

The Culturally Responsive Teacher

Ana Maria Villegas and Tamara Lucas
Educational Leadership, March 2007, 28-33.

To engage students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we must see them as capable learners.

Belki Alvarez, a young girl one of us knows, arrived in New York from the Dominican Republic several years ago with her parents and two siblings. After a difficult start in the United States, both parents found jobs; their minimum-wage earnings were barely enough for a family of five to scrape by month to month. As the oldest child in the family, Belki soon had to assume caretaking responsibilities for her younger brother and sister. At only 8 years old, she was responsible for getting her siblings ready for school, taking them there each morning, bringing them back home at the end of the school day, and caring for them until her parents came home from work.

On weekends, she worked with her mother at the community street fair to make extra money for the family by selling products prepared at home. She astutely negotiated prices with customers and expertly handled financial transactions. Belki often spoke enthusiastically about having her own business in the future. She spoke Spanish fluently at home and in the community, and she often served as the English language translator for her parents.

Belki's teachers, however, did not know this competent, responsible, enthusiastic girl. They perceived her as lacking in language and math skills, having little initiative, and being generally disinterested in learning.

Such profound dissonance between her in-school and out-of-school experiences is not unique to Belki. Sadly, this is typical for an increasing number of students in U.S. schools today

Over the past three decades, the racial, ethnic, and linguistic demographics of the K-12 student population in the United States have changed dramatically. In 1972, 22 percent of all students enrolled in elementary and secondary public schools were of racial/ethnic minority backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). By 2003, racial/ethnic minority students accounted for 41 percent of total enrollments in U.S. public schools. In six states and the District of Columbia, students of color are already in the majority (NCES, 2005). The immigrant student population has also grown significantly in the past 30 years. Currently, one in five students

speaks a language other than English at home, and the majority of these students are learning English as a second language in school (Center on Education Policy, 2006).

A Framework and a Vision

Successfully teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds--especially students from historically marginalized groups--involves more than just applying specialized teaching techniques. It demands a new way of looking at teaching that is grounded in an understanding of the role of culture and language in learning. Six salient qualities (see Villegas & Lucas, 2002) can serve as a coherent framework for professional development initiatives in schools seeking to respond effectively to an increasingly diverse student population.

Understanding How Learners Construct Knowledge

Our conception of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is grounded in constructivist views of learning (National Research Council, 2000). From this perspective, learners use their prior knowledge and beliefs to make sense of the new ideas and experiences they encounter in school. A central role of the culturally and linguistically responsive teacher is to support students' learning by helping them build bridges between what they already know about a topic and what they need to learn about it.

For example, Belki will learn more from a social studies unit on immigration if her teacher draws on her very real experience as a newcomer to the United States. The teacher might ask her and other immigrant students in the class to describe their experiences learning a new language and compare living in the United States to living in their native countries. The teacher could build on those narratives to introduce relevant concepts, such as factors that lead people to immigrate and phases in the immigration process. The teacher could invite immigrant parents to the class to share their experiences. By involving the students and their parents in these ways, the teacher would not only help students build bridges to learning but also strengthen the connections between home and school. If the teacher does not tap into the experiences of students in the class and instead teaches the unit by focusing solely on the experiences of earlier immigrant groups coming to the United States--such as the Germans and Irish--the material will be much less relevant and engaging.

Learning also involves questioning, interpreting, and analyzing ideas in the context of meaningful issues. With this in mind, an English teacher in a community in the U.S. Southwest that had a large Latino population designed a unit on immigration to the United States. The

students were asked to write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper expressing their views on the topic. To write the letter, the students realized that they needed to understand the issues more deeply. So they summarized relevant newspaper articles and developed and administered a questionnaire in their neighborhoods to learn about the community's views on immigration. They debated in class the proposal to build a fence along the United States/Mexico border. Working in groups, they wrote letters to the editor and then assessed their drafts using a rubric that focused on grammar, clarity of position taken, and development of supporting arguments. After receiving the teacher's feedback, the students revised and sent their letters. The students were deeply engaged in a process that helped improve their writing skills.

In embracing constructivist views of learning, we do not mean to suggest that there is no place in schools for direct instruction, memorization, and basic skills instruction. When such transmission-oriented strategies predominate, however, their pedagogical value diminishes, much to the students' disadvantage. Such an approach to teaching does not give students opportunities to actively engage in learning and integrate new ideas and frameworks into their own ways of thinking. Therefore, students are less likely to learn to think critically, become creative problem solvers, and develop skills for working collaboratively--all qualities that are essential for success in life and work.

