

Isn't Culturally Responsive Instruction Just Good Teaching?

Kathryn Au

I'm standing just inside the door of the third-grade classroom where I'm scheduled to conduct observations. In this elementary school on the Wai'anae Coast of the island of O'ahu, about 60% of the students are of Native Hawaiian ancestry, about 20% are Filipino, about 5% White, and another 5% Samoan. Almost all speak Hawai'i Creole English (a nonmainstream variety of English) as their home language. About two-thirds come from families living in poverty, including homeless families camping on the nearby beaches. The school day hasn't officially begun, but students are entering the room, signing in by flipping their name cards, and going quickly to their seats. They look at the whiteboard to read the teacher's message, make sure their homework is ready to be checked, and get out a book to read. By the time the bell rings, the students are settled at their desks, ready to begin.

The teacher walks to the front of the room, makes a few announcements, and launches into her first lesson, which requires the students to work in small groups to comprehend, summarize, and generate questions about a newspaper article. At the same time, students assigned to take attendance and the lunch count and to collect homework carry out their tasks independently. I'm impressed by how quickly the students have become engaged in challenging academic work, by how self-directed they seem, and by the teacher's calm yet business-like manner.

This smoothly running classroom, in which the teacher and students are obviously in tune with one another, shows many features of culturally responsive instruction. I sensed that the classroom belonged as much to students as it did to the teacher, that the students felt "at home" in school. I saw that both students and teacher were focused on academic learning, another hallmark of culturally responsive instruction. I noticed that the teacher had built in time for students to work in small groups, that there was a place for collaboration and cooperation in the classroom.

Culturally responsive instruction appears to offer the potential to improve students' academic achievement and chances for success in school. However, it is not easy to see how culturally responsive instruction can be applied, especially in classrooms with students of many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the first section of this article, I discuss the key characteristics of culturally responsive instruction. In the second section, I respond to three frequently asked questions about culturally responsive instruction. In the final section, I discuss practical implications in terms of classroom structures for participation.

Culturally Responsive Instruction: What Is It?

Culturally responsive instruction resides firmly within a pluralist vision of society, recognizing that the cultures of different ethnic groups provide content worthy of inclusion in the curriculum.¹ Culturally responsive instruction aims at school success for students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, acknowledging that a disproportionate number of these students

"Research and Practice," established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited literacy scholar Kathryn Au to draw on her own experience, as well as research she and others have conducted, to answer a few central questions about *culturally responsive instruction* in multiethnic classrooms.

—Walter C. Parker, "Research and Practice"
Editor, University of Washington, Seattle.

typically experience failure in school. To close the achievement gap between students of diverse backgrounds and their mainstream peers, we use culturally responsive instruction—teaching that allows students to succeed academically by building on background knowledge and experiences gained in the home and community.

Three Key Questions

1. I teach in an urban school, and my students come from a dozen or more different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Can teachers in a multiethnic setting like mine still use culturally responsive instruction? Yes, you certainly can, although you will need to think carefully about how you will implement culturally responsive instruction. This question grows from the fact that much of the research on culturally responsive instruction has been conducted in classrooms in which the majority of students are from one particular ethnic group. For example, my research linked the classroom use of talk story, a speech event observed among Native Hawaiians, to improved reading

performance in Hawaiian children.² These and similar studies seem to highlight a precise match between instructional practices and students’ cultural backgrounds. Many teachers feel that they cannot achieve such a match, because they teach in settings in which students come from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

There is, however, another way of applying research on culturally responsive instruction to multiethnic, multilingual settings. This approach involves identifying patterns of instruction consistent with a *diverse worldview* that resonates with the cultural values of many nonmainstream groups.³

Gollnick and Chinn identified individualism and freedom as paramount values of the dominant group, a conclusion supported in research by Spindler and Spindler.⁴ These and related mainstream values, shown in the first column of the Table, underlie dominant society beliefs about how schooling should be conducted.

Table. Mainstream and Diverse Values

Mainstream	Diverse
Individual effort	Working with others
Competition	Cooperation
Personal achievement	Well-being of the group
Success measured in material terms	Success measured in spiritual terms
Independence	Interdependence
People control nature.	People live in harmony with nature.

In contrast, consider a diverse worldview based on beliefs in the importance of working with others and cooperation, as shown in the second column of the Table. In the diverse worldview, cooperation allows challenges to be met more easily, as members of the group all bring their thoughts and efforts to bear. What is important is the well being of the group, especially the family, extended family, or kinship network. These values are shared by many students of diverse backgrounds and their families.

