

# **Practising Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Literature Review of Classroom Implementation**

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## **Abstract**

*Students in Canadian schools are increasingly diverse in terms of cultural background, but they are being educated in a system that often does not nourish their cultural identity. This literature review involves a synthesis of research on classroom-based pedagogy from 11 qualitative and quantitative designed research studies from 2003 to 2015, all which address the experiences of educators with the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The findings revealed six themes relevant to culturally relevant pedagogy: teacher beliefs and knowledge, culturally inclusive classrooms, reshaping curriculum, instructional practices, professional training and support, and family and community involvement. The author concludes that incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy is a necessary teaching practice that will improve learning and social factors in Canadian schools.*

In recent years, research addressing culture and education has grown significantly because of the rapidly changing Canadian society. The demographic diversity in Canadian schools puts pressure on educators to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom that will meet the academic and social needs of all students, regardless of cultural identity. This is not an easy task for teachers, but it is necessary if teachers wish to address society's need for equitable education. Culturally relevant teaching uses students' social, cultural, and language backgrounds, which empowers students to experience social and academic success in school. The results of the accessed studies illustrate the need to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in order to meet the needs of diverse students.

Several research studies have supported the need to integrate students' culture in their education. The success or failure of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy depends on the teacher, who plays the key role in the classroom and who determines the pedagogy used. In order for culturally relevant teaching to be successful, teachers must believe in the pedagogical focus and have the self-efficacy to feel confident in its implementation. Creating a culturally inclusive classroom means that teachers need to nourish a classroom wherein all students feel safe, respected, and comfortable. The prescribed curricula must be approached in a way that meets the needs of diverse students. Appropriate instructional practices must be implemented effectively to meet the needs of all students. Proper professional training and support are essential for both future teachers and current teachers in the profession, so that all educators will have the knowledge base vital for implementation. Building relationships with students' families and the community is also necessary for the success of this educational focus. This literature review examines the foundational themes for consideration by teachers who are committed to using culturally relevant pedagogy to improve the success of diverse students both academically and socially.

## **Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge**

The foundation of culturally relevant teaching is the teacher who respects cultural identity, determines the learning environment, and decides the pedagogy that is implemented in the classroom. Teacher beliefs play an important role in the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Many factors affect teacher beliefs and knowledge, including personal history and beliefs, self-efficacy, and knowledge of the subject area and students' cultures.

Teachers' personal histories and beliefs are key factors in how they incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy, because their previous experiences support their role as the teacher and

affect how they teach (Brighton, 2003). Teachers cannot easily or simply change their beliefs and practices, because these beliefs and practices constitute their socially constructed prior knowledge. It is also teachers' inherent, deeply held ideas that determine how they relate to students in the classroom, especially those students with a significantly different culture from their own. For teachers to implement culturally inclusive pedagogy, they must believe in building strong relationships with their students, using collaborative learning, and creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Culturally relevant teachers must also believe in challenging all students in order to inspire students to be academically successful when the content is challenging (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). For culturally relevant pedagogy to be successful, teachers must also feel a strong self-efficacy in their role as the teacher.

The teacher's sense of self-efficacy is an important aspect in promoting students academically and socially with culturally relevant teaching. In a study of middle school teachers, Brighton (2003) found that teachers who possessed a high level of self-efficacy were more willing and more successful in implementing new culturally relevant teaching strategies. The teachers who valued their own abilities believed that culturally relevant teaching already aligned with their current teaching methods; therefore, it was easier to implement the new strategies. Self-efficacy is also needed for teachers to feel that they are effective in their ability to support students socially and academically (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). This is because teachers must develop students' social skills in order to promote their academic abilities. Teachers who feel competent in using social skills to build relationships that foster learning find useful ways to enable students to interact with each other, creating communities of learning that will help diverse students to be more successful. An important component of teachers' self-efficacy is their knowledge of the curricular content, and of the various cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom.

