



CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGIES / OVERVIEW

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Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

What is culture?

Culture is the complex phenomenon that includes the changing worldviews, knowledge, values, traditions, beliefs, capabilities, and social and political relationships of a group of people that give meaning to and influence their life and actions. This means that culture goes beyond visible and tangible aspects, such as food or dress, to include more implicit behaviours to do with social roles, behaviours, communication and beliefs. Culture is shared between and learnt in groups of people that are bound together by a common history, location, language, religion or social class, yet it is multifaceted and dynamic, so that there are variations between individuals within cultural groups.

Why culturally responsive pedagogies are important

Culturally responsive pedagogies can reduce the gaps between the highest and lowest achievers while at the same time raising overall levels of achievement. Research shows that culturally responsive pedagogies raise student achievement for all cultural groups, ensuring that all students are given the encouragement and support to realise their educational potential regardless of their social, economic or cultural background or individual needs.

Many schools and teachers struggle to engage students from cultural backgrounds that differ from the dominant culture represented in mainstream school. New Zealand has one of the widest achievement gaps in the OECD, meaning that, while some students are performing at very high levels, others are performing at extremely low levels. When other variables are taken into account, achievement in New Zealand's education system can be delineated by culture and ethnicity. In particular, Māori and Pasifika students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not achieve at the same levels as other cultural groups. Disciplinary issues are also more prevalent in students from cultural backgrounds that differ from the mainstream culture of schools.

While student diversity is increasing, there is a general lack of diversity amongst New Zealand's teachers. Cultural gaps between students and teachers, when left unaddressed, can lead to misunderstandings of teacher expectations on the part of the student, or of student behaviour on the part of the teacher. Most schools, teachers, curriculum documents and texts reflect, transmit and reproduce the discourse, knowledge and values of the mainstream culture, while excluding or negating those of minority or diverse groups. When students' home background is the same as or similar to the mainstream culture, school activities are familiar, and they can easily build on their cultural understandings to learn school content. When the cultural knowledge and values of students from diverse backgrounds do not correspond or perhaps conflict with the expectations, values and knowledge of school, students who cannot or do not want to participate in the dominant discourse may be marginalised and fail.

Why culture matters for educational achievement

Culture influences how we think, perceive, act and communicate. Learning is mediated through culture. This means that the experiences of students in a classroom might be different, even where the teaching, resources, curriculum and relationships are the same, because how we learn and what we experience is filtered through cultural perspectives as well as existing knowledge and experiences.

Problems may occur when teachers are unaware of the different knowledge and experiences that diverse students can draw upon in their learning. Even if a teacher is from the same culture or race as his or her students, he or she will not automatically understand students' backgrounds, as cultural understandings and behaviours are nuanced and tend to vary within a particular cultural group. Teachers also may not understand different cultural cues.

It is important not to pretend that differences don't exist, or to treat all students the same way regardless of culture. Teachers need to move beyond cultural blindness to cultural responsiveness. Although what is experienced as good teaching will vary across cultural groups, there are some principles for culturally responsive teaching that research demonstrates can be very effective.

The importance of teachers' attitudes towards culturally diverse learners

The diverse languages, literacies and cultural ways of knowing and being of students of minority cultures are sometimes perceived as deficiencies that need to be overcome in order for students to learn the dominant language, literacies and cultural ways of school. From this point of view, students are seen as culturally deprived because they don't have sufficient experiences of the knowledge and values of the dominant culture, and are subject to low expectations for achievement and family involvement. This can lead to a sense of disconnection from the school for culturally diverse students and families. Research indicates that parents are aware that blame for students' underachievement is often directed towards the home, and this makes them feel unwelcome at the school.

Deficit beliefs and discourses about students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds can lead to teachers feeling helpless, frustrated or angry. This way of thinking locates the responsibility for change within students and their families and therefore outside of a teacher's control. This way of thinking prevents teachers from being powerful agents of change in their own classrooms.

Teachers, of course, are free to reject deficit thinking and adopt alternative discourses. Rather than identifying problems for certain groups of students in terms of their health, welfare, socio-economic status and general educational disadvantage, research demonstrates that the single biggest influence on student achievement is the quality of teaching. By adopting an agentic discourse, teachers see themselves as capable of making change and taking responsibility for student outcomes. Quality teaching can offset many negative factors that may affect a student's achievement.

