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# Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity

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## **ABSTRACT**

This discussion examines some of the major issues and attributes of culturally responsive teaching. It begins with explaining my views of culturally responsive teaching and how I incorporate cultural responsiveness in my writing to teach readers what it means. These general conceptual frameworks are followed by a discussion of some specific actions essential to its implementation. They are restructuring teacher attitudes and beliefs about cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity; resisting resistance to cultural diversity in teacher education and classroom instruction; centering culture and difference in the teaching process; and establishing pedagogical connections between culturally responsive teaching and subjects and skills routinely taught in schools. Excerpts from samples of my own and others' scholarship are woven throughout to exemplify general patterns, themes, and principles of culturally responsive teaching.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this essay I examine culturally responsive teaching as characterized in my own writings, and the scholarship of a few other authors. The focus is on some, but by no means all, of its principles and attributes commonly endorsed by scholars in the field to explain its ideological foundations and operational necessities, rather than specific instructional strategies for use with students per se. As such, teachers and teaching are foregrounded, with students and learning being contingent, but necessary, elements of the discourse.

The discussion is organized into six parts. The first part describes my concept of culturally responsive teaching and some of its salient features. Part two explains how I write to teach others how to understand and do culturally responsive teaching. Parts three through six examine some specific actions of culturally responsive teaching. Sequentially, they are restructuring attitudes and beliefs about ethnic and cultural diversity; resisting resistance or countering opposition to cultural diversity; centering culture

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and difference in the teaching process; and establishing pedagogical connections between culturally responsiveness and other dimensions or areas of teaching. This order of presentation reflects my ideological position that, whether positive, negative, or ambivalent, beliefs and attitudes always precede and shape behaviors. Therefore, in explaining culturally responsive teaching it makes sense to examine teacher beliefs before instructional actions. This is not a universally accepted sequence. Other scholars may agree that all of the topics included here are necessary for understanding and implementing culturally responsive teaching but arrange them differently.

### CONCEPT OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

During the earlier phases of my writing on cultural diversity I argued more for including accurate content about and comprehensive portrayals of ethnically and racially diverse groups and experiences in various subject matter curricula than about teaching. These priorities were consistent with the general developmental trends within this domain in the 1970s and 1980s. I reasoned, as did other advocates, that accurate information about ethnic and cultural diversity was necessary for both minority and majority students to counteract the negative discriminations and distortions perpetuated in conventional conceptions of knowledge and truth, in schooling generally, and in society at large. Unlike some of the early scholars who emphasized historical knowledge and experiences, my preference always leaned more toward cultural and contemporary content, with historical experiences as foundational influences. This emphasis on “teaching to” cultural diversity helps students acquire more accurate knowledge about the lives, cultures, contributions, experiences, and challenges of different ethnic and racial groups in U.S. society, knowledge that is often unrecognized or denigrated in conventional schooling.

Over the last 15 years or so I have written more about culturally responsive teaching. In this innovation, I argue that the education of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students should connect in-school learning to out-of-school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds; and develop students’ agency, efficacy, and empowerment. For example, culturally responsive teaching specifies what making learning relevant for Asian American students (and particular groups within this ethnic category such as people of Filipino, Chinese, or Korean ancestry) means conceptually and pragmatically, and how and why these actions and ideas differ for African Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans.

I define culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of

ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010c, p. 31). It is a means for improving achievement by teaching diverse students *through* their own cultural filters. In one of my first publications, I made a statement about effectively teaching ethnically diverse students that represents my initial thoughts on what I later called culturally responsive teaching. Although it has been further refined, crystallized, and deepened over the years, its essence continues and is evident in my current concept of culturally responsive teaching. In the 1972 article, I stated:

Education must be specifically designed to perpetuate and enrich the culture of a people and equip them with the tools to become functional participants in society, if they so choose. This education cannot progress smoothly unless it is based upon and proceeds from the cultural perspectives of the group of people for whom it is designed. Since all Americans do not have the same set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, values, and norms, a single system of education seems impossible to serve everyone. . . . [Educators] must accept the existence of cultural pluralism in this country and respect differences without equating them with inferiorities or tolerating them with an air of condescension. (p. 35)

This position is reaffirmed in my 2010(c) book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. The similarity between the 1972 and 2010 statements suggests continuity and cohesion in my thinking about the importance of being responsive to cultural diversity in teaching students of different ethnic heritages and racial backgrounds. In the more recent publication (2010c) I state:

Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning. It is contingent on . . . seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

Culturally responsive teaching is grounded in some beliefs that are fundamentally different from most of those that govern how educational programs and practices historically have been designed for underachieving students of color. It is an equal educational opportunity initiative that accepts differences among ethnic groups, individuals, and cultures as normative to the human condition and valuable to societal and personal development. It foregrounds the positive learning possibilities of marginalized students and their heritage groups instead of belaboring their

problems and pathologies (Gay, 2010c, 2010d). These ideas are similar to those offered by other proponents of culturally responsive teaching, such as Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b), Irvine (2003), and Hollins and Oliver (1999). For example, according to Ladson-Billings (1995b) cultural relevant teaching (her term of choice) is based on three propositions. Students must experience academic success, develop and/or maintain contact and competence with their primary cultural heritages, and learn how to critique, challenge, and transform inequities, injustices, oppressions, exploitations, power, and privilege.