Culturally relevant teachers must have a high level of knowledge in the subject areas that they are teaching and their students' cultures, because both directly link to their effectiveness as teachers. Research illustrates that teachers who possess a high level of knowledge in their subject areas are also more successful in applying culturally relevant teaching strategies (Brighton, 2003). If teachers are teaching content that they do not fully understand, they will be less effective in imparting knowledge. Teachers who do not fully understand a concept may mislead students, be unable to answer questions, be inconsistent, and thus cause confusion. Culturally relevant teachers must thoroughly understand concepts and skills in order to effectively communicate them to diverse students in a variety of ways. This is especially important because culturally relevant teachers must redesign the required curricula to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms (Morrison et al., 2008). Effectively restructuring a curriculum means that the teacher must have a solid understanding of the outcomes that the students need to meet. Teachers who are not knowledgeable in the subject that they are teaching are more likely to fail to adapt the curriculum to meet the academic needs and interests of students (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). In addition, if teachers do not have knowledge of the students' cultures, they cannot effectively ensure that learning is achieved (Johnson & Chang, 2012), because they will neglect the importance of integrating students' cultural perspectives in the curriculum (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Teachers with insufficient content and cultural knowledge may not be able to address the academic diversity of students, and thus may create lower academic and social expectations. Teachers must also believe in creating a culturally inclusive classroom environment.

### **Culturally Inclusive Classrooms**

Culturally inclusive classrooms are a key aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally inclusive classrooms accept, value, and use the diversity among students and teacher to enhance the learning experience. A culturally inclusive classroom encourages all students by

embracing their ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, socio-economic status, and/or sexual orientation as an integral part of the learning community. The factors that influence culturally inclusive classrooms involve creating a safe and comfortable environment, positively managing the classroom, and building relationships.

A classroom wherein students feel safe and comfortable is at the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally inclusive classrooms begin with teachers. Teachers play a significant role in how children view, respect, and interact with other children. In response, students will put more effort into their academic work in a culturally inclusive classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). Creating a culturally inclusive classroom means establishing a sense of belonging for students by supporting students socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Johnson & Chang, 2012). A sense of belonging will help to create a classroom that is a safe place wherein all students are respected and feel cared about by their teacher and peers. To establish this environment, teachers must encourage collaborative learning, which will help students learn together, identify with other students, and encourage relationships (Morrison et al., 2008). Culturally inclusive classrooms encourage cultural identity and sharing information about oneself so that students succeed socially as well as academically. If an inclusive environment is established, students will feel motivated to learn and succeed. A culturally relevant classroom is an environment wherein all students feel safe and respected, which also helps to prevent classroom management issues.

A culturally inclusive classroom often does not have many classroom management issues, because all students in the classroom feel valued. Research shows that culturally relevant teachers have high behavioural expectations of students (Morrison et al., 2008). Culturally relevant teachers need to have clear and consistent academic and behavioural expectations (Griner & Stewart, 2013), and enforce consequences when an expectation is violated (Morrison et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Rozansky (2010), the teacher participant did not effectively create a culturally inclusive classroom and experienced frequent behaviour difficulties. The teacher did try to connect with students on a personal level, but failed to use this connection in a relevant manner to create a sense of belonging. This example demonstrates that if students do not have a sense of belonging, they are more likely to misbehave in the classroom. This misbehaviour can take the form of discrimination against diverse students. If teachers create culturally inclusive classrooms, many behaviour issues may be eliminated. To further help with classroom management issues, teachers need to focus on the relationships in the classroom.

Relationships among students and the teacher are a key factor in creating culturally inclusive classrooms. Meaningful student-teacher relationships will foster a culturally inclusive classroom (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). On the other hand, a lack of positive student-teacher relations, exacerbated by cultural differences, "can lead to devastating learning experiences for students" (Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 588). The connections that teachers make with students, and the rapport created from these connections, will help students to be successful. Students should feel that the teacher cares, values, and respects them as individuals, thus creating a positive sense of belonging and identity in the classroom. The earlier the relationship is built, the more valuable it becomes. Teachers can build relationships with students by respecting their prior experiences and cultural identity, offering encouragement, and having high academic and behavioural expectations (Rozansky, 2010). If teachers and students have a mutual respect, then teachers can use their knowledge of and connections to their students to empower them (Morrison et al., 2008). This empowerment can be accomplished by drawing upon students' interests and creating opportunities in the classroom for students to use their culture. Teachers also need to nourish positive student-student relationships (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Research confirms that these peer relationships also support students academically and socially because students feel valued, safe, and comfortable in the classroom. These positive teacher-student and student-student relationships, along with reshaping the curricula, will help to improve academic achievement and social acceptance.

