

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Empowering Students Through Respect

By Monica Fuglei • June 11, 2014

When a class sees their teacher as an ally in their quest for an education, they perform better. Combative power relationships between teachers and students are being abandoned as more teachers seek a pedagogy that acknowledges students' ownership of their own education and engagement with the world at large.



What is culturally responsive teaching?

An excellent way to help students tap into that capability is through culturally responsive teaching, or CRT. CRT seeks to empower students educationally and to expand their capabilities in other spheres including social, emotional, and political arenas by making students' own skills, languages, and attitudes meaningful in the classroom.

Adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy doesn't mean making assumptions about a person's culture based on their looks, age, or socioeconomic status. Instead, it means getting to know students in a way that is personal and individual.

Acknowledging and embracing a student's racial or ethnic background is important, but it is just a piece of who they are. Fully recognizing and respecting them means learning how they learn and what they are passionate about or interested in.

Identifying classmates' common passions and cultural intersections

Identifying a student's learning style is important, but learning who they are is essential as well. Once teachers know what students like, they are able to identify a classroom's shared passions and areas where cultures intersect.

While establishing a culturally responsive classroom, teachers should avoid awkwardly embracing things they think students will like — no student wants a teacher who seems like a fake. Curiosity about the student experience and insight, on the other hand, can truly open a path of understanding between students and teachers.

High expectations and discussions on code-switching

Finding a literal and metaphorical language for reaching students does not mean lowering standards. A culturally responsive teacher must maintain and communicate high expectations for students' behavior and performance.

Using students' cultural lingo in class discussions might mean some meta-discussions on code-switching and the importance of academic language in an academic setting. Students whose own cultures have been recognized and respected will be more likely to adopt, even temporarily, the code-switching necessary in the classroom. Students who engage in this practice will have learned far more than the content of the original discussion; their learning will translate to out-of-class applications.

Students who feel valued take ownership of their learning

Perhaps the most important quality of CRT is that teachers must shift toward a liberatory pedagogy that emphasizes student engagement and experience over a teacher's ability to lecture on content. Embracing a classroom style that puts a teacher in the position of facilitator instead of specialist can be very difficult, but the action has significant payoff.

Students whose lives and cultures are not treated as important are less likely to invest in the overall learning process, whereas those who are empowered and feel valued will be ready to learn, even if that connection is made through something as simple as teaching the lesson through pop culture, movies, or the music that the class will enjoy.

In addition, students who embrace their role as powerful actors inside the classroom may go on to act as change agents outside of the classroom. In this way, a culturally responsive curriculum makes room for service learning opportunities that connect classrooms to many cultures inside and away from school.

Teachers must examine their own belief systems as well

On a final note, a crucial — and challenging — aspect of culturally responsive instruction is to abandon old ideas about cultural deficits, whether they are related to ethnic or cultural backgrounds or socioeconomic status. Teachers must be careful not to convey judgment in the classroom that might reflect upon students' families, friends, or personal histories. This means addressing their own assumptions about different behaviors, like the parent who forgot to sign off on homework or missed an important parent-teacher meeting.

Educators should work to establish meaningful communication and relationships with student's families that allow them to understand why parent/teacher communication might break down and overcome those barriers. When students see family and teacher collaboration and mutual respect, they are more likely to invest in their education in meaningful and lasting ways.