My concept of culturally responsive teaching has evolved to include both substantive and process dimensions, as well as acquiring cultural competence and using cultural resources to facilitate better teaching and learning. The axis of emphasis also has shifted over time. Earlier, instruction or teaching was the subtext to curriculum. Now the central focus is teaching, with curriculum content as one of its components. These shifting concentrations are explained in detail in *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2010c). Implicit in them is the potential of culturally responsive teaching to improve multiple kinds of achievement that are beneficial for many different students, although for different reasons and in different ways (2010d). Culturally responsive teaching:

simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique; cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; . . . individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring. It uses [different] ways of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes, and skills. It cultivates cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students, and between students and teachers. It incorporates high-status, cultural knowledge about different ethnic groups in all subjects and skills taught. . . . Thus, [it] validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers ethnically diverse students by . . . cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success. (pp. 45–46)

This comprehensive agenda inspired the title of this essay, “Teaching To and Through Cultural Diversity.” I (2010c) offer a further justification for and explanation of what it represents, also in *Culturally Responsive Teaching*:

A very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches to and through their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments. Culturally responsive teaching is this kind of paradigm. It is at once a routine and a radical proposal. It is routine because it does for Native American, Latino, Asian American, African American, and low-income students what traditional instructional ideologies and actions do for middle-class European Americans. That is, they filter curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference . . . [making them] more personally meaningful and easier to master. It is radical because it makes explicit the previously implicit role of culture in teaching and learning, and it insists that educational institutions accept the legitimacy and viability of ethnic group cultures in improving

learning outcomes. . . . The close interactions among ethnic identity, cultural background, and cognition are becoming increasingly apparent. . . . It is these interactions . . . that give source and focus, power and direction to culturally responsive teaching. (pp. 26–27)

### **WRITING TO TEACH TO AND THROUGH CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Readers of scholarship, like students interacting with teachers, may not share the authors' priorities, points of reference, and discourse styles. Therefore, authors should be deliberate about explaining their issues of concern in ways that are understandable to others beyond their own ideological and disciplinary communities. In so doing, writers function as interpreters and translators for readers in ways somewhat similar to how teachers mediate between the subject matter content and academic skills they teach and their students' experiential backgrounds. These mediating functions of authors and teachers are particularly important when the topics of discussion are unfamiliar or contentious as is often the case with ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. Although these issues have been present in U.S. schools for many years, they are still problematic for teachers who may accept the general idea of culturally responsive teaching but may not know what it means for practical application.

Explanations of culturally responsive teaching need to be clear and specific so that a wide range of readers can understand what is being said without too much difficulty. One way to accomplish this is to minimize the use of encoded vocabulary. When this is unavoidable, I decode and demystify it. For instance, I rarely use terms like "voice," "deconstruct," and "interrogate," words that are very common in discussions about inequities and injustices. But, when I do, I define what they mean to me and how I am using them. Conversely, culture is a concept that I find very powerful and useful in my conceptions of culturally responsive teaching. I often shift between using the term itself and its equivalent meanings. Instead of simply saying "culture," I will sometimes say "values, attitudes, and beliefs," "customs and traditions," "heritages and contributions," or "experiences and perspectives," all of which I consider as equivalents of "culture."

It is also important for authors and teachers to declare how they understand and engage with diversity. My priorities are race, culture, and ethnicity as they relate to underachieving students of color and marginalized groups in K–12 schools. Other authors may focus instead on gender, sexual orientation, social class, or linguistic diversity as specific contexts for actualizing general principles of culturally responsive teaching. It is not that one set of priorities is right or wrong, or that all proponents of culturally responsive teaching should endorse the same constituencies. But they should make their commitments explicit and how they exemplify the general principles and values of teaching to and through cultural diversity.

This is why I typically avoid using diversity and difference without any qualifying descriptors. I also explain why I consider certain specified types of diversity as paramount to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for underachieving students.

My ethnic, racial, and cultural identity as African American is the primary anchor and explanation for what I emphasize in analyzing current educational realities and future possibilities for marginalized students of color. I know from personal experiences the transformative benefits of culturally responsive teaching, and the devastating effects of perpetual failure due to educational irrelevance and ineffectiveness. So, my advocacy for teaching to and through cultural diversity to improve the achievement of ethnically diverse students is both a personal priority and a more generalized educational mandate. It is infused with a conviction that extends beyond intellectual competence and accumulated professional experience. I am neither apologetic for these autobiographical nuances in my scholarship, nor do I pretend they do not exist. While I do not always make these declarations explicit, their presence is not difficult to discern. I am not unique in writing (and teaching) through my own filters of identity and affiliation. This is a common occurrence among scholars of cultural diversity and for classroom teachers in general. As Don Hamachek (1999) suggests, "Teachers teach not only a curriculum of study, they also become part of it. The subject matter they teach is mixed with the content of their personalities" (p. 208). William Ayers (2001) makes a similar observation, noting that "greatness in teaching . . . requires a serious encounter with autobiography . . . because teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves" (p. 122).

I routinely incorporate insights derived from ideology, theory, research, and practice involving a variety of subjects, locations, and student populations into my explanations of culturally responsive teaching. I also am always cognizant of the likelihood that readers of my work will be at different stages of their own development as culturally responsive teachers. While there is no way I can anticipate all of these differences, I do try to provide a variety of resources, explanations, and other engagement opportunities, just as teachers are expected to differentiate instruction to accommodate the learning styles and capabilities of their ethnically different students. These may include research studies, written and media resources about ethnic and cultural diversity, instructional programs and strategies, critical reflections, conceptual principles to guide instructional practices, and activities for teaching skills and cognitive knowledge about cultural diversity. I try to be culturally responsive in the process of informing readers about how to understand and function as culturally responsive teachers. The next sections of this essay provide some more specific ways this is done by examining four major actions essential to implementing culturally responsive teaching that I, and others, write about frequently.