## **Reshaping Curricula**

Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to reflect upon and reshape the curricula to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. This student-centred pedagogical focus encourages academic improvement because all students acquire cultural knowledge; therefore, learning happens through cultural diversity. Even with a mandated curriculum, changes can be made to the resources used so as to meet the needs of the students while still achieving stated curricular outcomes. Adaptations to the curriculum can be integrated to improve opportunities for the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

Integrating culture in curricula is an important component of culturally relevant teaching. Teachers can use diverse resources to redesign ways to achieve existing curricular outcomes, in order to have a positive, meaningful, and engaging influence on all students' learning. Research on culturally relevant teaching shows that students learn through building on their prior experiences and knowledge by connecting that background to current content and activities in the classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). Researchers have argued that learning is relevant to students only if it is connected to students' identities (Morrison et al., 2008). This connection is reinforced by the personal relationship that teachers build with each student (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). When teachers learn about their students' culture, they can use this knowledge to integrate students' cultural views in the curricula. Integrating students' culture can be "done as a way to validate students who are culturally diverse, helping instil in them a positive sense of cultural identity" (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011, pp. 199-200). Culturally relevant teachers must use students' cultural knowledge to assist them in teaching the curricula. Using culturally relevant materials and instruction related to students' cultures, and activating prior knowledge, will support diverse student learning (Morrison et al., 2008). Integrating culture in the curricula will improve the academic achievement of students through meaningful instructional practices.

## **Instructional Practices**

Culturally relevant pedagogy involves transforming traditional teaching practices in order to accommodate different learning styles and to create a supportive classroom environment. Teachers need to change their teaching practices to suit the needs of diverse students. Research verifies that when culturally relevant pedagogy is implemented, it will improve academic achievement. Students whose teachers incorporate high levels of culturally relevant teaching strategies have a higher level of ethnic identity, a better connection to their culture, higher rates of community involvement, and higher rates of school engagement than those whose teachers implement very little culturally relevant teaching (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010). The results in the study by Kana'iaupuni et al. (2010) also show that culturally relevant teaching strategies positively affect student performance and enhance socio-emotional well-being. Several teaching practices can be used in culturally relevant pedagogy, differentiated instruction and storytelling being the most prominent.

Differentiated instruction is one way to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. This instructional practice makes student learning more appropriate and validating, and thus it supports academic achievement. Research shows that some teachers are reluctant to implement differentiated instruction to improve the academic success of all learners, largely because of teachers' preconceived notions of traditional classrooms and student learning. Brighton (2003) conducted a study on the implementation of differentiated instruction. The results of the study indicated that teachers felt they were there to entertain students. Most teachers in the study believed that engaging students was more important than challenging them, because it made learning more appealing for students. The second belief that Brighton (2003) found to be evident was that the role of the teacher was to talk and instruct, and the role of the students was to listen and learn. This traditional teaching strategy contradicts

differentiated instruction, which is a student-centred approach whereby students are responsible for their own learning. The third belief found was that students would resist and shut down when faced with an academic challenge. The consequence of this belief was that teachers did not offer challenging learning experiences for students. The fourth belief of the teachers was that all students must complete the same task to have fairness and equality in the classroom. Differentiated instruction means that a range of tasks at different academic levels, and with diverse approaches to cultural knowledge and ways of learning, should be provided for students. In the end, teachers' prior beliefs made it difficult for them to implement culturally relevant pedagogy by using differentiated instruction, because their attitudes about traditional teaching strategies did not change. If teachers' prior beliefs and practices are difficult to change, they will not implement diverse instructional strategies; therefore, student learning will not improve. Differentiated instruction will make the learning experiences more appropriate and validating for students, and will support academic achievement through culturally relevant instruction. Storytelling is another practice in differentiation that will support students.

The teaching practice of storytelling is a way of implementing culturally relevant instruction. Storytelling means that students are invited to discuss their experiences, knowledge, and activities with their peers and teacher (Johnson & Chang, 2012). To implement this teaching strategy, teachers need to create inclusive classrooms wherein all students feel respected and safe to share their experiences. Storytelling circles create a culturally inclusive classroom wherein students feel comfortable and respected (Baskerville, 2011). Storytelling builds relationships among students by establishing a safe, trusting, and caring environment. Relationships are built as students learn more about their peers and teacher through the stories that they tell. Sharing students' personal stories creates acceptance among students and strengthens relationships. The stories bridge the cultural gap among students of different cultures, increase listening skills, enhance self-reflections, and improve interactions among students. Storytelling also improves connections and relationships so that students will stop segregating themselves in their own cultural groups. Storytelling facilitates student engagement, creates new ways of communicating, helps students to look at ideas in a different way, and changes their attitudes toward others. Storytelling develops an appreciation of culture as students learn and understand other cultures in the classroom. This teaching strategy has proven to be a successful culturally relevant teaching practice. Teachers need professional training and support to implement culturally relevant teaching strategies such as storytelling.

### **Professional Training and Support**

Research indicates that professional training and support are needed for teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers who lack training and support are not able to address the academic achievement gap among culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Professional training and support are required for pre-service, beginning, and experienced teachers.

Teacher education programs need to prepare pre-service teachers to enter the diverse classrooms that they will encounter; therefore, educating future teachers on culturally relevant teaching is necessary. Literature on culturally relevant pedagogy outlines that teacher educators must include new ways to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom in the areas of cultural knowledge. Kang and Hyatt (2010) conducted a study in a teacher education program that had pre-service teachers learning about culture. Results of the study showed that pre-service teachers acquired a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and realized how much impact they can have on students by using culture in the classroom. The pre-service teachers found the teacher education training to be "an eye-opening experience" (Kang & Hyatt, p. 47) because of their limited personal experience with multi-culturalism. Another study conducted by Dharan (2015) illustrates that training on culture in an initial teacher-training program raises pre-service teachers' awareness of cultural diversity and provides them with an understanding of culture

and its importance in teaching practices. Pre-service teachers also need to have continued support once they begin teaching, so that their views about integrating culture in the curricula are nourished.

Continued support is needed for beginning teachers when they enter the profession, so that they continue to see the importance of implementing diverse cultural knowledge in their teaching. It was evident in a study conducted by Dharan (2015) that the previous perceptions of beginning teachers in the study changed once they entered the profession. This was due to their introduction to existing teaching practices in their schools that used more traditional teaching practices. The beginning teachers found these traditional teaching practices easier, and use of these practices increased their teaching confidence or self-efficacy. The study showed that the beginning teachers were aware of cultural diversity and the need to integrate culture into curricula, student learning, and teaching practices; however, they chose not to use that approach. Dharan (2015) concluded,

If beginning teachers are to have an [sic] heightened awareness of the fact that every learner is situated at the intersection of their life experiences, gender, race, ethnicity, abilities, religion, spirituality, and social class and effectively embed such understanding in their pedagogy, they must be guided and supported. (p. 70)

This support can be accomplished through mentoring programs in enlightened schools. Teachers who practise culturally relevant pedagogy in their teaching can mentor beginning teachers on how to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. Beginning teachers, and indeed all teachers in the profession, need continued professional training and support.

Professional development and knowledge renewal for current teachers in the profession comprise a necessary step toward culturally relevant teaching implementation. Teachers are lifelong learners, and professional development is essential in the profession so that teachers can continually grow and analyse their teaching practices (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Research shows that some teachers may have feelings of discomfort and hesitancy when integrating culture in the classroom. Teachers may fear that their personal biases influence their teaching practice, as they often do. Culturally relevant pedagogy may require many teachers to teach outside their comfort zone, which brings about uneasiness when reflecting on their current teaching practice, and on their sense of self-efficacy as connected to the status quo. Coronel and Gomez-Hurtado (2015) conducted a study in Spanish secondary schools, and found that teacher participants had limited knowledge of culture because they had not received any training on cultural diversity. Participant teachers in another study conducted by Brighton (2003) found that professional training in culturally relevant teaching improved teachers' current teaching practices. Once teachers receive the initial training needed to implement culturally relevant teaching, they also require support with its application because of possible misunderstandings of the key practices of culturally relevant teaching. In another study, Rozansky (2010) found that with support in the area of culturally relevant teaching, the teacher was able to increase her expectations of her students, improve her ability to implement critical literacy, and create more purposeful units that connected to students' cultures. Griner and Stewart (2012) also found that teaching practices changed significantly for teachers who participated in professional development on culturally relevant teaching. Therefore, providing professional development is necessary. Training in culturally relevant pedagogy will support teachers in creating classrooms conducive to learning for diverse students, and will enable teachers to make more connections to their students' families and communities.

## **Community and Family Involvement**

Literature that focuses on culturally relevant pedagogy shows that family and community involvement is important to culturally relevant teachers. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to have the support of students' families and the community. Support from family and community members encourages academic improvement because students see that more people care about their academic achievement.

Teacher collaboration with students' families is a fundamental part of culturally relevant teaching. Parhar and Sensoy (2011) explained, "Interaction among teachers and family members allows students to feel increasingly a part of the school, and that the school becomes part of their family" (p. 203). Family plays an important role in culturally diverse students' success in school, and it is important for teachers to create a relationship with mutual respect. Parhar and Sensoy explained that many culturally diverse students come from a culture with strong family connections; therefore, school interaction with family is needed for the success of those students. Families can share primary source materials from their home country, such as artifacts, games, and healing herbs for use in instruction (Morrison et al., 2008). These materials can be used in a variety of ways in order to bring the visual imagery of other cultures into the classroom. Inviting families into the school is an effective way of showing students that where they come from is important. There are, however, challenges with interacting with families, including teachers having little time to include families in their students' education, different educational beliefs between the teacher and the parent because of cultural expectations, and language barriers (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Despite the difficulties with family interactions with the school, culturally relevant teachers believe that "family members who feel welcomed at the school are likely to be supportive of their children's education and supportive of the teachers" (p. 204). Family involvement and community involvement are closely connected.

Collaboration with the community is essential for increasing the academic and social achievement of culturally diverse students. Research confirms that involving the community with the school creates a school environment wherein the community and families are treated with respect and the school is a place where students want to be (Morrison et al., 2008). Educators can turn to community members for help in their search for tools, strategies, programs, and curricula to meet the needs of culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Community members can be invited to interact with students and to take part in activities in the classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). For example, people in the community can come to the school to speak to students or to instruct students about aspects or practices from their home community. The school should empower the community to become involved in the school so that community members can play a role in meeting the needs of culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). This initiative will include mentoring community people into completing the paperwork required to serve as a school volunteer. The number of culturally diverse students in classrooms today is growing significantly; therefore, it is imperative that educators use culturally relevant teaching to benefit all students in the classroom.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The teaching practices embraced by a culturally relevant pedagogy are important for educators to consider implementing as they seek to find ways to increase the success of culturally diverse students. Research suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy is an effective approach to reach students with varying academic, social, and cultural backgrounds. The growing number of diverse students in Canadian schools makes the implementation of this differentiated pedagogical focus necessary.

The teacher has the central role in providing an equitable education for diverse students. Teachers choose the teaching practices that they will implement, and teaching practices are based on teacher beliefs and knowledge; therefore, teachers need to feel confident in their

abilities to teach content, to integrate their understanding of culture, and to develop students' social skills. Culturally relevant teachers encourage learning by creating culturally inclusive classrooms wherein students feel safe and comfortable, and have a sense of belonging and respect. Positive approaches to classroom management and relationship building are key factors in creating a culturally inclusive classroom wherein students feel more inspired to learn. Meeting the needs of diverse students requires teachers to approach achievement outcomes in the curricula in a different way by adapting the curricula to reinforce student learning, thus creating a positive and engaging experience for students in the classroom. Culturally relevant instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction and storytelling, will help to foster culturally diverse students' learning by creating a higher level of engagement and a better connection to their culture. Professional training and support will provide all teachers with the knowledge and encouragement that they need to develop culturally relevant pedagogy. Family and community interactions will provide teachers with support to create classrooms conducive to learning. Research attests that if culturally relevant pedagogy is implemented, it will benefit the changing student demographics, both academically and socially.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies illustrate that culturally relevant pedagogy will foster the learning environment and result in increased academic and social success of students. This research is imperative in the Canadian educational system because of the rapidly changing student demographics. Change is needed in our educational system, because traditional teacher-centered practices are not working with the shifting demographics and cultural backgrounds in contemporary classrooms. More and more students are culturally diverse, and teachers need to adapt their teaching practices to support these students. The learning environment must make students feel valued in order for all students to learn and feel safe. Students will benefit by becoming more comfortable with themselves, the teacher, and other students in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy will help to support the learning needs of all students in the classroom, because it takes into consideration all aspects of culture, including ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. It is up to teachers to consider and then make needed changes to their teaching pedagogy, so as to make a difference in their students' lives and to enable them to be successful academically and socially. Culturally relevant pedagogy embraces a positive change in teaching practices that will influence all students toward higher academic and socio-emotional success.

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### **About the Author**

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