

Carol Weinstein  
Mary Curran  
Saundra Tomlinson-Clarke

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# Culturally Responsive Classroom Management: Awareness Into Action

*This article expands discussions of culturally responsive pedagogy by focusing specifically on the tasks and challenges of classroom organization and management. First, we examine three prerequisite understandings that underlie teachers' ability to manage diverse classrooms in culturally competent ways. We then consider specific approaches and strategies for enacting culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) and reflect on the ways that management practices promote or obstruct equal access to learning. We stress the fact that developing CRCM is an ongoing, long-term, and often discomfiting process, in which cultural diversity becomes a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management.*

MARIA EMIGRATED FROM MEXICO to the United States when she was 5. Now in a third-grade, monolingual English class, she sits quietly at her desk and speaks only when her White, middle-class teacher calls on her. She does, however, raise her hand frequently to ask if she's doing her assignments correctly. Her teacher believes that Maria is insecure and overly dependent on her. In class, she

often chides her to be more outgoing and independent; she repeated this message on Maria's report card and at parent conferences. Maria's teacher is unaware of the fact that Hispanic parents tend to expect their children to be quiet and obedient in school and to seek advice and approval before acting.

Houng, a Vietnamese American girl in second grade, repeatedly answers "Yes," when her teacher, Ms. Adams, asks her if she understands. Her written work, however, consistently reveals her confusion. Frustrated and annoyed, Ms. Adams concludes that Houng lacks motivation to learn and chastises her for not seeking help. Ms. Adams has no idea that the literal equivalent of "yes" in Vietnamese is "da," which can also mean "I am politely listening to you." (Grossman, 1995)

James is an African American sixth grader who is loud, active, assertive, and quick to interject comments into a class discussion without raising his hand. His teacher (who is African American and was educated in predominantly White schools) realizes that the school's emphasis on quiet, passivity, and turn taking is strikingly different from the behavioral expectations that exist in James's home; nonetheless, she believes it is important for James to learn "appropriate" classroom behavior. For this reason, she frequently reprimands him, makes him miss recess, and has him stay for detention.

The teachers in all of these situations are interpreting and responding to their students' behavior from the perspective of mainstream sociocultural norms. Although well-meaning, these teachers are acting in ways that actually discriminate against

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*Carol Weinstein is a professor, Mary Curran is an assistant professor, and Saundra Tomlinson-Clarke is an associate professor, all at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.*

students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Such discrimination occurs when teachers do not recognize that behavior is culturally influenced; when they devalue, censure, and punish the behaviors of non-mainstream groups; and when they fail to see that their management practices alienate and marginalize some students, while privileging others.

Unfortunately, the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that give rise to this kind of discrimination are likely to become more frequent as the cultural gap between students and teachers widens. Calls for “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 2001) and “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2000) address the need for teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and predispositions to teach children from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and social class backgrounds. This article expands these discussions by focusing specifically on the tasks and challenges of classroom organization and management. First, we examine three prerequisite understandings that underlie teachers’ ability to manage diverse classrooms in culturally competent ways. We then consider specific approaches and strategies for enacting culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM).

### **Prerequisites of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management**

Like culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching, CRCM begins with an understanding of “the self,” “the other,” and the context. First, we must *recognize that we are all cultural beings, with our own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about human behavior*. We need to articulate and examine the values implicit in the western, White, middle-class orientation of U.S. schools, such as the emphasis on individual achievement, independence, and efficiency. By bringing cultural biases to a conscious level, we are less likely to misinterpret the behaviors of our culturally different students and treat them inequitably.

Second, we must *acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist among people*. A desire to be fair and impartial sometimes leads teachers to strive for “color-blindness” (Nieto, 1994), and educators are often reluctant to talk about cultural characteristics for fear

of ignoring heterogeneity among group members and “essentializing”—seeing groups as static, monolithic, and homogeneous. But in order to be culturally responsive, we must acquire “cultural content knowledge.” We must learn, for example, about our students’ family backgrounds, their previous educational experiences, their culture’s norms for interpersonal relationships, their parents’ expectations for discipline, and the ways their cultures treat time and space. At the same time, cultural knowledge should not be used to categorize or stereotype, nor to imply a clear understanding of another’s cultural beliefs and world view (Mishne, 2000). Instead, teachers should use acquired cultural knowledge as a way of demonstrating an openness and willingness to learn about the aspects of culture that are important to students and their families.

