Cultural Competence in Education

Compiled by

Dr. Yvonne De Gaetano

and

Carla España

May 21st, 2010

Center for Puerto Rican Studies
Hunter College, CUNY
Cultural Competence in Education:
A Brief

*Teachers carry into the classroom, their personal and cultural background. They perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preoccupation. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural backgrounds that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself. Together students and teachers construct, mostly without being conscious of doing it, an environment of meanings enacted in individual and group behaviors, of conflict and accommodation, rejection and acceptance, alienation and withdrawal.* — Spindler and Spindler (1994, p. xii)

The specific culture into which we are born is transmitted to us by our family. The ways of doing things, interactions, expectations, and how and what we learn are strongly influenced by our culture. Our language and our identity play a critical role in how we are shaped as people. As educators this is incredibly important for us to know about in order to teach well and provide opportunities for learning for all students. The research is unequivocal; teacher education programs must coherently infuse all teacher preparation courses with issues of cultural diversity so that we have culturally competent teachers who can spark students’ learning through their cultures and experiences. Teachers need to learn about, and embrace, the diversities of their students, and have high expectations for them so that students in turn can achieve academically.

The references in the bibliography that we have prepared stress the immediacy and importance of obtaining cultural competence in the field of education.

As we began our search for articles, studies, and books that address cultural competence in education, we decided, to be current, to limit our search primarily to the years spanning from 2000 to the present. We also chose a few earlier works that we deemed to be key in cultural competence studies. In searching for the literature on cultural competence, we used the terms more commonly employed in education, e.g., culturally relevant curricula, cultural diversity, diversity, cultural congruence, and cultural responsiveness. We also included multicultural
education because of its importance in schools today. Within those terms we identified five categories: (1) Theoretical perspectives; (2) The Development of cultural competence in university faculty and teachers/graduate students; (3) Cultural perspectives in content area studies; 4) Diverse student populations; and (5) Parent involvement. Some of the references fall into more than one of the categories. In the summaries that follow we provide a brief picture of the references that we have included.

Theoretical Perspectives

Culturally related pedagogy is a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this “culturally relevant pedagogy.””


In this section we have included books that address critical race theory, racism, class, language, and diversity in teacher education. Cochran-Smith (2004) analyzes educational policies from an historical stance that have had an impact on teacher education. Cochran-Smith makes clear that even today teacher education programs prepare teachers to teach white middle class children. For Cochran-Smith social justice is integral to education. She, therefore, makes the strong case for the inclusion of race, class, and language differences in teacher education programs. Delpit’s (2002), book is a series of essays by the author and others on Ebonics. The book forces one to think deeply about attitudes regarding language, race and class. Nieto’s Affirming Diversity (2008) is now a classic in the development of multicultural education in schools. She uses case studies of actual students to emphasize important points of how differences in race, language, and ethnicity affect students in schools where these issues are ignored. Some of the books in this section (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010; Irizarry & Nieto, 2010; Pedraza et al., 2005) focus on Latino educational research and the issues around ethnicity,
language, and schooling of Latino populations. Gándara and Contreras (2009) write about Latino underachievement in schools. They place much of the fault on political policies and educational legislation that negatively affect Latinos as well as the overwhelming poverty of many Latinos. Villegas and Lucas (2002) make a strong case for recruiting and preparing a diverse teaching population that is well prepared to teach in culturally diverse settings. Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed a theory of a culturally related pedagogy. She specifically focuses on successful teaching of African American students, but she also extends the culturally related approach to other culturally diverse groups. Her theory of culturally relevant teaching includes teachers’ beliefs in the abilities of the children to succeed academically and in the affirmation of their cultures and identities. She also believes in developing and supporting students’ critical consciousness of their realities.

As human beings we know that we are shaped by what we learn informally and formally. We gain unconscious attitudes and ideas about the “other” or those who are culturally and/or racially different from ourselves throughout our lives. Many of these attitudes and understandings are negative, and especially for teachers they are problematic, since so many of the children they teach are culturally and racially different from the mainstream. Gay (2010) advocates for personal transformation in the preparation of teachers—an extremely difficult task. Gay focuses on the need to address the attitudes and beliefs embedded in teacher education curricula, and in the beliefs of instructors and prospective teachers, because teacher attitudes have a profound effect on their practice. She places the responsibility of beginning to transform attitudes and beliefs squarely on teacher education programs. Gay acknowledges that one course cannot change a lifetime of negativity toward diversity and, therefore, she insists that other disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics need to address negative racial attitudes.
Finally, she concludes that attending to attitudes and beliefs is critical, but not enough; knowledge, skills and abilities to teach culturally diverse students must also be addressed. In a thoughtful article, Milner (2008) theorizes that unless those in power see a benefit for themselves in policies and practices regarding cultural and racial diversity in education, little will change. He asserts that the topic of race and racism in American education continues to be uncomfortable and not discussed openly. Unless those in power are willing to give up something to benefit the “other,” nothing of substance will happen in education.