As you can see, both the mainstream and diverse worldviews have positive features, and it is not a matter of having to choose between the two. In the classroom, students are likely to benefit from a classroom environment in which they have experiences with both kinds of values. The challenge is to make sure that values reflected in the diverse worldview find a place in the classroom because patterns typically observed in classrooms tend to reflect primarily mainstream values.

Classroom and home settings should remain distinct and different from one another, so that teachers can carry out classroom activities in a manner that promotes academic achievement, and families can carry out their lives in a manner consistent with their own goals. In other words, culturally responsive instruction does not involve duplicating home and community settings in the classroom. Instead of duplication, think of culturally responsive instruction in terms of hybridity.⁵ Hybridity refers to

the creative blending of elements from students’ home cultures with elements typical of the classroom and academic learning. In culturally responsive instruction, the teacher is creating hybrid settings that (1) have a focus on academic goals that students of diverse backgrounds, like all other students, should meet to do well in school and in later life, and (2) provide students with a comfortable, understandable environment that enables them to meet these goals.

2. Can mainstream teachers who are outsiders to the students’ cultures still implement culturally responsive instruction? Again, the answer is yes. A finding common to all the research reviews is that teachers of mainstream backgrounds, as well as teachers of diverse backgrounds, can successfully use culturally responsive instruction and teach students of diverse backgrounds. For example, in my study of talk story-like reading lessons, one of the

teachers, Teacher LC, was a mainstream teacher.⁶ Although initially unsuccessful in conducting reading lessons with young Hawaiian students, Teacher LC learned after a year to use talk story-like participation structures and to link her lessons to students’ interests. Ladson-Billings’s study of teachers effective in promoting the literacy of African American students included five African Americans and three European Americans.⁷ Although teachers who share their students’ cultural backgrounds may have an advantage in establishing positive relationships and providing students with effective instruction, other teachers can definitely learn to adjust their teaching to become more effective.

3. Isn’t culturally responsive instruction just good teaching, and shouldn’t good teaching be the same in every setting? This time the answer is no. To understand why, consider this quotation from Geneva Gay:

Many educators still believe that good teaching transcends place, people, time, and context. They contend it has nothing to do with the class, race, gender, ethnicity, or culture of students and teachers. This attitude is manifested in the expression “Good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere.” Individuals who subscribe to this belief fail to realize that their standards of “goodness” in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups. The structures, assumptions, substance, and operations of conventional educational enterprises are European American cultural icons....⁸

In other words, to advocate a universal concept of good teaching may actually amount to advocating teaching from a European American or mainstream perspective.

It remains true that certain general principles of good teaching appear widely applicable. An example of such a principle

is establishing positive relationships with students. However, the way these principles are instantiated may well differ depending on the cultural backgrounds of the students. For example, a teacher may seek to establish positive relationships with students by praising them by name: "Noah is doing a great job of organizing his ideas in a web." In the eyes of some students, however, the teacher may inadvertently have violated the cultural value of working for the good of the group rather than calling attention to one's individual accomplishments. The teacher's well-intentioned comment may cause the student to feel uncomfortable and to be looked down upon by his peers.⁹ Instead, this teacher could try to establish positive relationships with students by praising a small group of students or referring to the students' good work indirectly: "Team B, you're doing a wonderful job of organizing your ideas in webs."

As this example implies, the way we usually "do school" is itself a form of culturally responsive instruction, in this case, instruction responsive to the cultural backgrounds of mainstream students. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that the concept of culturally responsive instruction is applicable to *all* students, those of mainstream as well as diverse backgrounds. In both cases, the idea is that students have a better chance of experiencing academic success and of reaching high levels of literacy when instruction is responsive to their cultural backgrounds.

Classroom Structures for Participation

How can teachers adjust classroom structures for participation so that instruction becomes culturally responsive? Teachers can make these adjustments by using a variety of different groupings and interactional patterns in their classrooms. Some of these structures for participation will be consistent with a mainstream worldview oriented toward individual achievement, while others will be consistent with a diverse worldview oriented toward the well being of the group. Both are important, because culturally responsive instruction is never intended to limit students' learning only to structures for participation that they already find comfortable.

Whole class lessons. Whole class lessons

usually require students to learn at the same pace and to conform to the same expectations for behavior. These expectations for conformity mean that teachers tend to rely on classroom recitation to keep the students under tight control. In classroom recitation, the teacher singles out individual students to answer questions.¹⁰ In classrooms with many African American or Native Hawaiian students, to give two examples, use of individual recitation during whole class lessons often leads to difficulty, because teachers make themselves visible targets for students' disruptive behavior.¹¹ Rather than being the most easily managed arrangement, whole class lessons may actually turn out to be the most difficult to manage, especially for novice teachers.

