

Culturally Responsive Instruction: Promoting Literacy in Secondary Content Areas

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Culturally Responsive Instruction: Promoting Literacy in Secondary Content Areas

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how secondary teachers implement culturally responsive literacy instruction in their content areas. Culturally responsive instruction makes connections with students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences to teach the standards-based curriculum. Learning becomes more meaningful and relevant as teachers draw upon students' prior knowledge (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Raphael, 1986).

Summarizing previous research concerning culturally responsive literacy instruction (Au, 1993; Boykin, 1978; Boykin, 1984; Gay, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1992; Osborne, 1996; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989) and analyzing my own research in the preparation of present and future teachers for culturally responsive literacy instruction (Schmidt, 2002; Schmidt, 2003; Schmidt, 2005), I have explored the following seven characteristics for successful implementation of culturally responsive instruction:

1. High expectations—supporting students as they develop the literacy appropriate to their ages and abilities
2. Positive relationships with families and community—demonstrating clear connections with student families and communities in terms of curriculum content and relationships
3. Cultural sensitivity-reshaped curriculum, mediated for culturally valued knowledge—connecting with the standards-based curriculum as well as individual students' cultural backgrounds
4. Active teaching methods—involving students in a variety of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing behaviors throughout the lesson plan
5. Teacher as facilitator—presenting information; briefly giving directions; summarizing responses; and working with small groups, pairs, and individuals
6. Student control of portions of the lesson or “healthy hum”—talking at conversation levels around the topic being studied while completing assignments in small groups and pairs (Schmidt, 2003)
7. Instruction around groups and pairs, low anxiety—completing assignments individually, but usually in small groups or pairs with time to share ideas and think critically about the work

When lessons in secondary mathematics, social studies, science, language, and English content areas incorporate most of the seven characteristics, students stay focused, become invested in what is happening, and actually step onto the road of academic success and social achievement. In addition, literacy development is promoted since daily classroom practice in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing become integral to the content-area planning process.

In this article, I will describe culturally responsive lessons observed in public secondary classrooms in mathematics, physics, biology, social studies, and English. One school was in a rural setting, another was an alternative school housed in a village church, and three were located in urban areas. My objective for this article is to describe and portray culturally responsive

instruction so educators can have a more concrete understanding of the teaching and learning successes in secondary schools in which poverty issues and diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students seem to contribute to academic failure.

This article is organized around six main sections:

- The first section includes a brief review of the research supporting culturally responsive teaching.
- The second section explains the literacy courses that teachers in this article experienced in their secondary education preparation program.
- The third section presents the main points concerning how I selected and gathered data from the teachers and their culturally responsive lessons.
- The fourth section describes each teacher, classroom, school setting, and lesson summaries. Additionally, after each set of lesson observations *The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction* are linked to the lessons and teacher interviews.
- The fifth section contains teachers' thoughts concerning the implementation of culturally responsive teaching.
- The sixth section reviews recommendations regarding culturally responsive instruction as they relate to the lessons and teacher interviews.

Why Culturally Responsive Instruction?

The U.S. Department of Education predicts that by the year 2010, minority populations will become the majority populations in our schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Presently, this diversity has a significant impact on urban education, but in the future it will have an even greater impact on rural and suburban education. Therefore, it is time for successful teacher inservice and preservice programs to connect home, school, and community with culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching (Au, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Moll, 1992; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Osborne, 1996; Tatum, 1992; Tatum, 1997; Tatum, 2000; Willis & Meacham, 1997; Zeichner, 1993; Schmidt, 2002; Schmidt, 2003; Schmidt, 2004; Schmidt, 2005).

Research and practice demonstrate that strong home, school, and community connections not only help students make sense of the school curriculum, but also promote literacy development (Au, 1993; Boykin, 1978; Boykin, 1984; Edwards, 1995; Edwards, 1996; Faltis, 2000; Goldenberg, 1987; Heath, 1983; Leftwich, 2002; McCaleb, 1994; Moll, 1992; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Schmidt, 2000; Schmidt, 2004; Schmidt, 2005; Xu, 2000b). However, in recent years, home, school, and community connections have become a significant challenge.

There are various reasons for this challenging situation. First, as our school population has become increasingly diverse, both culturally and ethnically, our teaching population has consistently originated from European-American, suburban experiences. Educators typically describe themselves as white and middle class and often add that during discussions about diversity, “I’m an American; I don’t have a culture” (Florio-Ruane, 1994; McIntosh, 1990; Paley, 2001; Schmidt, 1999; Sleeter, 2001; Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997).

Second, most current and future teachers have not had sustained relationships with people from different ethnic, cultural, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, much of their knowledge about diversity has been influenced by media stereotypes (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2002; Pattnaik, 1997; Tatum, 1997).