So what is culturally responsive teaching?

Culturally responsive teaching is about making school learning relevant and effective for learners by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, life experiences, frames of reference, languages, and performance and communication styles. This means making what students know, and how they know it, the foundation of learning and teaching interactions and curriculum. This is good for all students, but particularly so when there are significant differences between the world of the teacher and the world of the child.

All students have cultural 'funds of knowledge' or bodies of knowledge and skills for individual functioning and well-being that they can utilise in formal classroom learning. Culturally responsive teaching recognises and deeply values the richness of the cultural knowledge and skills that students bring to the classroom as a resource for developing multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Teachers communicate, validate and collaborate with students to build new learning from students' specific knowledge and experience. Culturally responsive pedagogies focus on positive interpersonal relationships and effective, socially constructed and dynamic forms of instruction and assessment. Actually, the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy are entirely compatible with the principles of effective teaching.

Culturally responsive teaching is

- Validating: the curriculum values the diverse knowledge and practices of its students.
- Comprehensive: it incorporates preferred ways of knowing and the cultural and life experiences of students, as well as the history and culture of the group.
- Empowering and transformative: it transforms the way students see themselves in terms of their personal efficacy. It is also transformative and emancipatory in that it reveals that multiple versions of 'truth' are valid and no single version is total and permanent.

Some researchers are beginning to use the term 'culturally sustaining pedagogies', reflecting an aim to foster and sustain linguistic and cultural diversity in schools rather than merely respond to it. These researchers are cautious of approaches that use students' existing cultural knowledge to teach the mainstream canon of acceptable knowledge and ways of being in ways that work to overwrite existing cultural beliefs and knowledge. They suggest that teachers support students in sustaining their emerging cultural and linguistic competence while simultaneously offering access to competencies valued and practised in the dominant culture.

How can I be more culturally responsive in my teaching?

Teacher reflection on the changing interplay of curriculum, content and culture for each class or lesson is very important for culturally responsive teaching. The following paragraphs explore actions that can help you to develop or improve a culturally responsive pedagogy.

- Reflect on your cultural knowledge and teaching assumptions related to culture (link to section)
- Learn about your students (link to section)
- Use students' cultural knowledge, perspectives and skills as a resource for teaching (link to section)
- Create a safe and supportive environment and build strong relationships (link to section)
- Encourage a discursive curriculum and enable student self-determination (link to section)
- Connect with families (link to section)
- Connect with communities (link to section)

Reflect on your cultural knowledge and teaching assumptions related to culture

The kind of beliefs and attitudes that teachers hold are crucial to their ability to make a difference to diverse learners. Teaching practices, and the types and frequency of teachers' interactions with students, are determined by teachers' beliefs and assumptions about, and expectations of, the student. In addition, students perceive themselves and their learning capabilities through the eyes of their teachers. What teachers do and say impacts students' self-beliefs and self-efficacy.

It is therefore important to evaluate your own teacher discourse and beliefs about culturally diverse learners, and perhaps to reposition yourself by drawing on alternative discourses that are more productive. Teachers who are culturally responsive share a passion for social justice and for helping all students to achieve. They have the courage to question mainstream knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy as well as their own beliefs and assumptions about students, families, and communities. They also are willing to go beyond established and familiar teaching practices to find new practices that may be more successful for all students.

- **Reflect upon and explore where your assumptions, attitudes and biases come from.**
 - How do your interactions with students reflect your attitudes about cultural difference? Consider videoing a series of lessons and analyse if you do spend more time and focus on certain students or groups of students.
 - Think about whether your teaching is biased in favour of mainstream ways of knowing and learning.
 - How well do you value the diversity of your students? Do you see cultural difference as a problem for teaching and learning to be solved, or do you approach it as a valuable resource for your teaching and the learning of the whole class?
 - Become aware of your view of the world and the ways in which this can lead to misrepresentations of cultural groups and actions, and to misunderstandings in interactions with students. For example, what are your expectations of appropriate behaviour and how are these culturally based? How might they lead you to misinterpret student behaviours that are incompatible with your expectations?
- **Reflect on how your classroom management techniques suit different learners, and whether particular practices might be promoting learning for some students, while obstructing learning for others.** When deciding how to approach a student's misbehaviour, consider whether it could be due to a cultural clash or misunderstanding, a miscommunication, or whether the rule itself is perhaps inappropriate in some way. Explain to students why a certain behaviour is not acceptable, but also ask why he or she did it in order to better understand how the student perceives the rules of the classroom and to build relationships with students.

