychosocial abilities of the students through an approach described as culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching ensures that educators engage students by teaching subject matter in meaningful ways, connecting it to students’ lives (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). The three propositions of a culturally responsive teacher include conception of self and others, social relations, and conceptions of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Through culturally responsive teaching students (a) “experience academic success, (b) develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c) develop a critical consciousness” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 160). Further, she explains that “teachers who are prepared to help students become culturally competent are themselves culturally competent; they know enough about students’ culture and its role in education (teaching and learning), take responsibility for learning about students’ culture and community, use student culture as a basis for learning, and promote a flexible use of students’ local and global culture. Additionally the teachers exhibit sociopolitical consciousness that involve knowledge of the larger sociopolitical context of the school, community, nation, and world” (2001, p. 98).

Although a growing body of research discusses the need for culturally responsive teaching, what does it look like in the classroom and how do we provide specifically examples for implementation? Educator preparation programs are continually in search of strategies to facilitate teachers through “the process of knowing themselves, discovering one another, and

constructing their own thoughts and beliefs about society” Gallavan, 2005, p. 35). However, because of the mismatch between our culturally diverse students and our “culturally insular” (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996) teachers, educator preparation must consider the issues of culturally responsive teaching for teacher candidates. In considering how culturally responsive teachers form these significant relationships, four principles frame the process: interaction, accommodation, ownership, and opportunity. These four principles are closely aligned with concepts found in the literature (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 1999; Noddings, 2001; Gallavan & Webster-Smith, 2012) that suggest educators move beyond tokenistic practices such as ethnic festivals and foods toward a “transformative approach,” a more comprehensive, sustained approach that occurs at the personal and institutional levels (Banks, 2009). The four principles: interaction, accommodation, ownership and opportunity are connected in that they form a hierarchy where each serves as a building block for the others (Edwards, 2011). The initial step of interaction is followed by accommodation which enables ownership to occur. When interaction, accommodation and ownership have occurred, opportunity is possible.

### **Interaction**

Most teachers will agree that getting to know students is important for effective teaching and learning. When a teacher knows his/her students well, he/she can go beyond the idea of ‘treating others the way you’d like to be treated’ and toward a more responsive practice of ‘treating others the way they’d like to be treated.’ Interaction requires multiple methods for gaining knowledge from students and their families.

#### *Get to Know Them*

The first step in developing significant relationships with students is to interact with students to get to know them both academically and personally. Interaction is key, as it provides both a channel for the teacher to understand student motivations and a means for the teacher to show respect for students and their worlds. As soon as a teacher begins to ask how to teach “each student” rather than asking how to teach “students” then he/she begins to move toward a more interactive classroom. A simple, yet often overlooked first step for teacher preparation programs is to expect teacher candidates to learn the names of every student in the field placement classrooms as well as a minimum of three interests, hobbies or bits of information about each student. Expecting and measuring teacher candidate knowledge of student names provides an indication of the teacher candidate’s interest in interacting with students. Interactions

start with names.

Asking questions of the students and listening to the answers without judgment is the foundation of creating caring communities that support both learning and social development (Noddings, 2001). Creating this type of welcoming classroom environment determines “whether the majority of students learn anything at all” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 42). Getting to know students enables teachers to form relationships with students, families and caregivers to discover what “funds of knowledge” the families have to offer both the student and the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). The ultimate goal of this type of communication is to allow students and their families to become involved in collaboratively designing the educational experience. Increased student and family participation leads to increased student achievement (Deslandes, Royer, Turchotte, & Bertrand, 1997; Lee, 1994) and fewer disciplinary problems (Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003).

Culturally responsive teachers use learning style inventories such as the Dunn, Dunn, and Price Learning Style Inventory (2000) which enable teachers and students to see preferences for learning. In addition to formal learning style inventories, interactive teachers use informal inventories to tap into student interests. Creating lessons based on the inventories shows respect for the students, an important element in building significant relationships. In addition to asking students to identify their interests, cultures and goals for learning, culturally responsive teachers ask families for input. Families are most likely to become involved in school matters when they receive specific academic invitations (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2003). Therefore, culturally responsive teachers regularly interact with families in completing assignments and activities. Asking a parent to compose a story with a student or asking a parent to suggest reading materials for his/her son/daughter honors the family’s role in the education of their student (Edwards, 2001). Sharing these types of specific examples helps teacher candidates to see what is meant by interacting with students and families.

### *Interpreting and Responding to Behaviors*

A second area of interaction is interpreting and responding to behaviors of the students, both as individuals and as members of a classroom. A teacher must not assume student defines him/herself by visible groups. Rather, the teacher is best able to learn how the student sees

themselves by listening to the student and carefully observing behaviors. A teacher may mistakenly assume that an Asian student is avoiding eye contact because it is his/her culture when in fact the student may not follow that cultural rule at all. Although many teachers are familiar with the idea of addressing the specific behavior and not addressing the person, this idea of carefully interpreting and then responding is critical for culturally responsive teaching.