Finally, culturally responsive classroom management requires that teachers *understand the ways that schools reflect and perpetuate discriminatory practices of the larger society*. We must understand how differences in race, social class, gender, language background, and sexual orientation are linked to power. We need to recognize that the structure and practices of schools (e.g., rigid tracking, unevenly distributed resources, standardized testing) can privilege select groups of students while marginalizing or segregating others.

### **Strategies for Enacting Culturally Responsive Classroom Management**

With these fundamental understandings, teachers can begin to reflect on the ways their classroom management practices promote or obstruct equal access to learning. This is an ongoing, long-term, and often discomfiting process, in which cultural diversity becomes a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management. These tasks include (a) creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals, (b) establishing expectations for behavior, (c) communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, (d) developing a caring classroom environment, (e) working with families, and (f) using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems. In the following sections, we examine each of these tasks from a culturally responsive perspective.

### Organizing the physical environment

I once visited a fifth-grade classroom on the New Mexico-Mexico border. The room displayed pictures of colonial Jamestown, and because it was spring the bulletin board was surrounded by paper tulips. In fact, when I looked at the calendar, I realized that it was May 5 (Cinco de Mayo) and that there was nothing in the classroom commemorating this holiday. Also, as much as I like tulips, I found those on the bulletin board paled in contrast to the Mexican golden poppies and other beautiful desert flowers that surrounded the school but didn't make it into the classroom. (Jones & Fuller, 2003, p. 93)

In contrast to the teacher who designed the classroom in this vignette, culturally responsive classroom managers filter their decision making about the environment through the lens of cultural diversity. In other words, they think about the ways the environment can be used strategically to communicate respect for diversity, to reaffirm connectedness and community, and to avoid marginalizing and disparaging students. A map of the world, for example, can highlight students' countries of origin. A sign or banner can welcome students in the different languages they speak. Posters can depict people of various cultural groups (although care must be taken to avoid stereotypical representations such as Mexicans sleeping under large-brimmed sombreros). Children's individual photographs can be mounted on poster board and then used to create a jigsaw puzzle, reinforcing the idea that everyone comes together to form a whole. In elementary classrooms, the literacy corner can prominently display books that promote themes of diversity, tolerance, and community, such as *Crow Boy* (Yashima, 1983), *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Dr. Seuss, 1989), *The Crayon Box That Talked* (DeRolf, 1997), and *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991).

In addition, the physical setting can promote social interaction and prosocial behavior. Desks arranged in clusters, for example, allow students to work together on activities, share materials, have small-group discussions, and help each other with assignments. Because racial and ethnic differences can lead to name-calling and teasing, the physical environment can reinforce the importance of being kind and tolerant. Students can drop brief notes about acts of kindness they do or witness into a "kindness box," from which the teacher periodically

pulls a note and reads it aloud (Beane, 1999). Bulletin board displays can encourage students to commit "Random Acts of Kindness" or can remind students about the "DOs and DON'Ts of Teasing" (Hoover & Oliver, 1996).

### Establishing expectations for behavior

Research on effective classroom management at the beginning of the year (e.g., Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980) has confirmed the importance of establishing clear expectations or norms for behavior. According to these researchers, effective managers typically have three to six general rules of conduct (e.g., "Be respectful" and "Participate in class lessons"), and they make certain that students understand what the norms mean in terms of specific behavior. This is especially critical in culturally diverse classrooms, since different cultures hold different views about appropriate behavior. In some cultures, for example, making eye contact is a sign of respect, while in others respect is communicated by maintaining an averted gaze. Teachers may expect children to sit quietly and "listen when someone is talking," but some African American students may be accustomed to a more active, participatory pattern of behavior ("call-response").