- **Examine your expectations of each student.** Are they high enough? Not all teachers assume a deep capacity for achievement in all students, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds. Students who follow mainstream classroom practices are seen as more highly motivated and as higher achievers than students who demonstrate different cultural ways of learning and behaving. When teachers have low or no expectations of certain students, and spend more time and attention on students they think will achieve, low achieving students tend to also give up on themselves. **Raising expectations seems to be fundamental for reducing disparities in achievement**, although high expectations must be accompanied by effective teaching. Help students set challenging but achievable goals, and follow through in terms of helping them to reach those goals. Challenging goals without support to achieve them are demotivating for students.
- **Make time and space to listen to student voice** which can help you and your students to identify and understand each other as individuals rather than cultural stereotypes, and help you to critically reflect on your discursive positioning and the impact this might have upon your students. Students tend to find it easy to identify which teaching strategies work for them, and what is most important in their relationships with teachers.
- Regularly review evidence of culturally diverse learners' achievement and learning experiences, including student narratives and perspectives as well as standardised tests, then base your learning about and decisions related to teaching on analyses of student learning (see **Teaching as Inquiry**).

Learn about your students

Students' prior experiences provide them with unique preconceptions and knowledge bases that must be taken into account in order for teaching to be effective. With this knowledge, you can engage students and activate their frames of reference, life experiences, and cultural values as a basis for building meaningful learning.

- **Start with students and take time to learn about your students' lives and cultures.** Find out about students' home life, family, language, cultural values and expectations, socioeconomic background, previous experience with school and achievement, self-esteem, attitudes, religion, community experiences and practices. Don't overlook these important parts of a student's identity in order to assume a 'colour-blind' perspective and treat all students the same. You might ask students to write about themselves, their families or family traditions, or complete a personal questionnaire about hobbies, interests, music preferences and aspirations. Students might share artefacts from their home or might be assigned to research different aspects of their culture. You might ask parents to fill out a similar questionnaire about their children, and also about their background and connections. Find out how students spend their free time, and perhaps attend sporting or music events in which your students are involved.
- **Avoid stereotypes, which do not see students as individuals and interfere with your ability to understand each student's perspective.** While it is important to have some general knowledge of a cultural group and norms for behaviour, etiquette, communication and learning, try to move beyond surface level understandings of cultures, such as food, music or festivals, and try to gain an understanding of the variance within a cultural group.
- **Have conversations with students.** Conversations help you get to know who your students are in meaningful ways.
- **Validate what you learn about students.** Many diverse students develop an understanding of the negative views of their race, often emphasised in the wider culture, and actually come to internalise them. Teachers need to interrupt these discourses by endorsing students and affirming their culture.

Use students' cultural knowledge, perspectives and skills as a resource for teaching

When students' culture and experience is central to their learning, they can build on their prior cultural experiences and understandings. What students already know forms the starting point for exploring unfamiliar knowledge and experiences.

- **View the diversity of cultures within your class as a strength from which all students benefit.** See the wealth of culture and experience as a valuable asset and resource which benefits, complements and expands your teaching.
- **Gather and use students' background knowledge and prior experience when planning curricular content, selecting teaching strategies, and designing the classroom environment.** Ensure that your programme reflects an appreciation for and understanding of diverse ways of knowing and being.
- **Acquire some basic knowledge of the languages that your students speak,** and find ways to use this language as a bridge for new ideas and concepts. This demonstrates cultural tolerance and shows students that their language is legitimate and valued rather than inferior.
- **Display images, artefacts and different languages, and ensure that classrooms (including the arrangement of furniture) reflect students' cultures.** Ensure that your classroom reflects your valuing of cultural diversity throughout the year and not just on certain days or months of the year. Include significant and more comprehensive information about different cultures and their contributions to the curriculum, for example, important explorers, scientists and artists. Critically evaluate the materials you use for teaching – what images do students encounter, are these culturally diverse and can students see themselves and their culture reflected in the classroom context?
- **Teach 'to and through' students' frames of reference.** Begin lessons by eliciting student experiences, and build on these to develop and understand new concepts. Find out what students know and what they want to know. Use questionnaires or discussion at the introduction of a new topic. This helps students connect their community and home-based knowledge to classroom learning. It also helps make the culture of students visible and present in the curriculum. Engage in another discussion at the end of the lesson so that students can reflect on what they have learned. All this dialogue helps you understand your students' prior experience and how they have used this to construct their present understanding.