## RESTRUCTURING ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

Culturally responsive teaching requires replacing pathological and deficient perceptions of students and communities of color with more positive ones. While the problems and challenges these populations face in society and schools must be addressed they should not be the only emphases. Educational innovations motivated by and framed only in negativism do not generate constructive and sustainable achievement transformations for ethnically and culturally diverse students. Furthermore, there is an underlying fallacy in the pathological perceptions of communities and students of color that needs to be debunked. This is the assumption of universal marginality, powerlessness, and disadvantage.

I counter this implicit claim by pointing out that marginality is contextual and relative; that there is something positive and constructive among people and communities most disadvantaged in mainstream society; and that teachers genuinely committed to transforming learning opportunities for students from these communities must identify, honor, and engage these resources or funds of knowledge in their reform efforts. There is, indeed, power, potential, creativity, imagination, ingenuity, resourcefulness, accomplishment, and resilience among marginalized populations. Thus, no individual or group is perpetually powerless in all circumstances. These orientations represent a significant shift in perceptions of poor, underachieving ethnically diverse students, and can revolutionize educational interventions designed for them. In taking these positions I am in agreement with A. Wade Boykin's (2002) recommendation to concentrate more on the promise and potential of African American students instead of exclusively on their problems, and the analyses of Mexican American students' community funds of knowledge offered by Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti (2005). My thinking is also influenced by other scholars such as McCarty (2002), Lipka (1998), and Wigginton (1985), who argue for using the social and cultural capital of Navajos, Yup'iks, and Appalachian Whites, respectively, as resources for improving their educational achievement.

Some of the negative beliefs that need to be reconsidered and even abandoned are the living conditions of students of color are so dysfunctional that they cannot concentrate on learning, and some ethnic minority students disassociate from school achievement to avoid acting White. Other pathological beliefs are imposed on teachers, sometimes by themselves but most often by others. They range in severity from mild ones like not caring about or being comfortable with relating to ethnically diverse students and parents, to not having the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach students who are not middle-class European Americans, to being intentionally racist. There is some degree of truth in these claims and other pathological or negative beliefs about students and teachers, but indictment and "overkill" are not good strategies for changing them. Culturally responsive teaching is more about finding solutions to achievement disparities in



schools than simply casting dispersions on students and teachers. As I suggest in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2010c):

Merely belaboring the disproportionately poor academic performance of certain students of color, or blaming their families and social class backgrounds, is not very helpful in implementing reforms to reverse achievement trends. . . . [S]imply pointing out achievement problems does not lead to their solutions. . . . The underachievement of some ethnic groups has been spotlighted again and again over several generations, and the situation has not gotten any better. . . .

It is also true that some of the disparity is attributable to racism and cultural hegemony in the educational enterprise. But to declare this is not enough to direct a functional and effective change agenda. More constructive reform strategies must be employed. (pp. xvii–xviii)

Later in this same book, I explain further that

Success does not emerge out of failure, weakness does not generate strength, and courage does not stem from cowardice. Instead, success begets success. Mastery of tasks at one level encourages individuals to accomplish tasks of even greater complexity. . . . To pursue [learning] with conviction, and eventual competence, requires students to have some degree of academic mastery, and personal confidence and courage. In other words, learning derives from a basis of strength and capability, not weakness and failure. (p. 26)

In other publications I propose some alternative beliefs for consideration in explaining the underachievement of students of color and poverty that offer more constructive directions for instructional change. They include cultural incompatibilities between the schools and homes of ethnically and racially diverse students; stress and anxiety associated with continually crossing cultural borders between home and school; the existential gap between students and teachers due to such factors as race, class, gender, age, education, ethnicity, and residence; the absence of ethnic and cultural diversity in school programs, practices, and personnel; ethnically diverse students' perceptions of schools as hostile, unfriendly, and uncaring; and significant variability in students' access to and mastery of the social capital of schooling. I (2010a) also recommend that prospective and practicing teachers critique their own beliefs about culturally diverse students, and how these affect their instructional behaviors by examining such questions as:

- What do I believe are the underlying causes of achievement difficulties of various culturally diverse students?
- Am I able and willing to articulate and scrutinize my beliefs about cultural diversity in general and about particular ethnic groups?
- Can I discern how specific beliefs about different ethnic populations are embedded in particular instructional decisions and behaviors?
- Am I willing to consider making significant changes in my attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and, if so, do I know how to proceed? (p. 144)

These perceptions of the importance of attitudes and beliefs in shaping instructional actions are not unique to me, or to teaching ethnically and culturally diverse students. There are long traditions of research and critiques of teacher beliefs across various demographics among student populations including gender, social class, linguistic diversity, racial identity, intellectual ability, location of schools (urban, rural, and suburban), and curricular options (see, for example, Nesper, 1987; Fang, 1996; Oakes, 2005; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Villegas, 2007). These studies and analyses of classroom practices may differ on specific details, but the findings are generally consistent that teachers' instructional behaviors are strongly influenced by their attitudes and beliefs about various dimensions of student diversity. Positive attitudes about ethnic, racial, and gender differences generate positive instructional expectations and actions toward diverse students, which, in turn, have positive effects on students' learning efforts and outcomes. Conversely, negative teacher beliefs produce negative teaching and learning behaviors.