Interpreting and responding to behaviors rather than making assumptions is important for many reasons. Cary (2000) suggests second language learning students are sometimes shy and quiet in class as they listen to conversations to learn the language. If a teacher repeatedly calls on a student exhibiting these behaviors the teacher may incorrectly assume the student doesn't know the answer or doesn't want to participate in the class. In a different instance, a student who speaks out loud when the teacher is speaking may be seen as disrespectful. Gay (2010) reported the mismatch of interaction styles between some white middle-class teachers and some African American students. Some African American students speak using a communication style that shows agreement or takes issue with the teacher's comments while the teacher is speaking. This personal assertiveness is common in a call response communication pattern seen in many African American students (Obidah and Teel, 2001). In these two instances, a teacher could incorrectly assume one student is non-responsive and the other is rude rather than questioning, correctly interpreting, and responding to the specific behaviors. As members of a classroom, students look to us to model and discuss real cultural differences rather than visible physical characteristics.

Culturally responsive teachers interpret and respond to behaviors as indicators of culture rather than make assumptions in classroom management issues. Teacher candidates must have multiple opportunities to see teachers responding to behaviors. Rather than asking students for an off-hand response to a question and then dealing with the myriad of student responds, the teacher models and teaches the expected behaviors prior to a class discussion. Teacher candidates often want to guide classroom discussions but often only plan for what they want to discuss- not how the discussion will be structured. For example, a teacher may bring a prop, such as a football, as a physical reminder of the participation expectations. Students must hold the football to have the power to participate. Students wanting to talk may hold out their hands to catch the football. If a student is given the football he/she does not need to talk and can pass it on to another student. The teacher does not talk without holding the football. Culturally

responsive teachers teach expected behaviors such as this and reinforce them as the discussion continues. Because the rules of participation are clearly set, the teacher can then respond to specific behaviors that do not match the rules of participation rather than assuming a quiet student has nothing to offer and a vocal student is being rude. Teacher preparation programs must help teacher candidates develop procedures, such as this example for a classroom discussion, that will help them focus on interpreting and responding to behaviors rather than making assumptions about students.

### **Accommodation**

In addition to interaction, accommodating student needs is a crucial part of culturally responsive teaching. After teachers get to know the students and their families, the next step in developing a significant relationship is to meet students' needs and create learning situations that will take their achievement to the next level. When teachers use knowledge about their students' and families' social, cultural, and language background when planning and implementing instruction, the academic achievement of students can increase (Banks et al., 2005).

#### *See Difference*

Critical to valuing individuals is seeing the differences that exist and accepting the multiple realities of the students. If teachers do not perceive each student as a unique individual they are likely to treat all of the students the same which discounts actual differences. The ability to teach from the perspective that each student is unique allows the teacher to capitalize on the knowledge, skills and beliefs that each student brings to the classroom. The result is an enriched classroom that accommodates and celebrates individual differences.

Delpit (1995) reminds us that not seeing difference can be a dangerous approach to the classroom as it ignores real differences between and among people. There has been a shift in education away from thinking about how various cultures differ from the norm and toward thinking about how "diversity and difference are central to the classroom endeavor and central to the focus of quality teaching" (Alton-Lee, 2003, 7). Culturally responsive teachers see people as individuals with a variety of cultural influences. Because our own cultural backgrounds "define our ways of being, knowing, and doing" (Protheroe & Barsdate, 1991, 3), it is often difficult for teachers to think outside of their own culture which is why it is important for teachers to seek to accommodate students by asking their perspective. Teacher preparation programs must help teacher candidates learn to work with individual students rather than to generalize attributes to

groups of students.

### *Provide Choice*

The second area of accommodation as a means of developing significant relationships is in providing choice for students. When the teacher knows students as individuals the teacher can focus on student centered learning. Giving the students choice provides the opportunity for students to select material and tasks with which they most identify. The most important component in choice is the opportunity to acknowledge that there are multiple sources of authority, knowledge and experience outside of the traditionally espoused ones. In other words, the teacher is not the only acknowledged source of information. In this way students are helping to construct their own educational experience by deciding on the validity of alternative choices.

Tomlinson (2005) suggests modifying instruction and curriculum to meet the needs of students. Culturally responsive teachers adjust curriculum and student grouping practices because they know that differentiation impacts student achievement of standards (Tieso, 2005). Differentiating materials allows students to select works and activities that draw upon each student's strengths and culture rather than asking each student to assume a single perspective. Using flexible grouping or tiered activities (Tomlinson, 2005) allow students to work either alone or with students who have similar or complimentary strengths. Asking students to show learning through a variety of products, results in formative and summative assessments that provide meaningful and accurate data for student learning and reflective teaching practice.