The Development of Cultural Competence in University Faculty, Teachers and Students

Most teacher educators are constantly searching to improve their teaching to help students obtain greater knowledge, stronger skills, and sharpen their awareness of their students and of themselves as teachers. Milner’s (2006) study asks how teacher educators can structure courses to truly make a difference for preservice teachers to be successful in teaching in urban classrooms. Among Milner’s goals for a course he developed were that prospective teachers know and understand their own and the different perspectives and values and beliefs of others, and learn how to assess and continue to strengthen their knowledge of diversity. The elements that seemed to have had a strong positive effect on students’ cultural and racial insights and awareness were the kinds of readings that the students were assigned, and the reflections and concomitant discussions that followed. His study identified three areas which made a positive difference in preservice teachers in the diversity course he developed. The preservice teachers who seemed the most prepared and ready to teach in culturally diverse urban schools were those who (1) had strong interactions with culturally and racially diverse students and developed greater cultural and racial awareness, (2) were able to reflect critically, and (3) made connections between theory and practice. García, Arias, Murri and Serna (2010) review the latest
demographics and the literature on the education of English learners (ELs). The authors speak about “responsive pedagogy” — teaching that respects and integrates the beliefs and histories and experiences students bring to class — their culture and language. The authors also advocate for university-school partnerships. The authors believe that teacher educators need to provide a supportive, nurturing environment for student and novice teachers in guided contacts in EL communities to help them change their beliefs about language and English-only teaching. In her study on multicultural training in graduate schools of education, Wallace (2000) asked important questions regarding the preparation of faculty to prepare preservice teachers for teaching in culturally diverse settings.

The literature on prospective teachers and teachers emphasized the need for teachers to prepare for diversity in the new millennium. Obtaining knowledge about students’ cultures and teacher self reflection were themes in the literature. Gay (2000, 2010) provides a comprehensive and compelling argument for teachers to act now to revise the way they teach. Teachers need to embrace the approach, get professional development, and practice culturally relevant teaching. She believes that waiting to become comfortable with this kind of pedagogy is not an option. Dee and Henkin (2002) examine the attitudes and dispositions toward diversity of prospective teachers among different specialties (special education, childhood education, English/foreign languages, math, social studies and physical education) who were preparing to teach in a highly diverse setting. Results of a survey showed differences in comfort and propensity for teaching culturally diverse students according to the specialization for which they were preparing. The undeniable conclusions of the study were that colleges and universities need to have a focus on cultural diversity (integrated into their course offerings) as an outcome for teacher preparation in their conceptual frameworks and/or mission. In addition, a way to measure outcomes for cultural
competence is needed. Marx’s (2008) study on the beliefs of Whites who teach Latino students was revealing. These experienced White teachers continued to hold stereotypic ideas about the cultures of the students and were unable or unwilling to talk about race. Dutro, Kazemi, Balf and Lin (2008) did a two year study that presents one teacher’s attempt at culturally relevant teaching. The study exemplifies the complexities of this kind of teaching. Initially the teacher and the children used the concept of culture as country of origin; eventually the concept of race, how children identify themselves, and how others see them, came into play. This is one of the few papers on actual examples of how teachers begin to use culturally relevant themes in teaching and how children’s responses take lessons into more complex areas of inquiry.

Cultural Perspective in Content Area Studies

“Too many teachers and teacher educators think that their subjects (particularly math and science) and cultural diversity are incompatible, or that combining them is too much of a conceptual and substantive stretch for their subjects to maintain disciplinary integrity. This is simply not true.” Gay (2002, p. 107)

Educators must consider the culture of the students for content areas to be taught in a holistic manner. It benefits educators to see how content area instruction needs to be grounded in the reality of the students. Nordstrom (2008) argues that environmental education and multicultural education are pedagogies that can be connected as they have common ground in cultural diversity. This type of pedagogy need not be considered in isolation from other subjects when thinking about culturally responsive pedagogy. Robert Ferguson (2008) observes that there has been a great deal written on the intersection between science and multiculturalism. Multicultural science standards have been formulated and authentic activities that correlate with the standards have been developed. These standards have been written specifically for science instructors of preservice teachers. The activities that have been developed may also be connected to students’ communities. In Math Club Problem Posing, Simic-Muller, Turner, and
Varley (2009) discuss an after-school program that complements and connects math classroom practices with visits to community businesses. Using students’ communities is an important part of culturally relevant teaching since communities, too, form a part of students’ cultures.

