



## Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy: Need of the Hour

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### **Abstract**

*NCERT's National Curriculum Framework-2005 initiated a paradigm shift in school education from teacher centric to student centered pedagogy. In a culturally diverse classroom, engagement in learning is most likely to occur when students are intrinsically motivated to learn and to achieve these teachers should make connections with the students and respond their needs in imaginative and dynamic way. Culturally sensitive pedagogy is based on the idea that culture is central to student learning. It is an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using culture as source to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. The use of cultural resources in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' own cultures. This link between culture and classroom instruction shapes students thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside of school. In education, cultural sensitivity involves creating equitable opportunities for all students. Therefore after reviewing in brief, the status of present pedagogical processes culturally sensitive pedagogy could be used for including maximum students in the classroom and their learning could be become effective.*

**Keywords:** Culturally Relevant Teaching , teaching and learning experiences.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) introduced the term “Culturally Relevant Teaching” to describe teaching that integrates a student’s background knowledge and prior home and community experiences into the curriculum and the teaching and learning experiences that take place in the classroom. There are three central tenets underpinning this pedagogy: (1) holding high expectations for all students, (2) assisting students in the development of cultural competence and (3) guiding students to develop a critical cultural consciousness. In this student-centred framework, the uniqueness of each student is not just acknowledged, but nurtured.

Other theorists, among them Gay (2000) and Villegas and Lucas (2002), use the terms “Culturally Responsive Teaching” or “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” to describe teaching that recognizes all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure and social or cultural identity. Theorists and practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy more than acknowledge the “cultural uniqueness” of each student; they intentionally nurture it in order to create and facilitate effective conditions for learning. They see student diversity in terms of student strengths; they orient to it as presenting

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opportunities for enhancing learning rather than as challenges and/or deficits of the student or particular community.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not about “cultural celebrations,” nor is it aligned with traditional ideas around multiculturalism. It involves careful acknowledgement, respect and an understanding of difference and its complexities.

Theorists write about three dimensions which comprise culturally responsive pedagogy:

### **1. Institutional**

The institutional dimension refers to the administration and leadership of school systems, including the values developed and reflected in school board policies and practices. It highlights the need to critically examine the formal processes of schooling which may reproduce particular patterns of marginalization. Educators need to consider which patterns need to be intentionally interrupted and changed.

### **2. Personal**

The personal dimension encompasses the mindset of culturally responsive educators and the practices they engage in, in order to support the development of all students. Not only are culturally responsive educators self-aware, but they also having a deep knowledge of their students and how they learn best.

### **3. Instructional**

The instructional dimension includes knowing learners well and considering the classroom practices which lead to a culturally responsive classroom.

All three dimensions are foundational to the establishment of an inclusive school culture (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

### **Characteristics of Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy**

- Use of valuable knowledge and experience that children and their families bring to school learning.
- Expand students’ life opportunities, available choices, and community contributions.
- Construct education for social justice, access, and equity.
- Shape their practice based on evidence of what results in successful learning of each student.
- Foster relationships based on care, respect, and responsibility.
- Produce high achieving students.
- Understand that people learn in different ways throughout their lives.
- Respond with learning opportunities that work.

Thus culturally sensitive pedagogy facilitates and supports the achievement of all students. In a culturally responsive classroom, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centred context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement. Teachers who are culturally sensitive apply interactive, collaborative teaching methods, strategies, and ways of interacting that support students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences and integrate it with evidence-based practices.

Thus this process avoids exclusion in which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the pedagogical process within the classroom and initiates inclusion.

**The basic dimensions of culturally sensitive pedagogy are:**

- **Content integration:** while transacting the content to the student it should be blended with examples and histories from wide range of cultural groups. The examples while teaching should be well knitted with the cultural backgrounds of the student, it should be such so that students should feel the ownership of their learning and content should reflect their context. Teaching through these strategies would definitely bring in student the understanding of the topic and the entire teaching learning process will become interesting and effective.
- **Equity pedagogy:** every child's background, level of ability, culture and religion is valued and respected. The broad range of talents, abilities and achievements of children should be celebrated and the pupil and teacher should work together in a climate of mutual respect, tolerance and trust. Learning of all students should be promoted inspite of their race, caste, economic status and gender.
- **Knowledge construction:** the child's way of viewing the world should become the starting point to construct the knowledge in the school. The need for subject addressing cotemporary concern of society is important. The child's local and community environment forms the primary context in which learning takes place and in which knowledge acquires its significance. It is this interaction with the environment that the child constructs knowledge and derives meaning. The local knowledge and the child's own experiences are the best entry points into the study of disciplines of knowledge and the ultimate aim of the knowledge is to connect with the world. Including such knowledge generation activities as a part of educational process would greatly enhance the quality of educational experiences.