One way culturally responsive teachers provide choice is through thematic or multigenre teaching (Romano, 2000). With differentiated materials, processes and products the students can make personally meaningful connections with the objectives and standards (Edwards, 2003). Multigenre reading and writing bring in content through various forms such as poetry, narratives, research reports, newspaper reports and blogs. Students are asked to process the information via these resources and then produce their own selection of writing from a menu of formats such as journals, prose, executive summaries or letters. While the content and standards remain the same for everyone, how the information is processed is individualized. Critical literacy (Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2002), such as multigenre reading and writing exercises, allow students to recognize how language has inherent power and is not neutral and therefore should be pulled apart, examined, and carefully constructed rather than blindly reproduced.

### **Ownership**



Teachers capitalizing on interactions and accommodations are now able to move toward the third area of using culturally responsive teaching which builds significant relationships in the classroom: ownership. Students who feel their teacher knows them both academically and personally are now poised to take ownership of their own learning. Teacher preparation programs must provide teacher candidates with opportunities to reflect on how their students not only learned because of the teacher candidate, but how the student took ownership of his/her own learning to do so.

*Learn from each other*

When students take ownership of their own learning, they have more opportunities than if they rely solely on the teacher. This approach empowers students and reinforces the message that education is ultimately the student's own responsibility in the sense that the students are the ones constructing the knowledge and controlling the environment. When students learn from each other through both formal and informal means, they no longer view the teacher as the keeper of the knowledge, but as the facilitator who helps the students develop their own ideas of how to live in and transform their world, thus developing independence rather than dependence.

Student-centered learning that is cooperative, collaborative and community-oriented allows for a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) that reminds students that learning does not occur in a vacuum but must be interpreted by the participants in the context of culture (Mercer, 1995). Students denied opportunities to learn from each other's multiple perspectives are denied the opportunity to develop as critical thinkers and instead undergo a process of "education for stupidification" (Macedo, 1994) which trains students to look for one accepted answer rather than to develop tools of critical citizenship. Sheets (1999) suggests that students not included in this type of classroom community fail to succeed in school more often than those students who feel they are connected to each other and to the classroom. Academic achievement grows as students take ownership of their learning and utilize other students, their life experiences, and their diverse ideas and perspectives to practice and refine their skills in a safe, supportive environment (Maloch, 2004).

Culturally responsive teachers encourage students to take ownership of their learning through purposeful strategies such as cooperative learning groups (Padron,

Waxman, & Rivera, 2002), book clubs or literature circles (Daniels, 2002), and student-directed discussion groups (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). O'Connor and Michaels (1993) suggest teachers use strategies such as “revoicing” where the teacher uses a conversational strategy to help the student participate in educational debate. Taking student ideas and framing the ideas in an academic format shows students how to gain access into academic discussions. This type of modeling, for example, takes a student who is angry about a school dress code policy and teaches him/her how to express his/her opinion in a school appropriate way. Ownership cultivates the social and academic skills necessary for active, engaged citizenship.

### *Build on Family Knowledge*

Essential to establishing a sense of ownership is incorporating work with families and the communities. These partnerships model for students that their community and the world are part of concentric circles that function interdependently. Culturally responsive teachers create learning that is in response to student cultures which are often reflected in the family. When learning builds upon and reflects a student’s culture, the student owns the learning. This ownership of learning impacts student motivation, parental beliefs about the role of the school, and student achievement.

August and Shanahan (2006) suggest teachers connect to families to make meaningful experiences since learning is often a result of academic and home experiences. Teachers must consider the cultural differences that may exist between the school and the families (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001) in creating meaningful experiences that build on family knowledge. Tapping into family “funds of knowledge” results in better student achievement (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Family involvement does not need to be characterized as either ‘parents as resources’ where families are involved in fund-raising and chaperoning field trips or as ‘parents as empty vessels’ where families are defined by what they can’t do, such as provide a dedicated space which includes Internet access for homework (Lightfoot, 2004).

Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & VanVoorhis (2003) suggest a framework for working with all families that includes requesting family support for both specific tasks as well as classroom support and integrating resources from the family and community into student learning. In addition to newsletters and school conferences, teachers can use surveys and

assessments to determine what the families expect from the teacher and the school. Touring student neighborhoods and community gathering places to identify local resources helps the teacher get a better picture of ways to incorporate ‘funds of knowledge’ into the classroom. For example, having students research their cultural backgrounds provides cultural information for the teacher and engages the student in learning from his/her family experience. Another way to build on family knowledge is to have students write a family narrative where each member of the family provides a perspective to the same story (Rees, 2000).