### **RESISTING RESISTANCE**

Teachers need to know from the outset that there is a lot of opposition to culturally responsive teaching. It has different causes and takes varied forms. These can range from rather benign ambiguities and uncertainties about engaging cultural diversity, to explicit rejection of its reality and value in education. Many of the beliefs about cultural, ethnic, and racial differences discussed in the last section are closely associated with resistance to culturally responsive teaching. They represent attitudinal dispositions that can prompt resistance. Part of the challenge to culturally responsive teaching is confronting resistance without simultaneously diverting attention and effort away from promoting cultural diversity. The first step is to acknowledge and understand its causes, manifestations, and consequences.

Two of the most common and recurrent forms of resistance to culturally responsive teaching manifest as doubts about its validity and as anxieties about anticipated difficulties with its implementation. They are generated by teachers themselves as well as U.S. society and schools. Society and schools cultivate resistance through persistent and pervasive practices that treat ethnic and cultural diversity as contentious, negative, insignificant, or nonexistent. Some teachers resist individually by erroneously equating culturally responsive teaching with being racist and discriminatory by highlighting differences. Others resist by claiming incompetence (i.e., "I would do it if I knew how") without making any commitment to develop needed knowledge and skills. Still others demand certainty of success before even attempting any culturally responsive teaching. In an article on these resistances, I (2010a) wrote:

The unspoken but otherwise graphically conveyed idea remains that “talking about differences, especially if they are race-related is taboo.” Part of the problem here is lack of experience with people who are different, conceptual confusion between acknowledging differences and discriminating against students of color, and the fallacious assumption that conversations about race with people of color will always be contentious. (p. 145)

Consequently, teachers may concentrate on only “safe” topics about cultural diversity such as cross-group similarities and intergroup harmony, and ethnic customs, cuisines, costumes, and celebrations while neglecting more troubling issues like inequities, injustices, oppressions, and major contributions of ethnic groups to societal and human life.

I try to help teachers cope with these kinds of resistances by explaining that culturally responsive teaching is a developmental process that involves learning over time, and that there is nothing inherently discriminatory about acknowledging the existence of human difference in its various forms. Furthermore, diversity in teaching techniques and resources is necessary to achieve educational equity and excellence. These ideas are often embedded in titles I give to my works. For example, a book I edited in 2003 on *Becoming Multicultural Educators* is subtitled, *Personal Journey Toward Professional Agency*. It was created deliberately to convey that culturally responsive teaching is both a personal and a professional endeavor, and that the knowledge and skills needed are cumulative and acquired gradually over time instead of being mastered all at once. Another document is titled, *At the Essence of Learning: Multicultural Education* (1994). Its intent is to demonstrate that cultural diversity is a fundamental aspect of what constitutes effective teaching and learning for all students. A third example is “A Personal Case of Culturally Responsive Teaching Praxis” in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2010c). It describes some of my own teaching techniques to illustrate what conceptual principles of culturally responsive teaching look like in actual practice. Hence, I show prospective and inservice teachers, and teacher educators how my teaching approaches are examples of what I recommend that they do with their students.

These messages suggest that teachers can build their capacities to recognize, analyze, circumvent, and/or overcome opposition to and anxiety about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. I encourage them to accept the necessity of struggle that involves the redistribution of knowledge, power, and privilege, as culturally responsive teaching does. In providing these explanations I am mindful of the observation made by Frederick Douglass that power concedes nothing without demand (*Frederick Douglass quotes*, n.d.).

Some of the analyses Hilda Taba (1962) provides about why teachers are hesitant to embrace change also are helpful to me in understanding and responding to resistance to culturally responsive teaching. According to her “the folklore of school culture” (p. 463) is the culprit. This folklore presents ideal teachers as knowing all the answers and not needing to

explore, experiment, or make any modifications in their instructional behaviors. It is sometimes stated as “a really good teacher for any student and setting is good for all students and settings.” This folklore does not create dispositions readily receptive to educational innovation and change. Instead, as Taba (1962) notes, it causes teachers to be intimidated by

risks of making mistakes, of discovering deficiencies, of not succeeding, of proceeding without sufficient skill. . . . These risks are a sufficient deterrent even for secure teachers. In some situations, making mistakes can be both personally and professionally threatening. . . . [Teachers’] whole training and experience [have] led them to expect answers from “qualified” persons and to depend on “competent” aid in suggesting materials and procedures . . . teachers want immediate answers and even show hostility when the questions are thrown back to them, because that suggests that the “experts” are shirking their responsibility. To be sure, this pressure for immediate answers is generated in part by the urgency of the practical situation. But equally responsible is the tendency of teachers to underestimate their own roles and abilities. (p. 464)

Some of the recurrent resistance to culturally responsive teaching might be more about difficulties and anxieties associated with embracing change in general than cultural diversity specifically. I wonder if this is what is happening when my students in multicultural teacher education classes declare that they are afraid, but are unable or unwilling to explain the sources and details of their fear. So, Taba’s explanations cause me to reconsider some of the assumptions I make about the passive resistance to cultural diversity frequently expressed by some teachers. Some alternative and unexplored strategies for preparing teachers to resist resistance to culturally responsive teaching may be required. These possibilities deserve further consideration by me and other proponents.