Using Critical Race and Latino/a Critical Race theories as a framework for her study, Pulido (2009) looked at how hip-hop was used as a way to understand race relations and identity formations with Mexican and Puerto Rican youth in a Chicago area. Although this article does not specify classroom practices, it gives evidence of the cultural environment that affects and informs students’ worldviews. Culturally relevant lessons that are connected to students’ identities become a powerful motivation for learning.

In discussing the classroom implications of teaching for social justice, Lalas (2007) states that “in the meaning-construction process, both the learner and the teacher use their life experiences, personal values and beliefs, personal and world knowledge, abilities to construct, monitor, and represent knowledge, and personal meaning construction and decision-making disposition in the instructional context of the classroom” (p.20). With this kind of education, tolerance is not enough. Educators and students must go beyond tolerance to promote equity through interactions, critical reflections and assessments as students learn content.

Diverse Student Populations

The literature on diverse student populations reveals that one of the key components for success of diverse students at any education level is acknowledgement of their cultural background. The importance of giving students the opportunity to discuss their identities and their interactions with society is made evident. Contreras (2009) studied 20 undocumented college students and discovered that they exhibited themes of fear and financial barriers. In addition, they needed space to reflect on their shifting identities. Bernal, Aleman and
Garavito (2009) corroborated Contreras’ findings. The authors found that students struggled with internalizing oppressive structures causing them to shift identities depending on their context, i.e., they would suppress their Latino/a culture in majority White contexts, but felt free to be themselves when working with Mexican youth. The authors suggest that a focus on, and conversations about identities must be a crucial part of courses we teach. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2009) recognize the need for diversity as “an asset in the era of global interdependence” (p. 331). They make many recommendations to the Obama administration to address Latino students’ experiences. They recommend revitalized teacher preparation programs, prioritizing second language acquisition, and reconsidering high-stakes testing, among other recommendations.

Studying cultural themes in six schools in the Midwest that had ninety-five percent African American students and one hundred percent African American teachers, Boykin, Tyler, and Miller (2005) classified specific classroom behaviors into themes of movement, verve, communalism, individualism, competition, and bureaucracy orientation. The authors found that of the ten types of cultural behaviors, individualism was the most recurring one. This behavioral theme was mostly initiated by the teachers. The authors concluded that the themes most common in the classroom were those associated with the mainstream culture rather than the African American cultural ethos of the student (and teacher) population. This study dramatically underscores that one must begin with the realization that “public school classrooms with predominantly minority student populations are not culturally neutral terrains” (p. 543). The article by Gomez and Rodriguez (2008) is part of a larger longitudinal study being conducted by the researchers. By presenting the lives of two Latino prospective teachers, the many assumptions made about Latinos in terms of experiences, social class and ethnicity in
schools and in teacher preparation programs are made evident. The need to address differences as well as similarities within Latino groups is highlighted. The importance of having Latino/a teacher educators who can identify with aspects of students’ lives and learning becomes important.

Parent Involvement

…parents, particularly marginalized parents—view their contributions to school success in terms of informal activities such as providing nurturance, instilling cultural values, talking with their children, sending them to school clean and well rested…and a variety of other nontraditional activities Lopez, Scribner & Mahitvanichcha (2001, p.256)

Dorner (2009) studied six families for a period of three years to determine how Mexican children and their parents understood and participated in bilingual immersion policies. Through participant observations and interviews, Dorner concluded that the parents, despite anxieties about their children not being taught in English, valued the two-way bilingual program and the continued development of Spanish. The children, on the other hand, seemed to feel more strongly about learning English. The researcher believes that the pressure of standardized tests in English may have contributed to the children’s attitudes toward English.

For three years De Gaetano (2007) and her colleagues met with two groups of parents in different cities to involve them in a bilingual multicultural program in which their children were participating in school. Through experiential workshops that utilized cultural artifacts, remembrances, stories, and other cultural venues, parents began to understand the schooling process and be more active in their children’s classrooms. The project demonstrated the importance of respecting, valuing and using parents’ language and cultures to involve them as partners in their children’s learning.
Interest in migrant parental involvement in schools, led Lopez, Scribner and Mahitvanichcha (2001) to conduct a study on schools that had good migrant parental involvement. Through three years of observations and interviews, the researchers determined that culturally sensitive outreach and continuous and effective communication with parents are key to migrant parent involvement.

These references were selected out of a larger, more extensive bibliography on the literature of cultural competence. Among the immediate needs that we identified in the references were the following: (a) to prepare teachers to become culturally competent in this millennium and, (b) to integrate cultural diversity in all (not simply one or two) courses offered at the university level. To improve teacher education and move it forward, we need to …“open up this discourse among teacher education faculty…and examine our efforts to teach those who are like us and not like us.” Cochran-Smith (1995b, p. 521).
Bibliography on Cultural Competence in Education