Create a safe and supportive environment and build strong relationships

A supportive environment that is favourable for learning is critical to culturally responsive teaching. The best way to create a supportive environment is through your relationship with students. Research shows that, for culturally diverse students, the main influence on their educational achievement is the quality of their relationships with teachers. Longer term and continuous relationships, such as with a form teacher, are particularly important, as they help students and their families to feel known and understood by their teachers.

- **Demonstrate that you care for and value your students, their lives, their culture and their academic success.** Be warm, sensitive, encouraging and yet consistent and authoritative. Show interest and a determination to help students succeed by supporting them with personal problems, listening to their ideas, giving personal time, supporting them in co-curricular activities, and marking and returning their work quickly. This is particularly important for students who feel school is not for them. Remember that students will interpret what is caring from their cultural perspective, which will not necessarily be the same as yours.
- **Demonstrate that you care for students as culturally located individuals.** That is, that you care for them as members of a cultural group, and not outside of their cultural identity. Demonstrate a genuine interest in students' cultures.
- **Attend events outside of school in which students are involved, such as extracurricular activities.** Single out students at break times to talk to them. Find out about important events in the students' lives, such as sports and drama, or even TV programmes, and comment on them.
- **Ensure the environment is welcoming and safe, so that students feel comfortable to take risks,** especially when learning is particularly unfamiliar for students because of cultural differences, or when using English as a second language. Poorly managed classrooms do not provide a safe environment for student learning. Ensure that you maintain classroom discipline and engage in effective teaching practices, as both the inability or reluctance to do so are perceived by students as a lack of care. Consider collaborating with students in order to develop shared expectations for acceptable classroom behaviour, as involving students in establishing a safe learning environment makes them much more invested in helping to maintain it.
- **Sit down with students and help them work through their goals.** Share high expectations for their achievement and work hard to help students achieve those goals and succeed. Students report that they enjoy talking with teachers about their aspirations and how to achieve them, as well as receiving support in relation to their goals. Students perceive teachers' high expectations as evidence of their positive attitude towards them as students.
- **Give feedback carefully to diverse students, as there is the possibility of mistrust about the motivation for the feedback.** This is less of an issue if students trust you. Ensure that your feedback is motivated by high expectations of all students, and offer reassurance that each student is capable of reaching those expectations. Ensure you focus feedback on classroom work, not on personality.
- **Be careful not to use vernacular phrases, humour or sarcasm in ways that might be misunderstood.** Avoid confrontational or humiliating communication styles which indicate to students that they are not liked or valued as students. Students are likely to have negative perceptions of their teachers when teachers don't listen to them, don't pay them attention or give assistance, or in any way show discrimination. These negative perceptions affect students' motivation and ability to engage in learning. Resentment may also build if students feel they are not getting enough attention.

Encourage a discursive curriculum and enable student self-determination

A discursive curriculum enables students' knowledge, experiences, concerns, questions and sense-making processes to be shared, valued and incorporated. It involves patterns of interaction in which all students are included and can participate successfully. Knowledge can be co-created for specific purposes negotiated with students that will then reflect and even promote their cultural values. Curriculum and pedagogy become culturally comprehensive rather than monocultural, no longer solely reflecting the knowledge, values and purposes of those in power.