Another resistance that has profound implications for implementing culturally responsive teaching is evident in the instructional materials most readily available and used by teachers, such as textbooks, mass media, trade books, Internet and other electronic resources, and personal experiences. Even at their best, these resources still provide incomplete portrayals of ethnic and cultural diversity, and too often their presentations are distorted or inaccurate. There is a long and comprehensive body of research on the treatment of various kinds of diversity in textbooks and other instructional materials that can help teachers resist perpetuating distortions of cultural and ethnic differences. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2010c), I summarize four problematic trends revealed by textbook analyses. They are:

First, there is an imbalance across ethnic groups of color, with most attention given to African Americans and their experiences. . . . Second, the content included about ethnic issues is rather bland, conservative, conformist, and “safe.” . . . Contentious issues and individuals are avoided, and the unpleasant sides of society and cultural diversity are either sanitized or bypassed entirely. Third, gender and

social-class disparities prevail within the representations of ethnic groups, with preference given to males, the middle class, and events and experiences that are closely aligned with mainstream European American values, beliefs, and standards of behavior. Fourth, textbook discussions about ethnic groups and their concerns are not consistent across time, with contemporary issues being overshadowed by historical ones. (pp. 130–131)

These conditions of textbooks (and other instructional materials) are far from ideal, but they are not hopeless. As part of their culturally responsive teaching, teachers and their students should critique teaching resources and strategies, and compensate for inadequacies when necessary. I suggest that teachers and students conduct their own analyses of textbooks, mass media, Internet, literary sources, and personal narratives; explore how personal background and environmental factors influence authors' scholarship; examine multiple ethnic descriptions and interpretations of events and experiences; investigate how different knowledge sources affect teaching and learning; and reconstruct or replace existing presentations of issues and situations in the various resources with their own acquired cultural knowledge and insights. In such activities, several principles of culturally responsive teaching are invoked, namely using multiple ethnic and disciplinary perspectives, encouraging the social construction of knowledge, fostering educational reconstruction and transformation, promoting critical cultural consciousness, and modeling learning in teaching.

Demands and challenges prompted by the current standards movement with its emphases on the same measures and indicators of academic achievement for all students also create resistance to culturally responsive teaching. Many teachers are genuinely troubled about the assumed tensions between expectations of high academic standards for everyone and differentiating instruction according to ethnicity, race, and culture. They also often declare that there is no time left for teaching to and through cultural diversity after attending to the other standards mandates they must meet.

Analyses of sample standards for several different subjects (such as reading, math, writing, and social studies) from state, national, and professional agencies reveal two features that have direct implications for culturally responsive teaching. One may aggravate the anxieties some teachers have about the goodness of fit between standards and cultural diversity; the other offers opportunities for connecting them. First, with few exceptions, standards "seem to ascribe to a colorblind philosophy as evident by avoiding any specific reference to cultural diversity, social class, race, and ethnicity beyond the superficial such as names of characters . . . in scenarios and prompts for test items" (Gay, 2010c, p. 138). Second, standards are knowledge and skills students are expected to learn so teachers can use culturally responsive techniques to accomplish these outcomes. For instance, in teaching to meet the standards of "reading different materials for a variety of purposes," and "understanding the meaning of what is read," I (2010c) suggest that

reading materials could include a variety of genres of writings by different ethnic authors, and about different ethnic groups' cultures, heritages, experiences, and contributions. Comprehension of these materials could be assessed by asking students to decipher or interpret culturally encoded messages and convert them from one expressive form to another, such as from poetry to explanatory essays, and from narrative autobiography to conversational dialogue. Similar extensions of standards in other subject areas are possible as well. For example, ethnically and culturally specific contexts, events, and situations (e.g., performance standards or benchmarks) could be used for students to demonstrate math standards like "using algebraic skills to describe real-world phenomena symbolically and graphically," and "using concepts of statistics and probability to collect and analyze data and test hypotheses." (p. 139)

I try to dispel misconceptions that cultural diversity and high academic quality as symbolized by standards are incompatible, and that race and ethnicity are either too volatile to discuss at all, or are no longer significant because the United States has become a post-racial society. I explain, with supportive documentation from research findings and practical experiences (such as those provided by Ayers, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Feagin, 2006; Loewen, 1995) that any kind of teaching involves more than conveying information, and that much content taught regularly in U.S. schools is incomplete or inaccurate with respect to ethnically diverse contributions. Despite hopes for the contrary, research also indicates that racism is still persistent and pervasive in U.S. society and schools. In explaining racism my positions are akin to those of critical race theorists, such as Ladson-Billings (1998), Dixson and Rousseau (2005), and Lopez (2003). They argue that racism is so deeply ingrained in U.S. institutions, culture, and life that it is normalized, and often difficult to recognize, especially by dominant and privileged European Americans. Other aspects of teaching that are powerful forces in the development of culturally responsiveness are ideology, learning environments and classroom climates, student–teacher relationships, curriculum development, and performance assessment (Gay, 2010a, 2010c, 2010d). For example, access to knowledge about culturally responsive teaching from the perspectives of more ethnically diverse scholars, and a wider variety of subject matter orientations might increase teachers' confidence and competence about implementing it in their own classrooms.