To avoid the possibility of confusion or misunderstanding (which can then lead to unnecessary disciplinary interventions and antagonism), teachers need to be explicit about their expectations, engage students in discussions about the class norms, model the behavior we expect, and provide opportunities for students to practice. Consider the following example:

Because Ms. Frank values collaborative learning, she places her students' desks in clusters and encourages them to help one another. But she spends a lot of time at the beginning of the year explaining to her second graders exactly what that means. She takes pains to distinguish between *helping* and *doing the work* for the other person. She and her students role play different situations; for example, Ms. Frank pretends she doesn't know how to do a math problem and asks a student for help. Then she asks the class, "Was that good help? Was that *explaining* or was that *doing the work for me*?" Ms. Frank and her students also talk about when it's *not* permissible to help one another. She explains that sometimes work has to be done *independently* so that she can see what people know how to do on their own.

Ms. Frank realizes that it's important to be absolutely explicit about the norms for helping in her very diverse classroom. Some of her children have cultural roots in individualistic cultures; it is likely that the values of individual effort and self-sufficiency have been deeply engrained, so these children may resist her efforts to encourage peer assistance. In contrast, the children from more collectivist cultures (e.g., African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) have probably been taught the value of providing assistance to others; they may find it difficult to *resist* helping their peers, even when they are directed to work independently.

### **Communicating with students in culturally consistent ways**

Culturally responsive managers recognize that differences in discourse style can have a direct effect on students' behavior. Delpit (1995), for example, points out that Black children and children from working-class families are more accustomed to straightforward directives from authority figures ("Sit down and get to work.") than to the "politeness formulas" (Manke, 1997) and indirect discourse strategies (e.g., "Sally, would you like to sit down?") typically used by middle-class White teachers. If teachers choose to use these indirect discourse strategies, they need to provide students with explicit lessons on how nondirective verbal interventions are actually "code" for direct commands.

Sometimes, teachers may decide to modify discourse styles so that their communications are consistent with students' cultural backgrounds. Cindy Ballenger (1999), for example, was an experienced preschool teacher who expected to have little difficulty with her class of 4-year-old Haitian children. To her surprise, however, her usual repertoire of management strategies failed to create a respectful, orderly environment. Since her colleagues—all Haitian—were experiencing no difficulty with classroom management, Ballenger had to conclude that the problem "did not reside in the children" (p. 32). She began to explore her own beliefs and practices with respect to children's behavior and to visit other teachers' classrooms to examine their "control statements." Eventually, Ballenger was able to identify several key differences between her own style of discourse and that of her Haitian

colleagues. While the Haitian teachers stressed the fact that they cared for the children and had their best interests at heart (e.g., "The adults here like you, they want you to be good children."), Ballenger frequently referred to children's internal states (e.g., "You must be angry."). Moreover, she tended to stress the logical consequences of children's behavior (e.g., "If you don't listen, you won't know what to do."), while the Haitian teachers articulated the values and responsibilities of group membership and stressed less immediate consequences, such as bringing shame to one's family. Once Ballenger had identified these differences in control statements, she made a deliberate effort to adopt some of the Haitian discourse style. Order in her classroom improved significantly.

### **Creating caring, inclusive classrooms**

When teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds, planned efforts to cross social borders and develop caring, respectful relationships are essential. From the very first day of school, teachers can set the tone by greeting students at the door with a smile and a warm, welcoming comment. Greeting second language learners with a phrase in their native language can be especially affirming. Teachers can also forge positive relationships with students by sharing stories about their lives outside of school, learning about students' interests and activities, inviting them to make choices and decisions about class activities, and listening to their concerns and opinions. It is critical that teachers deliberately model respect for diversity—by expressing admiration for a student's bilingual ability, by commenting enthusiastically about the number of different languages that are represented in class, and by including examples and content from a variety of cultures in their teaching. Finally, it is important to remember that caring also involves communicating high expectations and holding students accountable for high-quality academic work. Consider what Vinh, an 18-year-old Vietnamese student, has to say about teachers who praised his limited English:

My English is not good. And she say, "Oh, your English is great!" But that's the way the American culture is. But my culture is not like that. . . . If my English is not good, she has to say, "Your English is

not good. So you have to go home and study.” And she tell me what to study and how to study and get better. But some Americans . . . they just say, “Oh! You’re doing a good job! You’re doing great! Everything is great!” Teachers talk like that, but my culture is different. . . . They say, “You have to do better.” (Nieto, 1994, p. 408)