Third, school curriculum, methods, and materials usually reflect only European-American or white culture and ignore the backgrounds and experiences of students and families from lower socioeconomic levels and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Boykin, 1978; Boykin, 1984; Delpit, 1996; Foster, 1994; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, 1992; Nieto, 1999; Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995; Sleeter, 2001; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2001).

Fourth, many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare educators for “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), a term that directly relates to making strong home, school, and community connections (Edwards, 2004; Lalik & Hinchman, 2001; Sleeter, 2001; Wallace, 2000).

Fifth, when cultural differences are ignored in classrooms, student fears and alienation increase (Cummins, 1986; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Igoa, 1995; Schmidt, 1998; Schmidt, 2002). Consequently, this disconnect has become a national problem whose influence has been linked to poor literacy development and extremely high dropout rates among students from urban and rural poverty areas (Au, 1993; Banks, 1994; Cummins, 1986; Edwards, 2004; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Goldenberg, 1987; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Payne, DeVol & Smith, 2000; Schmidt, 1998; Schmidt, 1999; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990).

Validating Students' Families and Communities

Families and children from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and lower socioeconomic levels often feel a discontinuity between home and school. However, when teachers reach out to connect with students, their families, and community members, there is a narrowing of the academic gap and an increase in positive attitudes toward school (Au, 1993; Boykin, 1978, Boykin, 1984; Edwards, 2004; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Faltis, 2000; Goldenberg, 1987; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, 1992). These teachers create meaningful literacy lessons that are culturally relevant or culturally responsive. They connect what otherwise might seem to be a rigid curriculum to the knowledge and experiences of diverse students in their classrooms by validating family backgrounds and by using the literacies found in their students' homes. These teachers develop relationships with family and community members and make use of the talents and resources available (Edwards, 2004). For example, they recognize oral language expression associated with leadership in the African-American church (Edwards, Danridge, McMillon, & Pleasants, 2001), spatial relationship understandings of many Native American cultures, and mechanical understandings revered in Hispanic communities. Unfortunately, such exceptional teachers who make learning relevant to the diverse populations in their classrooms are rare (Nieto, 1999; Sleeter, 2001; Tatum, 2000). Therefore, teacher education programs have been called to the challenge of preparing teachers for culturally responsive teaching as a means for promoting student academic achievement at all ages and stages of learning.

Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs that appear to be somewhat successful in promoting culturally responsive instruction require self-awareness literacy activities. These incorporate autobiography, biography, reflections on diversity issues, and cross-cultural analysis to help present and future teachers gain knowledge of self and others (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2002; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Nagel, 2002; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Osborne, 1996; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Tatum, 1992). These activities have helped teachers of European-American students become more aware of their own cultures as well as the stereotypes they may believe concerning certain groups of people (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Pattnaik, 1997). Therefore, it has been the aim of these programs to enable teachers to meet the individual differences of their students with compassion, using reflective literacy activities. Unfortunately, though, most teacher education programs have not linked self-knowledge to teachers' implementation of home, school, and community connections for literacy instruction (Schmidt, 1999). Therefore, as a literacy professor with 25 years of public school, classroom experience, I designed a model known as the *ABCs of Cultural Understanding and Communication* (Schmidt,

1998; Schmidt, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). Current and future teachers write autobiographies, interview family members of students, and complete cross-cultural analyses. After this process, the positive experiences of the interviews and the cross-cultural analyses of similarities and differences motivate teachers to begin designing relevant content area lessons.

ABCs of Cultural Understanding and Communication

Due to the success of the *ABCs of Cultural Understanding and Communication* (Schmidt, 1998), many teacher-education programs and teacher-inservice programs have begun to use the model to develop the awareness that is fundamental to designing and implementing culturally responsive lessons (Finkbeiner & Koplin, 2002; Leftwich, 2002; Nagel, 2002; Schmidt, 1998; Schmidt, 1999; Schmidt, 2000; Schmidt, 2001; Schmidt, 2002; Schmidt, 2003; Schmidt, 2004; Xu, 2000a, Xu, 2000b). *The Seven Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Instruction* (Schmidt, 2003) emerged from inservice-program research. After analyses of four years of participant observations and videotaped lessons across the curriculum in impoverished urban settings, these characteristics appeared to be the essential considerations when planning and implementing successful lessons.

Unfortunately, school districts from high-poverty areas may not have the financial ability, infrastructure, or the human capital necessary to offer or coordinate in-depth inservice research programs. Therefore, the summary descriptions of the lessons in this paper, which have been implemented by five secondary teachers, may inspire teachers and administrators to create their own professional development programs and encourage support groups to design lessons incorporating the seven characteristics. Before moving on to the lessons, it is important to know how the teachers were prepared for culturally responsive instruction.

Literacy Courses

The teacher education program in which I teach is located in a small, Northeastern liberal arts, religiously affiliated institution. The college population of 3,000 includes 90 percent graduate and undergraduate students from European-American, middle class backgrounds. About 10 percent of the students are from African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Arabic, and Native American origins. Two literacy courses are required in the state's teacher certification programs. The program's courses help teachers understand the basics of the literacy development process and set the stage for differentiating instruction. Key assignments for the courses revolve around the *ABCs of Cultural Understanding and Communication* (Schmidt, 2001). Current and future teachers write their autobiographies, interview people from other cultures, complete cross-cultural analyses, and create at least 40 lesson ideas in their content areas related to the integration of home, family, and community cultures. During the semester, the graduate and undergraduate students read many of the multicultural literacy research articles cited in this article, meet class guests from diverse cultural backgrounds, view *Teaching Tolerance* videos (www.tolerance.org), discuss diversity issues, debate various perspectives on differentiating instruction, act out stereotypes, and visit local cultural sites. In addition, students teach at least one culturally relevant content-area lesson in a secondary school classroom.

Students enrolled in the literacy courses typically observe the professor modeling lesson planning in the college classroom, and, when possible, implementing lessons in public school classrooms, thus demonstrating how to apply theory. Students usually see these literacy classes as positive learning settings; however, by the end of the coursework, there is a range of understanding concerning culturally responsive teaching. Some current and future teachers actually change their thinking and begin to apply ideas immediately, others begin to develop a great awareness but need more support to actually implement lessons, and a few express concerns about the need for differentiating instruction for students from culturally and ethnically different backgrounds.

Selecting the Teachers and Observing Their Lessons

For this paper, I selected from among the better secondary content-area teachers with representation from different disciplines. I contacted the teachers by telephone or e-mail, requesting that I observe them teaching.

Only one teacher, Jerry, was worried about the observations since he was experiencing his first preservice site. I convinced him that he need not worry since he was helping me understand my own teaching.

I visited the classes during two months in the early spring to avoid state standardized testing. I sat in the back of the classes and took notes. Occasionally, when invited, I participated in discussions. Students usually wanted to know about the stranger in their classes; their teachers explained that I was a professor who had taught them about teaching. Several students at each site took advantage of my presence for teacher evaluations: "He's great!" "She's okay!" "I sure learn a lot from her!" "He's good!" "I like him." "He cares about us!"

In addition, I interviewed the teachers after their lessons to hear their reflections, and I recorded notes on paper. I received lesson plans and materials at that time. Lesson observations were outlined on notepaper, but were recorded immediately in great detail on my home computer. Furthermore, teachers completed questionnaires about their lesson-planning processes that they sent to me during the weeks following my visits. This gave them time to add reflections and gave me an opportunity to compare and contrast my perceptions with their perceptions concerning the planning and implementation of the lessons.

Analysis of all the data collected was based on *The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction*.

In the next section, the teachers, settings, lessons, and links to *The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction* are portrayed for the purpose of encouraging adaptation and implementation in similar schools.

Culturally Responsive Lessons

Physics Class

When I observed Jerry he was in his fourth week of teaching. His cooperating teacher was pleased with his work and said, “Jerry is teaching me new strategies for working successfully with my students.”

Jerry had a career in electrical engineering for 18 years before pursuing a second career in education. In his late 30s and of European-American origins, Jerry was an outstanding student in the college classroom. He questioned critically and seemed to enjoy the lively debates that took place. He designed 40 culturally responsive lesson ideas for the physics curriculum and wrote a paper concerning gender equity in science classrooms.

The high school in which Jerry taught was in an urban poverty area with 75 percent of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast. Jerry’s huge classroom contained 15 desks in front of black, slab-topped laboratory tables. The desks faced a raised, demonstration laboratory table with a chalkboard across the wall behind it. Jerry stood in front of the raised laboratory table when he taught. The 15 students in his class were Somalian-American, Lebanese-American, Asian-American, African-American, Hispanic, and European-American. There were eight men and seven women in this senior, elective physics course. The class met two or three days a week for two and a half hours per session

One of Jerry’s lessons was about the physics of sound. He began by playing a Stevie Wonder CD. Jerry had brought in a guitar and African drums. He demonstrated their use and discussed the vibrations of the strings and drum. Students enthusiastically volunteered to play along with the Stevie Wonder recording. One student sang and the vibrations of her vocal chords became part of the lesson.

Vocabulary was then introduced with a note-taking guide for all students. Words such as *oscilloscope*, *resonance*, *natural frequency*, *amplitude*, and *sound waves* were defined using the musical instruments. The homework assignment was to bring in musical instruments to play as a means for applying the new vocabulary and studying the mathematics associated with sound. Two days later, the class response was extraordinary, with 100 percent involvement.

A week later, Jerry taught a lesson about gender and science careers. He talked about his own experiences as an engineer, but explained that many other occupations related to engineering or principles of physics. The class brainstormed physics-related careers and listed plumbers, construction workers, automobile mechanics, electrical workers, architects, and appliance repair.

Jerry continued by asking about women in these fields and provoked a discussion concerning whether women could perform well in these occupations. For homework, Jerry requested that students go to websites and find biographies of those involved in engineering or similar work. Figure 1 shows Jerry’s assignment sheet.

Figure 1. Biography Assignment Sheet

Engineering Class—Internet Research Assignment— Engineering Biography

We can learn and take inspiration from biographies, especially when drawn from the lives of positive role models. Your assignment is to use the internet to learn about the lives of influential men and women scientists from diverse backgrounds.

- Explore the following websites: www.princeton.edu/~mcbrown/display/women.html; www.princeton.edu/~mcbrown/display/faces.html
- Carefully choose (at least one) person from these sites for the following assignment.
- Write a report that includes the following elements:
 - Describe the person's accomplishments.
 - Summarize a few facts about the life or background of the person.
 - What can you learn from this person's story?
 - Why did you choose this person?
 - How were you influenced or inspired by this person's story?
- Your report should be typed.
- Your report should be thoughtful.
- Your report should include three or more paragraphs.
- Your report may describe one or more persons.

Next, Jerry introduced a Public Broadcasting Station video concerning engineering and technology. Students were given a guide to complete as they watched. The video included African- and European-American female astronauts and aeronautical engineers. They told about their education and the necessary hard work. They talked about their accomplishments and how their work has affected others. The men and women in the video explained the importance of including both men and women in scientific fields since they bring different perspectives to the table. All of the women in the video mentioned their dreams and “the necessity of focusing in on the important things in life rather than the foolish things.”

After the movie, Jerry asked students to talk to their classmates about their dreams or aspirations. Students shared their thoughts and discussed what they needed to do to see their dreams come true. Early childhood education, criminal justice, law enforcement, restaurant management, automotive mechanics, music, and cosmetology were mentioned and analyzed in terms of what would be needed to achieve these goals. The class ended by referring back to the Stevie Wonder lyric of the previous week.

Jerry's students were attentive throughout the lessons. Considering the steady interruptions and distractions, such as knocks on the door, public announcements, and students entering and leaving class, it was amazing that Jerry or any teacher could teach and the students could learn.

However, Jerry applied the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching and was able to achieve remarkable results. By the end of his eight weeks in the high school, his cooperating teacher praised Jerry for his remarkable personal and professional relationships with students. His lessons demonstrated that he valued their prior knowledge and experiences.

The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction

When examining Jerry’s lessons, a new teacher is seen beginning to implement the seven characteristics. First, Jerry guided his students toward high expectations with assignments that utilized technology and gave them opportunities to research, read, and write carefully constructed reports. The websites motivated the students and stimulated their thinking about future careers and dreams through discussions of the video. He did not make specific connections with families, but he did reshape the curriculum to connect with individuals’ backgrounds through music. They borrowed instruments from family, school, and community members and utilized musical interest, talents, and a great musician to learn about the physics of sound. Active learning resulted when students participated in playing and singing. Reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing occurred as physics vocabulary was learned through active involvement in relevant ways. Jerry facilitated discussion with directions, questions, and summaries of responses. Students’ control of the lessons was expressed in their full participation in the music and their time spent expressing ideas and opinions in pairs and in class discussions related to the video. By connecting with student interests and talents, Jerry reduced anxiety associated with learning physics and increased student contributions to the class.

Mathematics Class

Joyce is a mathematics teacher in a rural high school attended by numerous Native Americans. She is Native American and brings culturally relevant literacy in mathematics to the classroom through artful negotiations that involve teachers, students, staff, and communities. Joyce graduated from the same high school and won a full scholarship to study mathematics at a prestigious engineering school. After the first year, she left. As she tells it, “I was lost. I was away from home and family. I realized how important my culture is for my life. I decided that college wasn’t for me.”

When Joyce returned home, she began working as a teaching assistant in her high school, tutoring students in mathematics and science. The Native American students especially appreciated her help: “You explain things, so we can understand.” This stimulated her interest in education and she returned to college for her teaching degree. In my classes, she talked about the need for students to have models from their cultures. She had a passion for mathematics and a passion for helping her rural public high school teachers and students understand and appreciate the Native American ways, so everyone would have opportunities to learn and succeed.

Presently, Joyce teaches inclusive seventh- and eighth-grade mathematics at her high school. Her classroom decor includes posters and objects related to world cultures and their contributions to mathematics. Chinese, Egyptian, Arabic, Mayan, Russian, Greek, Italian, Hispanic, and Native American mathematical knowledge is displayed. In addition, posters for movies, lacrosse, and basketball adorn the walls, signifying Joyce’s interest in her students’ popular culture. Joyce also

has made use of space in the hallways to celebrate mathematics with students' work. Tessellations, string designs, and three-dimensional geometrics appear on the walls. A sign, shown in Figure 2, hangs above her door as a reminder that she is ready to help and expects her students to learn.

Figure 2. Joyce's Sign

<p>“Let No One Ignorant of Geometry Exit From Here” Joyce Lewis</p>

In addition, Joyce has created a mathematics Word Wall to assist students as they write mathematics problems and explanations. She explained, “They need to be constantly aware of mathematics vocabulary. They need to be comfortable with the language of mathematics.”

Joyce makes mathematics real and interesting to all students, but now the Native American students have someone who understands. She includes as many cultures as possible in the teaching of mathematics. She explains, “Mathematics is not exclusively a White Man's subject. Many cultures contributed to our knowledge of mathematics.”

As a result of Joyce's success, many secondary teachers join with her on class and community projects and use her as a resource for lesson ideas in other content areas.

Joyce also conducts mathematics fairs several times a year to encourage family and community participation in the study of mathematics. Hawaiian quilts and Japanese *origami* are created, along with many other activities. Her goal is to involve the community in mathematics: “This is a subject that so many fear, but it is so relevant to the natural world as well as the scientific and technological world.”

During the week prior to my visit, Joyce's students traveled to the Onondaga Nation School and taught mathematics to second-grade Native American students. This was an empowering student, family, and community experience. Joyce's Onondaga Nation students proudly led their classmates into a school on the reservation. The European-American students learned positive information from the experience.

On the day I observed, Joyce began her lesson by referring to the teaching of patterns to second-grade students at the Onondaga Nation School: “How did we teach the students?”

A student responded with, “Step by step, we had a pattern to show them and ways to look for patterns.”

Other students added, “We showed them how to make patterns.” and “We showed them that mathematics is patterns.”

Students then began class by studying a mathematics puzzle that connected with the homework assignment on geometric patterns. They worked in pairs and were focused immediately. They followed a step-by-step mathematical procedure to produce a pattern as Joyce circulated among them. Conducting the class in this manner helped Joyce personally explain the material as well as

examine individual understandings. She also praised student work and made positive, helpful comments. Students then shared their procedures as Joyce recorded their ideas on an overhead transparency.

Next, Joyce introduced a step-by-step divisibility test for simplifying fractions. Students each had a sheet matching the overhead so they could take notes as she proceeded. “I want you to look for the patterns as we create a chart.” She explained, “It is important for you to do these tests mentally rather than depend on calculators.”

The chart included numbers from 2 to 10. She used real dollars and cents as examples for each of the rules. She then had students work in pairs to create new examples for each rule and design their own charts using their own examples. As Joyce circulated to check for understanding, students remained focused on their work. The class ended with examples given for each rule. Joyce encouraged them to study their charts with a friend or family member for the next day’s quiz.

In the next class, Joyce taught equations with two unknowns. She distributed cards with equations that had one unknown to groups and pairs of students. She asked students to solve the equations and then think of life problems with unknowns. Students quickly settled into talking about mathematics and shared several life situations. “How tall will I be?” “What will I be when I grow up?” “Who will win the lacrosse game this week?”

Next, the same groups received a series of four cards, each with different combinations of two unknowns. Triangle, square, star, and a number made up each equation. Students had to discover what number was the triangle, what number was the square, and what number was the star. Again, Joyce circulated, praised, and supported their efforts. Students worked nonstop and shared their answers with the whole class as Joyce recorded their ideas on overhead transparencies.

In Joyce’s classes, students with special needs are not obvious. A special education teacher circulated during group work, occasionally assisting an individual or small group of students.

The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction

When examining Joyce’s lessons, one can see that she expects her students to think mathematically by connecting mathematics to everyday life. As a result, she has high expectations for all of her students. Every class has an inquiry approach in which students are creating, investigating, and attempting to establish meaning from every lesson. Joyce has reshaped the curriculum and connected mathematics to her students’ and community members’ lives. With her colleagues, Joyce has established mathematics fairs and developed close relationships with her children’s families. She said, “I meet with parents whenever and wherever. I try to find out how they use mathematics in their lives and work. I invite them in to talk or share what they know. I want my students to know success in my classes.”

According to Joyce’s principal, the families in the rural community know her. “She gives our seventh- and eighth-grade students what they need to enjoy mathematics and do well at the high school. She knows how to talk to people, and she takes time to listen and find out who they are.”

Joyce encourages students to talk and share and provides a risk-free environment in which she can work closely with students at all levels of learning. Students write sentences about their own lives using the mathematics-vocabulary Word Wall. They read and complete problems in their texts, but they also create their own mathematical problems related to the standards-based curriculum. Their active involvement, from the moment they walk through the door of her classroom, focuses the students and puts the responsibility for learning on them without making it a burden. There is a “healthy hum” present at all times, except when Joyce gives brief lectures, presents examples of work, or summarizes student responses.

Alternative Secondary School

Crystal is of European-American origin and in her mid-30s. She was an unusually creative and joyous English and history major in my undergraduate instructional-planning course 10 years ago. After several years of teaching, she returned to her alma mater for graduate work and enrolled in my literacy courses. Her graduate area of study was secondary special education. Presently, she teaches in an alternative school setting for seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students who have been removed from area high schools because of their severe behavior problems. This school, housed in the basement of a church in an upper-class community, provides a “last chance” for students to receive a public education. Students bussed to this location are from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Their previous problems include combinations of the following: stealing, apathy, attendance, academic failure, and physical violence with teachers and students. Their parents are often enablers due to their own negative educational experiences. A goal for this alternative program is to teach self-control.

Crystal has remained in contact with me through the years, inviting me to the annual academic celebration of students’ work. Her impact on students has been both academic and social. In the past, I have written about Crystal’s unique accomplishments regarding home-school communication. Crystal expressed her teaching philosophy during my recent observations:

You can’t get anywhere with my kids if you don’t make lessons relevant. I want them to learn and be successful. The key to that is communication with families ... real communication ... visiting homes, calling parents. Forget notes home. The families are happy to see me. They don’t trust the social workers, but they trust me. A visit from the social worker is a stigma. I give them my home and cell phone numbers, and they call me when there is a crisis. One night I was called because of a suicide attempt. The student had tacked my Christmas card on his bedroom wall, so the parent called me for help. At one point in my career, I brought a child home to live with us.

Crystal teaches the English and social studies courses to 20 students in a small room in the church basement. Other areas in the basement are devoted to the mathematics and science classes. Crystal’s classroom is a comfortable place with learning centers that capture the imagination. Her room has world maps on the walls, an overstuffed sofa and lounge pillows, lush

plants, elongated study tables, and books, books, books everywhere—from *The DaVinci Code* and *The Five People You'll Meet in Heaven* to the classics—all housed on shelves around the room. In addition, young-adult novels such as the *Goosebumps* series, sports and teen magazines, picture books, *National Geographic* magazines, nonfiction books concerning WWII and art history, and newspapers add to the mix of materials. Crystal always attempts to mesh what students are reading with what is being studied. She also reads novels, such as *The Client* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, aloud to the students. “Students truly enjoy this; it inspires them to try reading a variety of books during the daily free-reading choice.”

Discussions follow reading time. Topics such as smoking, suicide, racism, drugs, and sex are common. Recently, Sigmund Freud was a topic; it was soon discovered that some students thought the topic was about Siegfried and Roy and the 2003 tiger attack in Las Vegas. Humorous exchanges followed. (As a matter of fact, good-natured humor is always welcome in Crystal’s class.) Many of the discussions lead students to recommend reading materials they have perused in class.

Students in Crystal’s classes rarely finish their education at the local high schools so Crystal stays in touch when they leave her program. She helps them get their General Educational Development (GED) and claims to have successfully hounded many. “When they pass the test, they discover that higher education is a possibility. This allows them to see opportunity.”

The blackboards in this classroom act as Word Walls for vocabulary in specific areas of study. Pictures from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* appear near a small stage with a gold curtain, and large digital color photos show students playing various roles in Shakespearean plays. Posters of Danny Devito from *The Renaissance Man*, Mel Gibson from *Hamlet*—“To thine own self be true”—Eminem, and G-Unit grace the walls. Finally, cardboard triptychs appear on the shelves, titled “Women of Achievement” from ancient to modern, such as Cleopatra to Anne Frank.

Classical and popular music play in the background as students work in pairs and threes. There is a rack of CDs for students to select. A favorite is Kanye West. Quiet discussions of answers on text reading guides provide opportunities for students to validate and question ideas. If students are writing essays, they occasionally stop and ask to read a portion to his or her neighbor.

Finally, an area is specified as the *Circle of Courage*. This is the class code of behavior and consists of concepts such as belonging, generosity, mastery, and independence. These are concepts discussed and practiced with specificity throughout the school year. In addition, students are expected to complete all class work to the best of their abilities; they soon realize that Crystal is their friend and boss. In a brief exchange, this was made clear:

Student: “I ain’t reading this; it’s boring!”

Crystal: “Oh yes you are! Remember, I’m your boss, applesauce.”

Student: (chuckles and continues)

During any class exchanges, students have three choices, represented with hand signals: “Call on me,” “I’ll try,” and “Don’t have a clue.” This allows for thoughtful expression and carefully considered responses.

Crystal’s lessons usually include reading and discussion guides for textbooks; summary paragraph writing; using Word Wall vocabulary for content-area units; hands-on cut, paste, and draw activities; and Readers Theatre. (There is a huge drawer with magic markers, pencils, scissors, and rulers as well as a closet filled with theatrical props, such as cardboard swords and shields, crowns, velvet capes, and other items.)

On the morning of the day I observed, Crystal met with her 12 students of eighth- and ninth-grade American history, world history, and English. The afternoon was reserved for the seventh-grade students. While one table group of ninth-grade students were reading, writing, talking, and discussing the influences from Athens and Sparta, the other table of eighth-grade students were analyzing the Civil War Era and relating it to the present national situation. The Word Wall, as seen below in Figure 3, served to stimulate their analysis:

Figure 3. Word Wall

Vocabulary				
emancipate	slave code	extended family	total war	Sectionalism
social reform	secede	fugitive	temperance movement	
abolitionist	underground railroad	Civil War	racism	

All eighth- and ninth-grade students shared their work with the whole group and a class question-and-answer period followed. Lively, honest exchanges regarding interracial dating and prejudice produced interesting perspectives. Students were respectful and patiently listened to each other’s voices, prior knowledge, and experiences.

Another powerful strategy used by Crystal was Readers Theatre. Students studied Shakespeare through delightful stage presentations, complete with crude costumes. Students learned that men played the parts of women in theatrical productions of the time so they willingly assumed the roles. *Romeo and Juliet* was the play of the week, and students proceeded to collect, from a closet, costumes associated with the roles assigned by Crystal. The eighth- and ninth-grade students performed Act II, scenes 1 and 2. Props included cardboard-and-duct-tape swords, red velvet crowns, and black felt hats. Crystal directed as students read from their paper scripts and acted out their parts in front of the gold-curtained stage: “Romeo, this is your best friend Mercutio. He dies in your arms—show emotion!”

Before students tackled the next scene, they reviewed the script from the previous scene to make sure everyone understood. Crystal asked about the meaning of the line regarding “the beautiful face and a serpent heart.” All participated with real examples from their own experiences, bringing up teachers, lost friends, and relatives. When the students acted in both scenes, they changed roles and repeated Act III. To summarize the work of the day on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Crystal began a discussion of the *Circle of Courage* and how it related to the play. Students then wrote about “belonging” and “mastery” and how “belonging and mastery” contributed to the problems in the play.

Every spring, Crystal produces the Academic Fair—four hours of celebrating students’ best work. Families, community members, and school administrators are sent special invitations to view student accomplishments. Displays are set up in the largest room of the church hall along

with coffee, tea, and cake. Guests are escorted to centers at which students explain their work in science, mathematics, history, and English. Before the fair, students practice gracefully greeting all guests, including the principal who might have expelled him or her from school. Students beam as videos roll and interactive centers capture attention. Visitors are struck by the students' accomplishments and capabilities when they have a teacher who believes in high expectations and makes learning relevant and active.

The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction

Crystal, a master teacher, has incorporated the seven characteristics on a daily basis. She wants her students to succeed and knows that being responsive to students' social, emotional, and academic needs are crucial. She challenges their academic and social abilities by constantly offering opportunities to discuss complex local, national, and international problems. In addition, they critically analyze and argue historical and literary events with solid information and rules of debate. Crystal demands excellence in assignments but is always there to assist students as they produce such work. Only the best products are submitted to the annual Academic Fair. Finally, Crystal assists students as they explore their talents and think about future careers.

Crystal knows her students' families, and they know her as an equal partner in their children's education. The families want the best that is possible for their children and understand what she is doing. Crystal has reshaped the curriculum, making it relevant to students' lives. The lives of great people and past events are related to the lives of the students and current events. Connections with local and regional community members are made meaningful with career visits from leaders of businesses and occupations. This makes the students aware of future possibilities and their own importance to others.

Crystal encourages the sharing of teaching and learning as students study in pairs. Therefore, there is plenty of active involvement through discussions, field trips, Readers Theatre, and artistic work. Furthermore, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing are practiced in all that is accomplished each day, giving students opportunities to develop literacy in ways they previously have not had. Crystal is in charge as she facilitates learning, but students have much control over their own learning as witnessed in the "healthy hum" that allows students to choose activities and resources, express critical thought, and practice logical argument. Undue stress and anxiety does not appear to exist in this academic environment.