**Characteristics of the teacher for Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy**

To create a culturally sensitive classroom teacher are of outmost importance. Teachers have a responsibility to all their students to ensure that all have an equal opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability. If instruction reflects the cultural and linguistic practices and values of only one group of students, then the other students are denied an equal opportunity to learn. Instruction that is culturally sensitive addresses the needs of all learners. The basic characteristics which the teachers should have to promote inclusion using this pedagogy are:

- The teacher should be socially conscious.
- The teacher should have empathy towards cultural diverse background of the student.
- Teacher should have commitment and skills to act as an agent of change.
- The teacher should have constructivist view of learning.
- The teacher should know about culturally sensitive teaching strategies

**Activities for culturally sensitive pedagogy** (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings,1994; Nieto, 1999)

The activities which could be involved in culturally sensitive classroom are:

- Student's differences and their commonalities should be acknowledged: teacher should acknowledge the individual differences among students along with their shared values and

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differences. There are various practices in different cultures which are followed by the students and this should be respected by the teachers.

- Student's cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials should be validated: The instructional material used by the teacher should be culturally supportive. These should be supported with rich diversity like multiculturalism. The more the instructional material are culturally diverse the more thinking process it will develop among students.
- The students should be educated about the diversity of world around them: classroom is the place where student diversity is seen and the students need the skills to relate to each other positively, regardless of cultural and linguistic differences. Teachers need to provide students with learning opportunities so that they might become more culturally knowledgeable and competent when encountering others who are different.
- Promote equity and mutual respect among students: To avoid the feeling of unworthiness, frustration, anger resulting in low achievement, unfair discrimination should be avoided and student should be treated fairly so as to bring maximum learning outcome.
- Encourage students to think critically: one of the major aim of education is to make student think critically which results in analysing and synthesising information to view new situations. For this students must be kept in such situations where students can think rationally.
- Motivate students to become active participant in their learning: action and evaluation leads students to participate actively in their own learning. Inquiry based, problem solving and discovery method leads to this type of learning.

Changes in the demographics are reshaping the nature of our educational system. Culturally sensitive pedagogy is slowly causing traditional trends to be reversed, with the onus to adapt to the demands of the multicultural classroom. To face the challenges teacher must become culturally sensitive. They must develop self awareness about predisposition and beliefs. They must learn more about student's culture to facilitate student teacher interactions and mutual understanding and finally the knowledge and skills developed through information and reflection must be translated into effective teaching. Appropriate selection of methodologies and approaches, culturally sensitive selection of contents and materials and a receptive and supportive environment are all crucial to the development of culturally sensitive pedagogy. Thus it adapts systems and structures to remove barriers to participation and fully involve all students in the process of learning. This requires adaptations to the school curriculum, buildings, attitudes and values, language, images and role models so as to achieve social inclusion.

### **The Mindset of Culturally Responsive Educators**

Culturally responsive teachers share a particular set of dispositions and skills – a mindset that enables them to work creatively and effectively to support all students in diverse settings. In the next few pages these characteristics, as outlined by Villegas and Lucas, are identified.

#### **1. Socio-cultural consciousness**

Culturally responsive educators understand their position in our present social, historical and political context; through questioning their own attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, they come to terms with forms of discrimination which can affect the experiences of students and families in multiple ways.

Self-reflection is foundational to the examination and identification of one's own biases. This critical process includes understanding the issues related to the distribution of power and privilege and the relationship of power dynamics to one's own social experience. Self-reflection also allows us to recognize how our own social identity is constructed and to think about how social identities are positioned and shaped by society. This is what it means to possess socio-cultural consciousness.