The solution is to use whole class instruction judiciously, such as for mini-lessons lasting about 10 to 15 minutes.¹² During this time, teachers provide instruction in new content, strategies, and skills, and set the tone and focus for the small group and independent work to follow.

Teachers who use whole-class instruction effectively in classrooms with many African American students, Native Hawaiian students, and others consider the pace of interaction. Teachers in some classrooms—notably, with many African American students—find that a brisk, rhythmic pace, including choral responding, works well.¹³ Teachers in other classrooms, such as those with many Native American students, may find it effective to speak in a slower, measured manner.¹⁴

Another factor is the means by which students obtain turns at speaking. Students from some cultural backgrounds are very comfortable with raising their hands and eager to be chosen. Students from other cultural backgrounds are reluctant to volunteer to speak, even when they have many ideas to share.¹⁵ These students may believe that responding in front of the whole class is a form of showing off, bragging, or putting oneself above others. In these situations, in order to involve all students, teachers may want to vary the participation structure. Specifically, instead of relying on students to volunteer, the teacher may have each student in turn give a brief response.

Another factor relates to whether or not

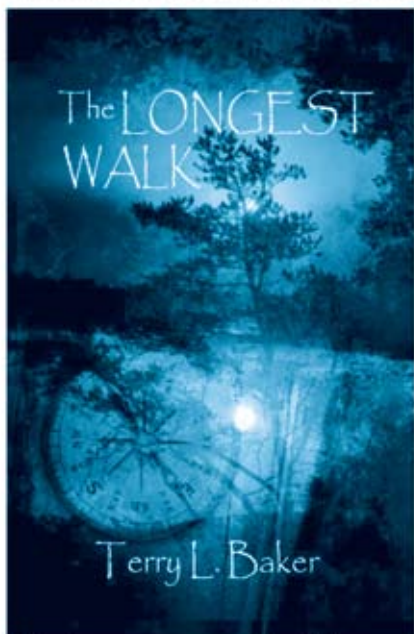
students have had time to prepare their responses to teachers' questions. Students from some cultural groups are taught at home to rehearse, practice, and otherwise prepare themselves before displaying their knowledge.¹⁶ Students from some cultural groups may be especially hesitant about sharing their responses when questions require interpretation or speculation rather than factual answers, because they have been taught to provide the answers expected by the teacher.¹⁷ To get around this problem, teachers can pose a question and have students discuss their ideas with a partner or a small group of three or four. A representative of each pair or small group then shares a key idea or answer with the whole class.

Teacher-led small groups lessons. Teacher-led small group lessons provide students with many opportunities to respond and to receive recognition for their efforts from both the teacher and peers. When the small group includes no more than six students, everyone usually feels obliged to make a contribution, and a student's lack of participation is readily noticed. Small group lessons often provide teachers with the most valuable instructional time, both to engage students actively with academic concepts and vocabulary and to establish positive relationships with students.

As in whole class lessons, teachers must continue to attend to issues of turntaking and pacing. If the teacher allows students to speak when they have something to say, instead of tightly controlling turntaking, small group lessons become consistent with a worldview oriented toward the well being of the group and cooperation. To establish a collaborative tone to the lessons, teachers must avoid calling on students and instead allow students to determine when they will speak. Some students have ideas to offer but do not know how to enter the conversation on their own, particularly if it is fast-paced. If the teacher sees that a student wants to speak but has not been able to do so, the teacher can make a space by quieting the group. For example, the teacher might say, "Excuse me, let's stop for a moment to see if Sarah has anything to add. Sarah, do you have an idea to share?"

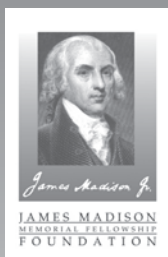
Small group discussions may proceed at

A Quaker boy...
an Indian brave...
united by one goal:
right a wrong to prevent a war.



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a brisk pace, as in talk story-like reading lessons, or the pace may need to be more leisurely. Teachers should watch students for clues about their comfort with the pace of the lesson and make adjustments accordingly. For example, research suggests that teachers in classrooms with Native American students may need to wait an extra moment to be sure students have finished speaking and do not feel interrupted.¹⁸

Student-led small groups. To make sure that student-led small groups are organized in a manner consistent with a diverse worldview, the teacher can guide students to set the ground rules to be followed during these small group discussions. These ground rules can reinforce values of cooperation. For example, the fourth graders in Torry Montes's class agreed that everyone should participate and that shy students would be invited to join the conversation.¹⁹ Rules such as these promote collaboration rather than competition among students within the group.