In addition to establishing caring, respectful relationships with students, culturally responsive classroom managers work to create a sense of community. This means anticipating the cultural conflicts that are likely to arise and promoting positive relationships among students. Beginning-of-the-year activities can direct students’ attention to the ways they are similar and different. The common game, *Find Someone Who* (e.g., Find someone whose parents come from another country. What’s one tradition or custom that person has learned from his or her parents?), for example, can include items relating to race, culture, and linguistic background (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). “Morning meetings” (Kriete, 1999) build a sense of cohesion by allowing students to begin each day by greeting each other by name, sharing news, and doing a group activity. Cooperative learning activities can highlight students’ unique talents if tasks are designed to require multiple abilities (e.g., reading, writing, computing, building models, spatial problem solving, drawing, creating songs, public speaking). Each of these situations can be enhanced if teachers make a point of explaining how it contributes to the goal of building community.

Finally, culturally responsive teachers recognize that teasing and bullying are common reactions to perceived differences among peers and that these behaviors destroy the possibility of community. We need to be alert to hurtful comments about race and ethnicity, body size, disabilities, sexual orientation, dress, use of languages other than English, and socioeconomic status. We also need to make it clear that disrespectful speech and slurs—even when used in a joking manner—are absolutely unacceptable. This means intervening if we hear a student use a hateful epithet (e.g., “That word hurts people, so you may not use it in this classroom.”). In addition, we can implement reflective activities designed to raise awareness. Students can read fiction that relates to the topic of harassment; conduct surveys about bullying; depict their feelings

about name-calling and put-downs through drawings and paintings; have open meetings on name-calling, teasing, and bullying, and discuss appropriate and inappropriate responses.

### **Working with families**

Communicating and collaborating with families is an integral, but challenging component of effective classroom management. When teachers and families come from different cultural backgrounds, the challenges are even greater. For example, some families may not perceive direct involvement in schooling to be part of their role as parents. Asian-American families generally hold high expectations for their children’s academic success; nonetheless, they tend to view educational matters as the province of the school (Fuller & Olsen, 1998). Similarly, Latinos greatly value education, but they typically perceive their role in schooling as limited to ensuring their children’s attendance, instilling respect for the teacher, and encouraging good behavior (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000). Culturally responsive classroom managers consider the possibility that a lack of direct involvement reflects a differing perspective about parental responsibility, rather than a lack of commitment to their children’s education.

In addition, teachers and parents may have divergent expectations about what constitutes appropriate school behavior. European American teachers, for example, may expect children to be active participants in class discussions—to question, debate, and state their own opinions. In contrast, parents from traditional Asian and Latino backgrounds may expect students to be quiet and obedient, not to contradict the teacher, and not to ask questions (Scarcella, 1990). Cary (2000) describes the kinds of conflicts that can occur when home and school cultures collide. In one situation, the Mexican father of a kindergarten boy disapproved of his son’s domestic play in the house-keeping area. In another, a father from Pakistan asked his daughter’s fifth-grade teacher to ensure that the girl was never seated next to a boy. Cary explains how the conflicts were resolved:

In both examples, each father had strong, culturally based, heart-felt concerns. So did the teachers. In the end, there were no perfect, everybody-wins-big

solutions. But there *were* solutions, based on compromise and, therefore, acceptable to all parties: The [kindergarten] teacher would not prohibit the boy from entering the Housekeeping Center, but neither would she encourage the boy to play there. The fifth-grade teacher would not seat the daughter permanently next to a boy, but the girl would periodically interact with boys in pair and small group activities. . . . A respect for cultural differences and some critical reflection and persistence enabled the . . . teachers to ultimately fashion workable solutions. (pp. 121-122)

Another challenge that arises in cross-cultural communication with families is engaging in genuine, meaningful, two-way communication. Too often, teachers assume that poor, uneducated parents simply do not care, or that parents who are learning English as a second language have nothing of value to offer. Instead, teachers need to encourage families from non-English-speaking backgrounds to provide insight into their children's culture and prior educational experiences, whether the child is experiencing any cultural conflicts, what their educational goals for the child are, whether English is used at home, and if there are any special needs or customs about which teachers need to be aware.