### **Opportunity**

Culturally responsive teaching relies on a solid pattern of interaction, accommodation and ownership so that students feel comfortable working together, knowing their opinions will be valued, and expressing themselves in multiple ways. When these elements are in place, students can challenge perceptions and reflect on their learning, thus creating opportunities that otherwise might not be realized. When students begin to do this type of higher order thinking that asks them to synthesize and evaluate, opportunity is created.

#### *Trust the community*

Opportunity requires trust in a classroom that builds through a history of interactions between and among students and the teacher. For a meaningful relationship to occur, the students must be able to see the classroom as a community where there is a need to care about each other and to acknowledge that the members are all in a struggle together. This does not mean everyone is operating on the same task at the same time, but that a community of learners means that each person is working toward his/her personal best.

Until there is an honest consideration on the part of the teacher and the student of how each student fits into the classroom community and the larger community, the student will have no real ownership of his/her education (Klem and Connell, (2004) and without this vested interest the opportunity for students to consider the ‘so what’ of a lesson is limited. The students must know that the teacher will give challenging and meaningful learning opportunities to maintain a standard of quality and trust. A teacher must be trusted to provide a supportive classroom so students will engage in taking risks, both academically and socially (Ennis and McCauley, 2002). Furrer and Skinner (2003) suggest that students who can trust the classroom community feel a sense of belonging which supports students’ enthusiasm, interest, and a willingness to participate in classroom activities. Raider-Roth (2005) support this idea and

suggest that a trusting community promotes student growth and achievement.

To create a community of trust where opportunity exists, the first thing that must be examined is a heavy reliance on seatwork (Baker, 1999). Students must engage with the teacher and other students to form relationships. Teachers must initiate tasks and interactions to entice students to participate creating an environment where students tend to share the knowledge that they believe is acceptable (Moje, 1996). Therefore, strategies such as having students check their answers with a peer before answering to the large group may encourage students to take risks and participate in a classroom discussion. A trusting community is also created when the teacher works with individuals patiently and deliberately rather than quickly providing a correct answer. Time spent with a student shows authenticity and sincerity which also helps to develop a significant relationship.

### *Teach Reflection*

Once students are comfortable taking risks, they must learn how to analyze and reflect upon their own thinking. Teaching is culturally responsive when students can explain the process of what and why they believe a certain thing to be important. The student comes to understand there is a process for discerning what someone believes to be accurate and true. A student who reflects honestly and frequently has practice looking for motivations, seeing connections between circumstances, thoughts and behaviors and can therefore have a better understanding of someone else's perceptions and ideas. Teaching students to reflect on their thinking creates opportunity for students to better understand both their culture and the role it plays in society.

Opportunity is created when culturally responsive teachers use lessons to allow students to consider questions and concepts to examine the intersect of cultures. For example, one teacher may develop lessons around historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement to consider the power inequities of society and through opportunity, help students develop a critical understanding of their place as individuals in a classroom as well as in a larger social picture (Freire, 1998). Metacognition, or the awareness a student has of his/her own learning allows the students to think about their thinking. This process of considering one's own thinking also allows the student to evaluate moral and ethical issues (Niemi, 2002).

Teaching students how to engage in reflection is critical to developing problem solving skills that are the gateway to opportunities. Encouraging students to question their perceptions

leads to a critical examination of facts and ideas. One model for teaching reflection is based in the three-level process used to analyze an event (Carter, 1991). The student is first asked to describe the event to identify and outline the specific event to be considered. The student then analyzes the event by finding sources to identify aspects, illustrate ideas, or deconstruct the event. After the first two steps of this process are complete the student can then use metacognitive strategies to consider the 'so what' of the event in an evaluation stage. This three step process is one of many ways students can analyze their thinking. Most importantly, in order for opportunity to occur, culturally responsive teachers must create lessons that allow students to reflect on their learning and to put it into a larger context.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding culturally responsive teaching and being able to recognize and implement the principles of interaction, accommodation, ownership and opportunity in order to build significant relationships is essential for preparing teachers for pluralistic schools and classrooms. As Gallavan & Webster-Smith (2012) point out, "The further one travels on the journey of cultural competence, the more chances one has to experience the power of momentum that increases the prospects of self-efficacy in terms of believing that one can become increasingly culturally competent." Culturally responsive teaching is effective teaching, and effective teaching addresses the academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness of students. The goal for the culturally responsive teacher is not to create individualized instruction for each student for every learning task but to be aware of when a student is not able to learn because of a cultural barrier (Delpit, 1995). As Stewart (2007) suggests, the world of today's student is far different from the one of just ten years ago. With an economy where currently one in every five jobs is tied to global trade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) our nation's education system is challenged to prepare students to for an increasingly global society. In order to engage in this ever-changing world, students must be critical thinkers who can work with others to incorporate multiple perspectives and teacher preparation programs must take the lead in making this happen.

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