Student-led small groups in the form of book clubs can be used to promote higher level thinking about text.²⁰ Teachers can take a number of steps to enhance students' ability to engage in thoughtful discussions about biographies, historical fiction, and other texts and so make good use of the time in book clubs. Teachers should make sure all students have access to the text, for example, by having struggling readers engage in partner reading or giving them access to a listening center where they can hear the book on audiotope or CD. In general, teachers should model the kinds of comments students might make about the text, such as offering interpretations or making personal connections, as well as giving students help with learning how to ask open-ended questions. Teachers can have students observe and comment upon live or videotaped book club discussions, so that students see the difference between productive and unproductive conversations. Some groups of students, such as the African American students observed by Florio-Ruane, may have the skills to engage in discussions of literature with little or no teacher guidance.²¹

Another valuable use of student-led small groups involves having students work together to complete a project. For example, in a thematic unit on civil rights, one small group might choose to conduct research on Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. Students in the group pull together information from a number of different sources, and summarize their information in a written report. They can devise other ways to share their information with the class, such as through web pages or dramatization.

In some cases, as in classrooms with many Native Hawaiian students, teachers should not assign roles for members of the student-led groups but let students work out these roles on their own. Native Hawaiian students, for example, often have considerable experience working with their siblings and cousins to accomplish tasks, and so know how to organize a small group to reach a common goal. In other cases, small groups may function more smoothly if the teacher assigns students roles, such as recorder or reporter. This approach may be necessary if students prefer to work on their own, are not accustomed to working with their peers, or come from cultural backgrounds with an orientation toward individual accomplishment.

Individual or independent work time. Obviously, if students of diverse backgrounds are to be successful in school, they need to learn to work on their own. The ability to complete academic tasks independently is valued in school settings that are oriented toward individual achievement and competition and that emphasize standardized or state tests. As with the previous three structures for participation, teachers should discuss the expectations and rules for participating appropriately with students. For example, in a primary grade classroom, the teacher might explain the situation to students in the following way:

Today you're going to be reading a section in your social studies textbook. Your job is to read this section on your own and then write the answers to the three questions. We're going to be doing this work in a different way.

Usually, if you need help, you can ask someone at your table. With this work, you cannot ask anyone at your table. If you need help, you will raise your hand and wait for me to come over to you. The reason we're doing things this way is so that I can see the kind of social studies reading you can do on your own. This information will help me know what I need to teach you. Do you have any questions about what we're going to be doing now?

In this explanation, the teacher has made the rules for participation explicit for the students. This new structure for participation has been contrasted to the structure with which students are familiar. The teacher has given the students the reason that this structure for participation is being used.

However, despite the teacher's clear explanation, it may not be easy for students to engage successfully in this new participation structure on the first few tries. In order to support students' learning of these new rules for participation, the teacher should take a few minutes at the end of the lesson for a whole-class discussion. During this discussion, the teacher has the students evaluate their performance during the activity and provide suggestions about how they might improve their performance the next time. It takes time for students of diverse backgrounds to learn to participate appropriately in new structures, particularly if those structures reflect an individualistic, competitive worldview.

A final insight about individual work time is provided by Philips.²² Philips observed that Native American students used this time to approach the teacher for help with their work. These students preferred to receive assistance from the teacher individually and in private, rather than during whole-class or small-group lessons. This study suggests that teachers in multiethnic classrooms may want to make themselves available for individual conferences with students at some time during the school day. The teacher may have students sign up for these conferences in advance, as during the writers' workshop, or students may simply come over to the teacher's desk when no other student is there.

Conclusion

Yes, culturally responsive instruction is good teaching. But I hope it has become clear that what constitutes good teaching—teaching that helps all students to learn and prosper in school—may vary from setting to setting. This means that teachers cannot follow a simple formula for implementing culturally responsive instruction but must creatively experiment and make adjustments until they find the right combination of structures for participation. Teachers who wish to use culturally responsive instruction in multiethnic classrooms have the challenge of organizing to create a place for different structures for participation over the course of a week, if not a day. This variety of structures for participation is necessary if students of diverse cultural backgrounds are to engage successfully in academic learning, at least part of the time, from the beginning of the school year. As the year goes on, teachers enable students to participate effectively in structures that may initially have been unfamiliar or uncomfortable. The opportunities for academic learning available to students of diverse backgrounds increase as they begin to engage successfully in all the structures for participation commonly found in school, those consistent with a worldview oriented toward competition as well as with a worldview oriented toward cooperation. In this way, culturally responsive instruction offers the potential for closing the achievement gap so often seen between students of diverse backgrounds and their mainstream peers. 📖

Notes

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