### **CENTERING CULTURE AND DIFFERENCE**

In addition to confronting resistance and developing more positive beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, teachers need to understand how and why culture and difference are essential ideologies and foundations of culturally responsive teaching. To facilitate this understanding I argue that culture and difference are neither inherently good nor bad, neither automatically privileging nor disparaging. They simply are, and

should be understood accordingly. At the onset of life people have no choice in the matter. Culture and difference are an unconditional part of their human heritage. As the life cycle unfolds they may, for various reasons, modify or embellish their social and human inheritances but they cannot choose to be or not to be cultural and different. Therefore, it is futile for educators to claim that they can attend to the needs of students (for academic learning and otherwise) without engaging their cultural socialization, and to expect students to divorce themselves from their cultural heritages easily and at will.

Similar arguments apply to other aspects of human difference, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and ability. But space restrictions and the limitations of my expertise do not allow me to comment on all of them here, or any one of them as thoroughly as it deserves. I present a few comments about racial difference and education only. More thorough analyses of race and racism in education, as well as other forms of difference are readily available from the scholarship of a wide variety of ethnically diverse educators and social scientists. Four helpful resources for teachers are Banks and Banks (2004, 2010), Howe (2010), Bonilla-Silva (2003), and Tuan (1998).

Within the context of U.S. history, society, and education, race is one of the most powerful, pervasive, and problematic manifestations of human difference. Too many teachers try to dismiss or neutralize its significance by claiming that no pure races exist, and that race is a social construction. This may be true, but a definitive feature of achievement gaps in U.S. schools is racial inequities. I want my readers to understand that, from my vantage point, whichever way race initially came to be, it exists and it matters profoundly in teaching ethnically diverse students. Yet, race, like culture and other human differences, does not carry any inherent stamp of privilege or problem; these are socially and politically constructed. Problems arise when perceptions of and value judgments about race, culture, and ethnicity held by some individuals and groups are imposed upon others.

I examine the dialectic relationships among humanity, race, culture, ethnicity, and education, how they are configured within different groups, and how they should be perceived and engaged in teaching and learning. The analyses are therefore centered on realities and possibilities. Admittedly, these are complex and difficult issues for many teachers to grasp, but they cannot be ignored, or wished away, if all students are to receive the best learning opportunities possible. My intention is to remove the veil of threat and untouchability that often surrounds culture, race, and difference, and help teachers to genuinely see and accept them as potentially empowering factors for educating students. At the heart of these arguments is my belief that teaching to and through cultural diversity is a humanistic, realistic, normative, and transformative endeavor. Since culture and difference are essential to humanity, they should play a central role in teaching and learning. To ignore them is to assure that the human dignity and

learning potential of ethnically, culturally, and racially diverse students are constrained or minimized. Therefore, understanding, using, and enhancing diversities inherent to humanity are important aspects of culturally responsive teaching.

These affinities between the nature of culture, teaching, and living should increase receptivity to cultural diversity in education. But this often is not the case. So what is the problem? Much of my argument about the importance of culture in teaching and learning is motivated by questions like this. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2010c) I explain:

[L]ike any other social or biological organism [culture] is multidimensional and continually changing. It must be so to remain vital and functional for those who create it and for those it serves. As manifested in expressive behaviors, culture is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including time, setting, age, economics, and social circumstances. This expressive variability does not nullify the existence of some core cultural features and focal values in different ethnic groups. . . . Designating core or modal [cultural] characteristics does not imply that they will be identically manifested by all group members. Nor will these characteristics be negated if some group members do not exhibit any of them as described. How individual members of ethnic groups express their shared features varies widely for many different reasons. (p. 10)

Many instructional messages conveyed in these statements respond to frequent critiques and misconceptions of culture, to unreasonable demands imposed upon culture as a condition of its validity, and to the need to understand how culture is embodied in actual behavior.

Insights I gain from the writings of Young Pai (1990), George Spindler (1987), Frederick Erickson (2010), and Spradlin and Parsons (2008) inform my conceptions of the pluralistic nature of culture enacted in attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors, and its significance in educating students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. A statement made by Erickson (2010) is illustrative of these insights:

In a sense, everything in education relates to culture—to its acquisition, its transmission, and its invention. Culture is in us and all around us, just as the air we breathe. In its scope and distribution it is personal, familial, communal, institutional, social, and global. (p. 35)

Further confirmation derives from the observations of Spradlin and Parsons (2008) that

No aspect of human life is *not* touched and altered by culture. Our personalities, the way we think, and the ways we solve problems, as well as methods we use to organize ourselves, are all given shape, in large part, by cultural experiences. However, we frequently take the great influence of culture on our lives for granted and fail to identify the significant and sometimes subtle ways culture affects our behavior. (p. 4, italics in original)



## ESTABLISHING PEDAGOGICAL CONNECTIONS

Culturally responsive teaching, in idea and action, emphasizes localism and contextual specificity. That is, it exemplifies the notion that instructional practices should be shaped by the sociocultural characteristics of the settings in which they occur, and the populations for whom they are designed. This idea is sometimes difficult to implement, in part because of the desire of educators for “best practices” or instructional strategies that are universally good for all students. A case in point, and my attempt to respond appropriately to it, is an international symposium and subsequent publication on teacher education for diversity, sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). I (2010b) was asked to discuss specific classroom practices for teaching cultural diversity. How was I to do this when the details and dynamics of diversity vary so widely among nation states (and within them, too)? How could I recommend practices that would somehow be appropriate for “all” classrooms yet adhere to one of the core tenets of culturally responsive teaching, namely to respect and respond to the particular diversities in each classroom?