- **Employ an interactive teaching style, soliciting discussion.** Make learning a participatory and active endeavour by assisting students to use discussion to make personal meaning of new ideas. Knowledge that has been personally organized and integrated into existing conceptual structures is more easily applied to new situations.
- **Trust your students to make good decisions, and give up some of your control in inviting student input into learning processes.** Share power in decisions about curriculum planning in terms of the curriculum content and the directions learning will take. This shows students you value their opinions, and moves you away from a deficit model in which you believe you know what is best for students. Emphasise shared responsibility, and give students input into goal-setting, so that goals are mutual.
- **Ensure students experience power-sharing relationships and interdependence with their peers and teachers.** Develop distributed leadership in the classroom so that students can both initiate and take responsibility for their own learning while supporting the learning of others. Create a culture in which all students are individually accountable for the knowledge they acquire and for helping each other to learn and demonstrate concepts and skills. Your role should be a facilitative one, helping students to plan, implement and manage their own decisions. Think about where you position your desk to send a message of collaboration rather than authority.
- **Focus student work on inquiry, active learning, problem-solving, and dialogue.** Inquiry work naturally facilitates culturally responsive teaching as it enables students to bring diverse cultural perspectives to the task. Plan to support students to be actively involved in sharing and disseminating knowledge.
- **Use cooperative learning strategies, which research overwhelmingly supports as an optimal strategy for all cultural groups.** Cooperative learning is not simply group work but involves groups working together in coming to agree on an answer to a problem or developing a product that reflects their work. Focus on the principles of sharing expertise and sharing responsibility. The work should invite students to consider different approaches to the task, which can be an opportunity to strengthen and reflect upon thinking skills and strategies. Diverse opinions, reasons and negotiations should be encouraged.
- **Set up the classroom for cooperative learning as the primary mode of working.** Ensure each student feels free to interact with other students and the teacher, assisting other students, seeking assistance and making personal contact in other ways. The aim is to encourage students to work as caring, inclusive and deeply interconnected learning communities, which has been identified as a component of quality teaching for culturally diverse students.

Connect with families

The relationships between school and home are a significant factor in student achievement. Culturally diverse students and families often report a sense of disconnection from schools which they perceive as due to a lack of ongoing and personalised relationships with the teachers or school. When relationships with families are enduring, commitment and collective responsibility are evident.

- **Give parents access to information and opportunities to participate and collaborate with a focus on student learning.** Students and parents from diverse cultures enjoy discussing learning when discussions are data-based and focused on achievement and constructive plans for next steps. This can help families to understand what their child needs to do to succeed in their learning and how to support them. Parental expectations and aspirations for their children's learning have a strong correlation with students' achievement. In particular, the impact on student achievement is greater when parents are helped to understand how to help their child while at the same time respecting their dignity and cultural values.
- **Develop positive interactions with families through actions such as calling or emailing each student's family with positive information, and regularly seeking and acting upon parental perspectives.** Use various methods of communicating and following up with parents, without assuming that families always have the capacity to access school reporting. Students perceive teacher contact with their family as a positive sign of the teacher caring for the student. Most appreciate home-school collaborations, although sometimes students may thwart communication attempts, for example, by withholding school letters, to protect parents from embarrassment or themselves from parental disappointment.
- **Be cautious of seeking a one way relationship of support, for example, expecting parents to support school activity without taking on board parent perspectives and aspirations.** The aim is for partnership, and not a one-way flow of information aimed at imposing school values on families. It is as important for the school to support the family and community culture of the student as it is for families and communities to support the school.
- **Seek to improve parent-teacher interviews.** Research shows that many parents find these meetings unsatisfactory due to the brevity of the appointment, as well as miscommunication and a conflict of agendas. Families from diverse cultures appreciate face-to-face communication for a longer period which makes it easier for parents to communicate in a culturally appropriate manner. There is little research, however, which explores the impact of parent-teacher interviews on student achievement.

Connect with communities

The active participation of the community is important in designing a culturally responsive programme. Effective teachers extend their classroom into and draw from the wider community. Listening to students, families and the community helps you to adapt your teaching for diverse students.

- **Learn about the community in which you teach, the people that live and work there, and the potential expertise and resources that are present.** Spend time in the neighbourhood in which your students live, talking to people in that community, and visiting shops and landmarks.
- **Design projects that draw upon community members' expertise, or that learn about the communities that impact upon student lives.** You might find members of the community that will speak to the students on various subjects, teach a lesson, or give a demonstration. The aim is for community projects focused on authentic, genuine experiences.
- Make use of venues outside of the classroom as a source of opportunity for community connections.