Learning About Students' Lives

To teach subject matter in meaningful ways and engage students in learning, teachers need to know about their students' lives. We are not suggesting that teachers learn generic information about specific cultural or social groups. Such thinking leads to stereotypes that do not apply to individual students.

Instead, teachers need to know something about their students' family makeup, immigration history, favorite activities, concerns, and strengths. Teachers should also be aware of their students' perceptions of the value of school knowledge, their experiences with the different subject matters in their everyday settings, and their prior knowledge of and experience with specific topics in the curriculum. For example, Belki's teachers would benefit from knowing that she and her family are immigrants, that she often serves as the English language translator for her parents, that she aspires to own a business some day, and that she expertly manages financial transactions at the weekend street fair.

Effective strategies for learning about students' lives outside school include conducting home visits, creating opportunities in the classroom for students to discuss their aspirations for the

future, posing problems for students to solve and noting how each student goes about solving them, and talking with parents and other community members. For instance, Belki's teacher might have asked her to give examples of how she uses math outside school. The teacher could have learned even more by visiting the street fair. By observing her animated interactions with customers, the teacher would have seen that Belki is a fluent Spanish speaker with sophisticated negotiation skills and some important math skills.

The vast majority of teachers in the United States are white, middle class, and monolingual English speaking. In most cases, their lives differ profoundly from the lives of their students. Although information-gathering strategies are simple enough to develop, it is more challenging for teachers to learn how to interpret what they discover about students through their data gathering. To make productive instructional use of this information, teachers must possess two fundamental qualities: They must have sociocultural consciousness and hold affirming views toward diversity (Nieto, 1996).

Being Socioculturally Conscious

We define sociocultural consciousness as the awareness that a person's worldview is not universal but is profoundly influenced by life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Teachers who lack sociocultural consciousness will unconsciously and inevitably rely on their own personal experiences to make sense of students' lives--an unreflective habit that often results in misinterpretations of those students' experiences and leads to miscommunication. For example, students from cultures with a less individualistic and more collectivist worldview than that of mainstream U.S. culture may be overlooked in class and assumed to be less capable than their mainstream peers because, in general, they do not seek individual attention and praise.

To develop sociocultural consciousness, teachers need to look beyond individual students and families to understand inequities in society. In all social systems, some positions are accorded greater status than others, and such status differentiation gives rise to differential access to power. Teachers need to be aware of the role that schools play in both perpetuating and challenging those inequities. Professional development carried out in groups and guided by an experienced facilitator who is knowledgeable about multicultural issues can be instructive. Activities might involve reading about the differential distribution of wealth and income in the United States or reflecting on the well-documented fact that a person's social class is the best predictor of academic success and future social standing (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). To

see the powerful connections between social and education inequities, participants could read *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, by Jonathan Kozol (2006). By reading and discussing accounts of successful teaching and learning in diverse settings (see Garcia, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto & Rolón, 1997), teachers can develop a vision of how schools can challenge such inequities.

Holding Affirming Views About Diversity

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that many teachers see students from socially subordinated groups from a deficit perspective (Nieto, 1996). Lacking faith in the students' ability to achieve, these teachers are more likely to have low academic expectations for the students and ultimately treat them in ways that stifle their learning. They are more apt to use drill, practice, and rote-learning activities at the expense of more challenging work that demands the use of higher-order thinking skills. They are also less likely to call on the students in class, give them sufficient wait time to respond thoughtfully to questions, or probe incomplete answers for clarity.

By contrast, teachers who see students from an affirming perspective and truly respect cultural differences are more apt to believe that students from nondominant groups are capable learners, even when these students enter school with ways of thinking, talking, and behaving that differ from the dominant cultural norms. Teachers who hold these affirming views about diversity will convey this confidence by providing students with an intellectually rigorous curriculum, teaching students strategies for monitoring their own learning, setting high performance standards and consistently holding students accountable to those standards, and building on the individual and cultural resources that students bring to school. For example, instead of setting out to "correct" students' language through the use of decontextualized drill and worksheet activities, the English teacher who asked her students to write to the newspaper editor helped her students develop their writing skills by involving them in purposeful and intellectually stimulating tasks.