Another challenge was how to be responsive to the diversity of the teacher educators at the symposium. They differed in their conceptions of and priorities about the role of cultural diversity in education. Individuals from some countries associated diversity primarily with new immigrants while others were concerned about indigenous groups and long-term resident minorities. Some of the symposium participants were in the early stages of becoming familiar with ethnic and cultural diversity in their respective countries but others had been engaged with it for many years. Some felt that no discussion about teaching diverse students could (or should) proceed very far without giving serious attention to race and racism, while for others these were not issues of significance in their countries. Some of the symposium participants thought the major goal for teaching cultural diversity was to facilitate assimilation into mainstream society, but for others equity and social justice for oppressed and marginalized students were more important. These challenges are similar to those of many teachers in U.S. schools, and are paramount in designing and implementing culturally responsive teaching. Teachers, too, have varying levels of ownership of, knowledge, and skills about cultural diversity, as well as concerns over its goodness of fit with the subjects and students they teach.

I (2010b) responded to these challenges at the OCED symposium and in a subsequent publication by identifying some general principles for teaching cultural diversity, and used situations within the Seattle, Washington, community and schools as specific cases to show how the principles may operate in practice in particular settings and circumstances. The principles included applying multiple ethnic, racial, and cultural perspectives in analyzing educational problems and possibilities; using varied culturally

responsive instructional strategies to achieve common learning outcomes for diverse students; and developing skills among students for crossing cultural borders. My hope was that my illustrations of these principles would encourage the symposium participants to generate parallel scenarios from their own ecological contexts.

The OECD symposium participants were more receptive to these general ideas for teaching cultural diversity than classroom teachers usually are. Teachers want to know how culturally responsive teaching relates directly to their specific students and teaching responsibilities. This need is understandable but impossible for authors to meet for all teachers since they are not present in the moment where and when teaching actually occurs. My attempt to bridge this perennial gap between theorists and practitioners is to establish pedagogical connections between general principles of culturally responsive teaching, various subjects and skills routinely taught in schools, and teachers' different levels of competence and experience.

Connecting culturally responsive teaching to specific subjects, skill areas, and other regular functions performed in classrooms also is crucial to determining teachers' levels of ownership of and investment in it. However, authors cannot possibly respond to all conceivable content areas and teaching functions. Some parameters have to be established. I write about culturally responsive teaching primarily for prospective and practicing teachers, and teacher educators based on insights derived from scholarship, research, and practice on ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, and on teaching. Occasionally, a particular writing project is directed toward some other specified audience, such as administrators, curriculum designers, or policy makers. For example, in 2004(a) I wrote "Curriculum Theory and Multicultural Education" with curriculum designers primarily in mind, and in 2005 "Standards of Diversity" for instructional supervisors developing guidelines for improving teaching and learning.

In the United States teachers are predominately middle class, female, monolingual, and of European ancestry, while students are increasingly poor and linguistically, ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse. These differences add another layer of complexity to implementing culturally responsive teaching, and make linking it explicitly to regular classroom functions even more important. I address this need by connecting theoretical and conceptual ideas of culturally responsive teaching to other subjects, skills, and domains of interest in the educational process. I do this by making both instructional content and technique connections. For example, promoting social justice for ethnically diverse groups may be connected to civil rights protests in social studies, contemporary song lyrics for music appreciation classes, paintings of different ethnic artists to illustrate artistic techniques, and ethnic political rhetoric and social commentary poetry in language arts and literature classes. Matching teaching strategies to the learning styles of different ethnic groups may be connected

to providing students with a variety of options for demonstrating mastery of academic content, such as academic essays, letters, short stories, oral storytelling, dialogues, creating scripts for animations, and photo collages. Other authors offer compelling ways of connecting other aspects of culturally responsive teaching to regular classroom practices that extend my repertoire. For example, Wigginton (1985) demonstrates how the self-concepts, ethnic pride, and academic success of Appalachian students improve by studying their own local cultural communities, customs, traditions, and artifacts. Carole Lee (2007) uses techniques she calls cultural modeling and cultural data sets to first affirm the cultural competence of African American students and validate their cultural heritages, and then show how skills embedded in these cultural practices are similar and transferable to academic tasks.

Several of my publications have pursued connections between culturally responsive teaching in such areas of study as social studies education, general teacher education, character education, critical pedagogy, supervision, mathematics teacher education, classroom management, curriculum, literature, literacy, and international education. Literacy and social studies education are discussed further to illustrate how these connections are envisioned, and to exemplify how teaching to and through cultural diversity is more of a pedagogical endeavor, although some curriculum, administration, assessment, and policy features also are involved.

My earlier efforts to demonstrate linkages between different types of literacy and cultural diversity appeared in a 1979 publication relating literature and the African American experience, and in 1985 on education for interpersonal literacy. A more refined and clarified exploration of the latter relationship occurs in a chapter on “Teaching Literacy in Cultural Context” (2010d), published in a volume by the International Reading Association. I appeal for literacy to be conceived broadly and configured into two major categories—academic or school-based knowledge and skills, and cultural competences based in the heritages, families, and communities of different ethnic groups. The first involves using a variety of multicultural and multiethnic examples, resources, and techniques in teaching components of school literacies such as reading, math, writing, citizenship, and critical thinking, and subjects like science, literature, computer science, health, and physical education. The second category encompasses acquiring knowledge about different ethnic groups’ cultural heritages, experiences, contributions, institutions, and artifacts.