Last, it's essential to be sensitive to cultural differences in communication styles. During parent-teacher conferences, teachers from the dominant culture may immediately launch into a discussion of the student's progress—especially if meetings are scheduled 15 minutes apart. But this may appear cold and unfriendly to people who are generally accustomed to exchanging pleasantries (e.g., inquiries into the health of family members) before getting down to the business at hand (Brown & Kysilka, 2002). Likewise, European Americans tend to wait only a short time after asking a question, while Native Americans are generally accustomed to longer pauses. "While you're thinking about what you're going to say, they're already talking," complained one Athabaskan Indian woman (Nelson-Barber & Meier, 1990; cited in Swap, 1999).

### **Dealing with problem behaviors**

Despite the best preventive measures, all teachers eventually have to deal with problem behaviors in the classroom. What does it mean to be culturally responsive in this situation? First, culturally responsive classroom managers reflect on the kinds of behaviors they judge to be problematic

and consider how these are related to race and ethnicity. For example, Black children tend to be more intense and confrontational than White children; they are more likely to challenge school personnel since they see leadership as a function of strength and forcefulness (rather than as a function of position and credentials); and they may jump into heated discussion instead of waiting for their "turn" (Irvine, 1990). Teachers who subscribe to the dominant culture are likely to see these behavioral patterns as examples of rudeness and disruptiveness, to respond with anger, and to invoke punitive measures. Alternatively, teachers who view the behaviors as reflections of cultural norms are better able to remain calm and nondefensive and to consider a variety of more constructive options (e.g., discussing classroom norms and the need for turn-taking in large groups). Indeed, they may actually come to see the benefits of allowing intensity and passion to be expressed in the classroom and broaden their definition of what is acceptable student behavior (see Delpit, this issue).

Second, culturally responsive classroom managers examine the ways that race and ethnicity influence the use of disciplinary consequences. Research repeatedly shows that African American youngsters, particularly males, are disproportionately referred for behavior problems compared to their majority counterparts (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996). Indeed, Irvine (1990) notes that Black students are 2 to 5 times more likely to be suspended at a younger age and to receive lengthier suspensions. Lipman (1968, cited in Nieto, 2000), for example, describes a case of an African American male who was given a 10-day in-school suspension for wearing the straps of his overalls un-snapped (a common fashion trend among African American males), while White students with holes cut in the thighs of their pants (also a fashion statement) were not even reprimanded.

### **Conclusion**

Being a culturally responsive classroom manager means more than learning a few words in a student's native language or creating a bulletin board that highlights students' countries of origin. It means being willing to reflect on the ways that classroom management decisions promote or obstruct students'

access to learning. Culturally responsive classroom management is a *frame of mind* as much as a set of strategies or practices.

Teachers who are culturally responsive managers recognize their biases and values. They reflect on how these affect their interactions with students. They ask themselves hard questions, such as “Am I more patient and encouraging with some? Am I more likely to reprimand others? Do I expect African American and Latino children to be disruptive? Do I use hair style and dress to form stereotypical judgments of my students’ character and academic potential? When students violate norms, do I recommend suspension for students of color and parent conferences for students who are European American?”

Culturally responsive classroom managers also strive to become knowledgeable about the cultures and communities in which their students live. They acknowledge the legitimacy of different ways of speaking and interacting. Although they recognize the fact that White, middle-class ways define what is appropriate and valued in our schools, they understand that this status comes from the power of the White, middle-class group rather than from any inherent superiority (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Moreover, they explicitly teach their students these mainstream ways, so that students can use them (if they wish) to succeed in dominant social spheres. At the same time, they do not imply that these ways are “better,” nor do they devalue cultural practices that are not part of the dominant paradigm.

Culturally responsive classroom managers understand that the ultimate goal of classroom management is not to achieve compliance or control, but to provide all students with equitable opportunities for learning. In the final analysis, culturally responsive classroom management is classroom management that furthers the cause of social justice.

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