## **2. High expectations**

The perceptions we hold of students' abilities have a significant impact on student achievement and well-being (Ladson-Billings 1994, 2001, 2011). However, historically, some social identities – particularly those linked with disabilities or intersecting with race and low socio-economic status – have been deemed as contributing to notions of “at-risk-ness” in students (Dei, 1997; Portelli, Vibert & Shields, 2007).

Culturally responsive educators hold positive and affirming views of their students and their ability to learn and achieve academic success. They demonstrate genuine respect for students and their families as well as a strong belief in their potential. They consider the social identities of students as assets rather than as deficits or limitations.

## **DESIRE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Educators who are culturally responsive see equitable and inclusive education as fundamental to supporting high levels of student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2004). Consistent patterns of underachievement found in groups, such as those students with special education needs or those with students from low socio-economic circumstances, need to be seen as created by deeply problematic systemic and institutional barriers. Culturally responsive educators are committed to being agents of social change, ultimately working to remove barriers and creating conditions for learning that are beneficial for all students (Ministry of Education, 2009).

## **CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH**

Culturally responsive educators build upon the varied lived experiences of all students in order to bring the curriculum to life. Through this approach, they integrate locally situated learning into daily instruction and learning processes.

Constructivist approaches promote inquiry-based learning – they support students asking questions and creating new knowledge based on their natural curiosity about their own experiences. Knowledge building is reciprocal because students play an active role in crafting and developing learning experiences for themselves and their peers. This results in making learning relevant and accessible for all students in the classroom as they are able to see themselves in the curriculum.

## **DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR STUDENTS**

It is important for educators to recognize that parents, caregivers and families know their children best (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). Therefore, in an effort to know their students, culturally responsive educators work to build strong relationships with their students' families. They promote mutual respect between home and school and embrace a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

Deep knowledge, not just of content, but of one's students as individual learners, enables educators to integrate lived experiences into the daily learning of the classroom. Drawing on students' experiences provides teachers with the opportunity to represent their knowledge in the curriculum so it is meaningful and students see themselves reflected in the learning that takes place in the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices**

A wealth of research is available both nationally and internationally on culturally responsive instructional strategies. At the core of these strategies is a) holding high expectations for learning while b) recognizing and honouring the strengths that a student's lived experiences and/or home culture bring to the learning environment of the classroom. As Villegas and Lucas observe about culturally responsive educators, "they use what they know about their students to give them access to their learning" (2002, p. 27). Learning experiences are designed to be relevant and authentic, enabling students to see themselves in the daily learning of the classroom. This sends a message to students and the community that student, parent/community knowledge and experiences not only have value, but that they are also important to the learning in school.

### **Conclusion: Effective instruction matters!**

The quality of the instruction and the expertise of the teacher considerably outweigh the challenging circumstances that some of our students bring to the classroom (Callins, 2006; Willis & Harris, 2000). Effective instruction also ensures academic rigour which is essential in a culturally responsive framework; high expectations need to be coupled with the appropriate supports to scaffold new learning (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Some strategies to implement a culturally responsive framework are suggested below. They are adapted from the work of Jeff Kugler and Nicole West-Burns (2010):

- Expand upon what is considered as the "curriculum" – recognizing both the informal and the subtle ways in which the curriculum defines what is and what is not valued in our schools and society.
- Use inquiry-based approaches to student learning to develop engaged and self-directed learners. Support students in making decisions about their learning that integrate who they are and what they already know with their home and community experiences.
- Use a variety of resources, including community partners, to ensure the learning environment and pedagogical materials used are accessible to all learners and that the lives of students and the community are reflected in the daily workings of the classroom. Resources, materials and books should present both local and global perspectives.
- See the curriculum as flexible and adaptive to the lived experiences of students so they see themselves and their lives reflected in daily learning opportunities.
- Know and build upon students' prior knowledge, interests, strengths and learning styles and ensure they are foundational to the learning experiences in the classroom and the school.
- Ensure that learning engages a broad range of learners so that varied perspectives, learning styles and sources of knowledge are explored.
- Differentiate instruction and provide a wide range of methods and opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning, ensuring both academic rigour and a variety of resources that are accessible to all learners.

- Work to ensure that the socio-cultural consciousness of students is developed through curricular approaches, emphasizing inclusive and accepting education, to inform critical examination and action regarding social justice issues.

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