Over time I also have produced several publications establishing linkages between cultural diversity and social studies education (1975b, 1980, 1982, 1991, 1997, 2004b, 2009). All of them point out similarities between the values and ethics of democracy, and teaching to and through cultural diversity. I explain how both endeavors promote *e pluribus unum*. That is, how they simultaneously embrace and advocate for commonality and plurality, consider similarities and differences as complementary, and suggest

that both unity and diversity are necessary components of human life and effective engagement in U.S. society. The following statement from *At the Essence of Learning* (1994) crystallizes these ideas:

Education in the United States is a public creation, a public mandate, a public service. Undeniably, the “American Public” is becoming increasingly pluralistic. . . . To serve its constituency adequately, education must likewise be culturally pluralistic. In symbol and substance it should convey to all students that they and their heritages are important components of what constitutes the essence of society’s cultures, values, and ideals. That is, individuals from all social classes, and ethnic, racial, gender, language, and cultural groups have the right to be validated, to have unrestricted access to the full range of opportunities available to citizens, and to have a representative voice in decisions that affect their lives and destinies. The ethics and actions these values engender are necessary conditions for the support and survival of a democratic society. (p. 98)

Such connections may relieve some of the anxieties and skepticism that some teachers have about culturally responsive teaching, and help facilitate its implementation.

I also use multiethnic and multicultural examples within the narrative texts of my writings that apply the theories of teaching to and through cultural diversity to the content and practices of different subjects and teaching–learning situations. After explaining these theories conceptually I then provide illustrations to help teachers imagine them in actual practice. My verbal version of this technique is, “Let me give you an example. . . .” Invariably, it really means more than one. For instance, an explanation of the collective or communal communicative practices of some ethnic groups that have been documented by researchers such as Cazden, John, and Hymes (1985), Smitherman (1986), Tannen (1990), and Au (1993) may be accompanied by descriptions of the talk story style of Native Hawaiians, call and response of African Americans, and rapport-talk of European American females.

Examples are integral to all teaching processes. Since I write to teach, they have a prominent place in my scholarship, too. As I (2010a) state in one publication, “Examples consume a significant portion of teaching time regardless of subject taught, level of schooling, type of teaching strategies used, or student audiences. They are the *meaningfulness bridges* for students between academic abstractions and their experiential realities” (p. 147). I made this recommendation for the first time in 1975(a) in the article, “Organizing and Designing Culturally Pluralistic Curriculum,” and have continued to reinforce it to the present.

The idea of using examples to make pedagogical connections between culturally responsible teaching and other parts of the educational enterprise is rather easy to imagine but can be a daunting task in practice. Teachers tend to use instructional examples culled from their own personal experiences and those of people and communities similar to

themselves. But ethnically and culturally diverse students and teachers often do not have these points of reference in common. Consequently, a technique that can be a very effective means of implementing culturally responsive teaching in theory may be counterproductive in practice. Developing repertoires of culturally diverse examples, skills to use them fluidly and routinely in classroom instruction, and the confidence to do so have to be learned by most teachers. Some helpful advice and strategies for meeting these needs are described in *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2010c).

## CONCLUSION

Culturally responsive teaching is a technique for improving the performance of underachieving ethnically and racially diverse students. In the United States these students are primarily of Asian, African, Native, and Latino American ancestry, live in poverty, and attend schools in urban and rural areas. This approach to teaching helps all students acquire more knowledge about cultural diversity, and uses the cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as instructional resources to improve their learning opportunities and outcomes. Thus, it teaches to and through cultural diversity.

In this essay review, I discussed some of the salient attributes and expectations of culturally responsive teaching, along with how they are articulated in my own scholarship. A prevailing theme is that since teachers and students are often not from the same ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds, these cultural differences can create serious challenges to effective teaching and learning. A viable way for teachers to mediate these differences is to build bridges across cultural differences through culturally responsive teaching. Other themes developed to illuminate and elaborate this general idea include (1) culture and difference are natural attributes of humanity, and, therefore, should be normative features of teaching and learning; (2) since attitudes and beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity shape instructional behaviors, they need to be more positive and constructive to produce better teaching and learning for culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse students; (3) some resistance to culturally responsive teaching should be expected, understood, and resisted; (4) the underlying values and beliefs of culturally responsive teaching such as equality, justice, and diversity are compatible with the democratic ideals of the United States; and (5) the viability and validity of culturally responsive teaching increase when connections between it and other routine responsibilities and functions of teaching are made explicit. Practical illustrations of and scholarly citations on each of these actions of culturally responsive teaching were provided to enhance their conceptual and ideological meanings. The scholarly citations also are resources that teachers may use for further study.

Another idea persistent throughout this essay is the importance of teachers modeling their instructional expectations of students. As a writer I also try to model what I recommend for teachers. I use a culturally responsive approach to explain what culturally responsive teaching means, and use writing as a tool for teaching. Two strategies illustrated this approach. One was using multiethnic and multicultural examples to illuminate general principles and concepts. The other was connecting culturally responsiveness directly to different teaching situations and tasks in ways that are cognizant of the diversity that is apparent among teachers.

The underlying message throughout these discussions is the need to change teaching conceptions of and techniques for cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity from the current orientations toward weaknesses, problems, and pathologies to strengths, promises, and possibilities. In other words, grounding teaching in the notions that success generates success, that competence build confidence, and that regardless of how marginalized or disadvantaged an individual student or ethnic group may be according to external criteria (as is the case with many students of color), there is some kind of capability within. A key mandate of culturally responsive teaching is accessing this internal strength of ethnically diverse students and communities, and using it to improve their personal agency and educational achievement.

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