Using Appropriate Instructional Strategies

Teachers can activate students' prior knowledge by asking them to discuss what they know about a given topic, as Belki's teacher could have done by having the immigrant students in the class share their personal experiences with immigration. Teachers can embed new ideas and skills in projects that are meaningful to the students, as the English teacher who helped students improve their writing skills through researching immigration did.

Teachers can also give English language learners access to the curriculum by drawing on the student's native language resources. They can provide students who are literate in their native language with material to read in that language to help them build background knowledge for specific content. They can encourage students to use bilingual dictionaries. They can prepare study guides for instructional units that define relevant vocabulary and outline key concepts in English, using simplified language. They can also use more visual cues and graphic organizers and incorporate more hands-on activities into their lessons.

Using pertinent examples and analogies from students' lives is another instructional strategy that helps students build bridges to learning. For example, one of us recently observed a teacher introducing the concept of rhythm in poetry by having students analyze the rhythm in a well-known hip-hop recording and then engaging the students in a similar analysis of a poem by Robert Frost. In U.S. history classes, teachers can help engage students from historically marginalized groups by having them examine the curriculum to determine whose perspectives are and are not presented. This would work well, for example, with a textbook treatment of slavery. If the students determine through an analysis of the text that they are learning little about the real experiences of slaves, they can read one of the many published slave narratives to deepen their understanding. As these examples suggest, the job of the culturally and linguistically responsive teacher involves engaging all students in learning for understanding.

Advocating for All Students

Numerous practices embedded in the fabric of everyday schooling put students from nonmainstream groups at a disadvantage. These include a school culture of low expectations for students from low-status groups, inadequate general and multicultural learning materials, large class sizes, assignment of the least-experienced teachers to classes in which students need the most help, insensitivity toward cultural differences, questionable testing practices, and a curriculum that does not reflect diverse student perspectives.

To continue to move toward greater cultural and linguistic responsiveness in schools, teachers must see themselves as part of a community of educators working to make schools more equitable for all students. Teaching is an ethical activity, and teachers have an ethical obligation to help all students learn. To meet this obligation, teachers need to serve as advocates for their students, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized in schools.

For example, teachers involved in school- or district-level textbook review committees could ensure that selected textbooks and supplemental materials appropriately reflect the diversity of

experiences and perspectives in the student population. Those who have input into the design of professional development activities could identify specific areas in which the faculty might need professional growth. Topics might include how to implement strategies for learning about students' lives, become socioculturally conscious, build on students' interests outside school to advance curriculum goals, and tap community resources in teaching. Responsive classroom teachers could also request common planning time with the English as a second language teacher to coordinate instruction in ways that maximize content learning for their English language learners.

Just Imagine

Certainly, individual teachers can enhance their success with students from diverse backgrounds by working on their own to cultivate these qualities of responsive teaching. However, the framework that we have presented here will have the greatest effect on a school if teachers and school leaders develop a shared vision of the culturally and linguistically responsive teacher.

Imagine Belki Alvarez's school life if her teachers had explored these six qualities and shared ideas for applying them in their teaching. They could have capitalized on her entrepreneurial skills to help her learn mathematical concepts. They would have seen her as a capable learner and understood the relevance of her life experiences for her school learning. They might have tapped her experience as the English translator for her family by having her translate for other Spanish-speaking students in the class who spoke minimal English. Approaching a student's education in these culturally and linguistically responsive ways--rather than emphasizing deficits--has the potential to truly engage all students in learning, both in school and beyond.

References

- Center on Education Policy. (2006). A public education primer: Basic (and sometimes surprising) facts about the U.S. education system. Washington, DC: Author.*
- Garcia, E. E. (1999). Student cultural diversity: Understanding and meeting the challenge. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.*
- Kozol, J. (2006). The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America. New York: Three Rivers Press.*
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.*

National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Digest for education statistics tables and figures*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/dt066.asp>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Digest for education statistics tables and figures*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available: <http://nces.edu.gov/programs/d05/tables/dt05%5f038.asp>

National Research Council. (2000). *How people learn*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Nieto, S. (1996). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of education*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Nieto, S., & Rolón, C. (1997). *Preparation and professional development of teachers: A perspective from two Latinas*. In J. J. Irvine (Ed.), *Critical knowledge for diverse teachers and learners* (pp. 89-123). Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A coherent approach*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

~~~~~

By Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas

Ana Maria Villegas (villegasa@mail.montclair.edu) is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey.

Tamara Lucas (lucast@mail.montclair.edu) is Associate Dean of the College of Education and Human Services and Professor of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey.