

Culturally Responsive Teaching



Terese C. Aceves
Loyola Marymount University

Michael Orosco
University of California-Riverside

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The CEEDAR Center

University of Florida
360 Norman Hall
PO Box 117050
Gainesville, FL 32611

www.ceedar.org
ceedar@coe.ufl.edu
352.273.4259



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A large and increasing proportion of the student population in the United States comes from homes that are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD; National Catholic Educational Association, 2010). This demographic change has created cause for concern as research shows that a student's race, ethnicity, cultural background, and other variables (e.g., poverty, assessment practices, systemic issues, lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, institutional racism) significantly influence the student's achievement (e.g., Harry & Klingner, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Addressing the unique needs of CLD students is one of the major challenges facing public education today because many teachers are inadequately prepared (e.g., with relevant content knowledge, experience, training) to address CLD students' learning needs (e.g., Au, 2009; Cummins, 2007). This inadequate preparation can create a cultural gap between teachers and students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) and can limit educators' abilities to choose effective instructional practices or materials (Orosco & O'Connor, 2011). Culturally responsive teaching (CRT; defined in the next section) can help teachers and schools overcome the historic underachievement of CLD students.

Definition of Culturally Responsive Teaching

In defining CRT, it is important to draw from the work of Geneva Gay (2010), Sonia Nieto (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008), and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009). Culturally responsive (CR) teachers value students' cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build upon rather than a barrier to learning. CR teachers use this capital (i.e., personal experiences and interests) as the basis for instructional connections to facilitate student learning and development. CR teachers apply interactive collaborative teaching methods, strategies, and ways of interacting that support CLD students' cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences matched with evidence-based practices (EBPs; e.g., Harlin & Souto-Manning,



2009; Hersi & Watkinson, 2012; Nieto et al., 2008; Santamaria, 2009).

Students in United States public schools are becoming increasingly CLD. This change has led practitioners to examine research on CRT for these CLD students. Research is slowly emerging to identify EBPs for students from CLD backgrounds (Orosco & O'Connor, 2011). For this innovation configuration, we reviewed research articles from the current professional literature for the purpose of identifying effective CRT practices. We only reviewed studies that included at least 50% of CLD students in the sample. In this review, we found six general CRT themes (i.e., instructional engagement; culture, language, and racial identity; multicultural awareness; high expectations; critical thinking; and social justice); five CRT practices (i.e., collaborative teaching, responsive feedback, modeling, and instructional scaffolding) that were considered emerging EBPs; two general recommended teaching approaches (i.e., problem solving and child-centered instruction); and two instructional considerations (i.e., assessment and materials) all supported by the CR literature (see Table 1). The following sections describe these findings.



Table 1

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Relevant Themes of CRT	Emerging Evidence-Based CRT Practices	Recommended CRT Approaches and Considerations
Instructional Engagement	Collaborative Teaching	Problem Solving
Culture, Language, and Racial Identity	Responsive Feedback	Child-Centered Instruction
Multicultural Awareness	Modeling	Assessment
High Expectations	Instructional Scaffolding	Materials
Critical Thinking		
Social Justice		

Relevant Themes of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Instructional Engagement

The CRT literature indicates that direct and explicit instructional engagement with EBPs can have a powerful impact on CLD students' development because it provides teaching that draws from CLD students' relevant schemas, background knowledge, and home languages; it also allows students to practice what is being taught (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006). For example, various classroom studies have indicated that students make greater improvement in reading comprehension when teachers intertwine instructional engagement approaches with skills-based practices (i.e., connections between students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and lessons) that assist CLD students with integrating new learning information (e.g., Orosco & O'Connor, 2013).

Culture, Language, and Racial Identity

Culture, language, and racial identity refer to the complex constructs that develop from



psychologically and socially inherited knowledge and experiences. Enculturation and socialization continuously shape culture, language, and racial identity (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Enculturation is the process by which students become knowledgeable of and competent in their communities throughout life while socialization is the process of behaving based on the accepted norms and values of the culture or society the individual experiences (Pinker, 2002). Language is a body of linguistic knowledge; it is the communication system common to people who are of the same culture (Tomasello, 1999). Language, the communication medium of culture, can be shaped by culture. Racial identity is the sense of one's cultural and linguistic beliefs and values; it can entail a group of people united or classified based on history, nationality, or geographic distribution (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Culture and linguistic experiences can help shape students' identities. Learning may be difficult for many CLD students because many of them encounter formal schooling as separate from their own cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences (Au, 2005; Gipe, 2006). CR methods provide teachers with the critical understanding of how students' cultural, linguistic, and racial identities develop and how these constructs impact learning.

Multicultural Awareness

CRT provides teachers with the multicultural awareness skills to objectively examine their own cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions. This critical reflection provides teachers with a greater understanding, sensitivity, and appreciation of the history, values, experiences, and lifestyles of other cultures. Multicultural awareness becomes central when teachers must interact with students from other cultures. It provides teachers with the skills to gain greater self-awareness, greater awareness of others, and better interpersonal skills; it also helps teachers to more effectively challenge stereotypes and prejudices (Banks, 2004).



High Expectations

In order to help students attain academic success and reach their potential, CR teachers must have high expectations for their students. High expectations refer to the ability to communicate clear and specific expectations to students about what they are expected to know and be able to do (Mitchell, 1998; Cahnmann, 2005; Cahnmann & Remillard, 2002). CR teachers create classrooms that promote genuine respect for students and a belief in their learning capabilities (e.g., Scheurich, 1998). They also provide instructional strategies and curricula that are driven by standards through the use of challenging, engaging exercises that take place within the context of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Hillberg, Tharp, & DeGeest, 2000).

Critical Thinking

An important component of CRT is the ability to instruct students to think critically. Critical thinking is the ability to think for oneself, apply reasoning and logic to new or unfamiliar ideas, analyze ideas, make inferences, and solve problems (e.g., Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). CRT methods provide teachers with the skills to teach students how to become critical thinkers by integrating challenging learning experiences involving higher order thinking and critical inquiry with their cultural and linguistic experiences. For example, in Funds of Knowledge, a well-researched critical thinking mediation (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013), researchers showed teachers how to integrate their teaching with students' home experiences. One example from this method involved using students' international traveling experiences, along with their parents' skills and knowledge, to reinforce classroom-skills-based instruction by forming native language literacy circles with parents to explain and foster critical analysis skills. In return, the parents applied these skills in conversations with their children to reinforce classroom EBPs. This CRT allowed teachers to look past their own views of the world, better understand the



thoughts of others, and form more cogent and well-rounded teaching, which allowed them to improve CLD students' critical thinking skills.

Social Justice

Social justice is the ability to understand and think about the social and political challenges that societies, communities, and individuals face and to proactively act upon these challenges (Cochran-Smith, 2004). CRT guides teachers' practices and curricula because it is centered in students' cultures, and it provides an active process for students to seek out information about what is happening in the communities around them, which guides them to better understandings of and better solutions for the inequities encountered in their communities (Irvine, 2002). However, cultural responsiveness goes beyond remedying mismatches from mishandled differences; it uses explicit instruction to help students access valued cultural capital, and it acknowledges that structural inequalities, including disparities in political and economic power, inhibit diverse students from succeeding (Ladson-Billings, 2009). For example, some teachers have taught students about connections between their indigenous cultural heritages in the United States and Mexico, the history of injustice they have encountered, and the acts of resistance and strengths by their people (Arce, 2004). CR teachers pragmatically focus on what students can do given their current contexts, noting that structural change is a long, slow process (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Nonetheless, even if starting at the micro level, CR educators contribute to structural change (Gay, 2010). CR teachers include a strong social-justice component in their instruction through which they help students identify and confront sociopolitical inequities and issues of social power and class privilege. CR teachers also nurture a sense of agency and action in their students (Nieto & Bode, 2012).



Emerging Evidence-Based Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Research during the past couple of decades has developed the foundation for EBPs that support teaching for students who struggle with learning basic academic skills. However, despite this research, which has improved many students' academic skills, CLD learners continue to underachieve in United States public schools. This underachievement has led researchers and educators to examine research on the development of EBPs with CRT methods. Research is slowly emerging to identify effective CR EBPs for students from CLD backgrounds. In the literature reviewed for this innovation configuration, we identified four EBPs for students from CLD backgrounds: (a) collaborative teaching, (b) responsive feedback, (c) modeling, and (d) instructional scaffolding.

Collaborative Teaching

Collaborative teaching is an umbrella term for instructional methods (e.g., cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, peer teaching, reciprocal teaching) that involve joint intellectual effort (i.e., requiring individual accountability, positive interdependence, and strong interpersonal skills) between students and/or teachers (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; O'Connor & Vadasy, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2011). Collaborative learning methods are a key component of CRT; they enable participants to share and learn from their collective experiences and challenges. Research indicates that practitioners who use direct and explicit collaborative-based approaches to learning to reinforce students' background knowledge (e.g., interdependence, sharing, collaboration) improve student literacy engagement and motivation (e.g., Au, 2011; Genesee & Riches, 2006).

In collaborative-based instruction, teachers provide a common introduction to lessons and then distribute learning assignments based on students' academic skills (e.g., reading, language level). Although all students learn about the same topic, the assignments may vary according to



student ability. Teachers collectively organize students into heterogeneous learning teams by grouping based on learning abilities. After students have read and identified the assignment, they discuss the topic with their groups, share their knowledge, and complete the lesson as a whole group. Teachers monitor and review the key concepts/skills all students should have acquired. If learning challenges persist, teachers may need to reciprocate and teach specific skills for student understanding. For example, there have been several studies (e.g., Calhoun, Al Otaiba, Greenberg, King, & Avalos, 2006; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Sáenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005) that have used collaborative-based learning approaches to engage CLD students in small groups in content-related strategic discussion to assist students in understanding concepts, deriving the main ideas, asking and answering questions, and relating what they are learning to their own cultural backgrounds. When students did not have the background knowledge to understand concepts and text passages, they were encouraged to generate questions for understanding that were discussed in small groups with the teacher facilitating comprehension.

Responsive Feedback

CR feedback is provided when teachers offer critical, ongoing, and immediate feedback regarding students' responses and participation. Through CR feedback, teachers supply individualized support regarding performance in a manner sensitive to students' individual and cultural preferences. This strategy includes incorporating students' responses, ideas, languages, and experiences into the feedback that is provided (Gersten & Geva, 2003) while inviting students to construct new understandings regarding what they are learning (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013).

Providing responsive feedback is an instructional strategy recommended as a necessary practice in effective instruction with students experiencing academic difficulty (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Responsive feedback has also been implemented as an important strategy within



studies involving English learners (Carlo et al., 2004; Gerber et al., 2004; Kamps et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2006). Prompting students with both affective and cognitive feedback encourages teachers to validate students' contributions while also clarifying and expanding students' statements during instruction (Jiménez & Gersten, 1999).

In order to engage in this critical feedback exchange, teachers must create multiple opportunities for students to respond and fluidly dialogue throughout the day. Scheduling opportunities for individualized teacher-student conferences allows students opportunities to receive individualized teacher feedback. Overall, students benefit from ongoing, specific feedback as a method to increase their self-esteem, monitor their understanding, and challenge their thinking.

Modeling

Teacher modeling has long been viewed as an essential component of effective teaching. As a CR practice, modeling involves explicit discussion of instructional expectations while providing examples based on students' cultural, linguistic, and lived experiences. CR modeling requires teachers to exemplify learning outcomes of CRT, which include strategy use, content learning, metacognitive and critical thinking, and interest and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

Research has established the modeling of skills, strategies, and new content as an essential and effective method for teaching English learners (Gerber et al., 2004; Gersten & Geva 2003; Kamps et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2006). Similarly, research on CRT practices emphasizes modeling as a key strategy for specific cultural groups (Hilberg, Tharp, & DeGeest, 2000). For example, within American Indian and Alaskan Native communities, learning through observation is an important tradition (Lipka et al., 2005). In an investigation involving indigenous Alaskan youth, researchers observed expert apprentice modeling during math



problem-solving activities reflective of this indigenous group's cultural practice (Lipka et al., 2005). Engaging in an essential cultural practice within instruction can validate students' group heritages while demonstrating its importance to academic tasks. CR modeling serves to illustrate specific cognitive strategies while drawing from students' cultures, languages, and everyday experiences (Jiménez & Gersten, 1999).

Instructional Scaffolding

CR instructional scaffolding occurs when teachers control for task difficulty and promote a deeper level of understanding using students' contributions and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Scaffolding skills include using different types of questions (e.g., open-ended questions, analytic questions), providing appropriate wait time and turn-taking, extending and acknowledging students' responses, and using supporting instructional materials (e.g., visual organizers, story maps; Jiménez & Gersten, 1999).

Researchers have integrated scaffolding methods in studies involving students experiencing academic difficulty, including students who speak a second language (Gerber et al., 2004; Goldenberg, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2006). For instance, scaffolding may include reference to English learners' primary languages or cultures. In this example, teachers may use relevant cognates while teaching English language development or provide primary language explanations to support English comprehension (Carlo et al., 2004).

CR research further demonstrates the effectiveness of this strategy in facilitating students' success and self-esteem during teaching episodes (Garza, 2009). Students have reported that teachers who provide this level of specialized assistance welcome a variety of student discourse and show genuine interest in their students' success (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013).

Recommended Culturally Responsive Teaching Approaches and Considerations

In addition to the instructional practices previously described and supported by research, the existing literature base describing CRT encourages other approaches that may have the potential for enhancing diverse student learning outcomes. Currently, empirical research with diverse populations investigating the effectiveness of these practices is lacking. Teachers, however, are encouraged to consider these areas of instruction supported by this literature base and implement with caution the approaches with diverse students. Specifically, these include using a problem-solving approach and child-centered practices during instruction and making special considerations during the assessment of CLD students and the selection of instructional materials that support students' cultural and linguistic experiences.

Problem Solving

Problem solving requires teachers to create opportunities for students to investigate real, open-ended problems; formulate questions; and develop solutions to genuine challenging situations. Engaging students in solving meaningful problems allows for complex and higher order thinking while increasing students' motivation to learn and resolve authentic issues in their daily lives. Teachers create opportunities for students to critique, challenge, and transform examples of injustice or inequity in their daily lives and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Therefore, problem solving becomes CR when students address problems that touch upon cultural and/or linguistic issues for the purpose of improving their daily lives. Some examples may include gathering and critiquing additional sources to supplement textbook curriculum that better reflect students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, investigating colleges with supportive programs for diverse students, and collecting oral histories from community elders regarding topics of study.



This instructional approach not only identifies and challenges inequities that may exist, but also allows students to devise solutions toward meaningful change. For example, one teacher engaged her students in investigating zoning laws using their math and reading skills in order to reduce the number of liquor stores and their associated problems (i.e., drug trafficking, prostitution, and public intoxication) around a school’s campus (Tate, 1995). With the results of their research, students lobbied the state Senate and made formal presentations to the city council, which resulted in numerous citations and the closure of two liquor stores near the school. CR problem solving encourages students to care about their communities. Literature documenting the implementation of CR problem solving with diverse populations is limited yet emerging.

Child-Centered Instruction

Students’ contributions drive the teaching and learning process in a CR classroom as teachers develop CR learning opportunities and outcomes focused on student-generated ideas, background knowledge, values, communication styles, and preferences. Through student-oriented practices, teachers respond to students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and learning needs. Student-centered instruction, choice, and participation are central to CRT practices (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2006).

Research conducted with indigenous groups and later adopted for use with a variety of other diverse student populations has long established child-directed activities as essential to the instruction of CLD learners (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, 2013). Researchers studying American Indian educational systems and communities found that given that these children are “allowed a high level of autonomy and decision making in their homes and communities, Indian students may be more comfortable and more motivated to participate in



activities that they generate, organize, or direct themselves” (Hilberg, Tharp, & DeGeest, 2000, p. 33). This practice is true for many diverse communities.

In CR classrooms, teachers provide opportunities for choice in classroom activities, encourage child-directed learning, and assist students as they engage in these activities. Teachers create opportunities for students to make decisions regarding the content and form of instruction and support that students need to self-regulate their learning. Instructional Conversation (Saunders, 1999; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999), an example of a child-centered practice, focuses on facilitating student dialogue in which students engage in conversations about academic content while establishing connections to personal, cultural, family, and community knowledge. Research support for these practices is emerging; for example, the What Works Clearinghouse found Instructional Conversations and Literature Logs to demonstrate the promising effects on reading achievement and English language development in English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Assessments

While assessing diverse students, teachers should select formal (i.e., standardized) assessments and informal measures and assessment procedures that consider students’ linguistic and cultural identities. Selected assessment tools and procedures should be designed for the purpose of uncovering what students already know and understand in order for teachers and families to capitalize on students’ strengths (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006). While interpreting assessment results, teachers must recognize that norms regarding expected student behavior and performance may vary depending on students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences. Research has shown that school personnel often ignore this variation or view differences as examples of deviant behavior in need of correction (Klingner et al., 2005).



The implementation of formal assessments with diverse populations has been indicated as a key contributor to the overrepresentation of CLD students in special education programs (Klingner et al., 2005; Linan-Thompson & Ortiz, 2009; Ortiz & Artiles, 2010; Ortiz & Yates, 2002). However, the examination of teachers' assessment practices within CR research is extremely limited. Recommendations related to CR assessment practices call for teachers to select formal measures validated for the population being assessed, integrate ongoing performance assessment, tap into students' strengths, involve qualified and trained representatives from students' cultural groups and communities in assessment procedures and recommendations, integrate appropriate ongoing curriculum-based assessments, and recognize that learning is demonstrated by a continuum of performance rather than discrete skills displayed at designated points in time (Gay, 2013; Klingner et al., 2005).

Materials

Teachers should integrate research-developed and teacher-selected materials that validate and consider students' cultural, linguistic, and racial identities. As critical consumers of these resources, teachers and students should review this material for the appropriate reflection of the diversity represented within the classroom community. When representative diversity is absent from this material, teachers should supplement as necessary in order to provide resources that reflect the cultures, languages, and lived experiences of the students they support (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2010, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Research on the condition of texts and other instructional materials has shown poor, inaccurate, and absent representation of diverse cultural and linguistic groups (Gay, 2010). Integrating materials reflective of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds is a strategy implemented within research examining CRT practices. In order to more directly address the inadequacies of curricular material for diverse students, Gay (2013) outlined the following



explicit strategies in which teachers and students should engage:

- conducting analyses of textbooks, mass media, Internet, literary sources, and personal narratives;
- exploring how personal backgrounds and environmental factors influence authors' scholarship;
- examining multiple ethnic descriptions and interpretations of events and experiences;
- investigating how different knowledge sources affect teaching and learning; and
- reconstructing or replacing existing presentations of issues and situations in the various resources with their own acquired cultural knowledge and insights (p. 59).

These practices allow teachers and students to critically evaluate the materials and resources used to guide instruction, correct any misrepresentation, and validate diverse students' histories and lived experiences.

Overall, the literature base describing CRT highlights problem-solving and child-centered approaches as representative of a CR classroom. Teachers who carefully select and critique the assessments and materials used for evaluation and instruction do so with their students' cultural and linguistic needs in mind. Although highly recommended, these CRT approaches and considerations require further empirical study with diverse populations for a better understanding of their influence on student achievement.

Conclusion

Many educational professionals may conclude that the practices outlined in this review encompass examples of "just good teaching" (Au, 2009). This way of thinking, however, presumes a generic universality of what is considered good teaching practice while ignoring the understanding that teaching and learning are culturally situated, varying across and within



cultural and linguistic groups (Gay, 2010). While implementing these practices, teachers must consciously make connections to students' cultures, languages, and everyday experiences in order for students to experience academic achievement while preserving their cultural and linguistic identities. "Academic success and cultural identity can and must be simultaneously achieved, not presented as dichotomous choices" (Klingner et al., 2005, p. 23). To ensure the academic achievement of diverse learners in urban, rural, and suburban communities across the United States, institutions of higher education and school districts must provide rigorous and ongoing professional development to support beginning and experienced teachers in their understanding and implementation of CR teaching practices.



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