Biology Class

Tim is an experienced biology teacher, of European-American origins in his mid-30s, working in an impoverished urban school at which 95 percent of the students receive free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches. Three years ago when Tim enrolled in my literacy courses as a graduate student, he hoped to motivate his students. He explained that most of his students do not attend school regularly and most could not care less about his courses. He could not understand their attitudes. "Biology affects everyone every day of their lives. Why aren't they interested?" At the time, he talked about enjoying his students and developing trusting relationships; however, he believed he could not influence their achievement in his content area. So, from the beginning of the graduate literacy course work, he attempted to implement literacy strategies in his

classrooms; he was pleased with the immediate results.

Today, Tim does not think twice about creating lessons that draw upon student home and community cultures. His students appear fascinated with his classes and attendance and achievement are at all-time highs.

I observed Tim’s inclusive biology class of 20 typical students and five students with special needs. (One teaching assistant was present and sat near a student.) The class was 95 percent African-American and Hispanic and 5 percent European American, with 60 percent female and 40 percent male.

The lesson began with a DNA model in a color-projected PowerPoint show. The DNA double helix encouraged immediate discussions that reviewed information concerning genes and chromosomes. Next, Tim distributed this form, shown in Figure 4, for students to complete in pairs.

Figure 4. Individual Data Collection Form

Date: _____ School: _____		
Sex (Circle one): Male Female Age: _____		
Fill in your traits in the table below: If you are uncertain, mark neither column.		
<i>Trait</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Tongue rolling		
Widow’s peak		
Dimples		
Earlobe attachment		
Mid-digital finger hair		
PTC taster		
Cleft chin		

Tim explained each characteristic and asked students to write questions on the back of the sheet. As students completed the form, laughter and interest were obvious. Tim circulated among the pairs and talked about similarities and differences. After 10 minutes, the collected data were put on a class chart as a frequency distribution. Students were intrigued with the similarities and differences and talked about members of their families having the same and different traits. Tim then asked students to define *genes*. Students quickly replied, “They make up who we are.” “Genes are DNA.” “Genes are traits.”

Next, Tim opened the discussion to other genetic traits. “So what are some genes that are special in your family?” Students responded with music, cooking, building things, fixing cars, sports, engineering, and teaching. Tim added, “Did you know that there are also genetic disorders? My wife has Crone’s Disease. She inherited the disease from her father. Does anyone know of any other genetic disorders?”

One student immediately mentioned sickle cell anemia. Tim then asked what people knew about sickle cell anemia. One student offered, “One in 500 African Americans in the United States have sickle cell.”

Tim agreed and explained:

People who have the disease have blood cells shaped like a sickle. This prevents the cells from carrying oxygen throughout the body. In order to get sickle cell, both the mother and father must possess the gene ... codominance is necessary for the person to get the disease. If one parent has the gene, then the child will not get the disease, but the child might carry the gene. That’s why genetic testing may be important for parents and their children.

Tim continued, “Why do so many Africans carry the sickle cell allele (gene)? Remember the text reading?”

A female student replied, “It came from West Africa where there’s malaria. People with the sickle cell don’t get malaria.”

A male student with special learning needs interjected, “There are other places that have sickle cell, like Italians. They get malaria in places around Africa. They are called tropical.”

Tim enthusiastically stated, “You folks did your reading! Great! Could a genetic disorder be good, too?”

Another special-needs student interjected, “Yes, a person with autism can be very smart. My brother has autism and goes to a special school, and he is much better lately.”

A female student contributed, “The book said our bodies change and develop to protect. So sickle cells protect you from malaria chills and sickness.”

Tim then asked, “How about skin color and the ozone layer?”

Students immediately joined in with, “Black skin has melanin, and we don’t get as burnt as brown skin and white skin.” “People with white skin ... watch out!” “We gotta mix.”

Tim then asked the students to turn to their texts and take a look at human adjustment to environmental changes. Students had to decide in pairs how humans would have to change if the polar ice caps melted and the ozone layer was depleted. Discussions arose around the need for mixed marriages so everyone would be brown or black, “the need for fish flippers and gills, so

we could live in the water, and the need for scaly-skinned meta humans, so we could survive anywhere on the planet Maybe a new species?"

At that point, one student brought up the Terry Schiavo case and life support. Students' questions arose about brain function and death. Tim mentioned cultural differences related to death and dying. "We have scientific explanations, but who should decide?"

The teaching assistant, who recently came from Nigeria, was asked to comment on the subject. She announced, "In Nigeria, this is a family matter and science can't tell the family what to do. No government has the right to say It's the family's choice And the choice of families would be to die naturally." A female student said that this is also what is believed in Cuba. "My grandmother told me this."

Opinions varied, but all were heard. One student asked about the cost of keeping the machine hooked for so many years. "Couldn't we take care of our children with that money?" Other students talked about not playing God.

When the bell rang, Tim ended class with a reminder to complete another trait chart for homework. "Go home and check out your family for genetic characteristics that might belong on the trait chart. Record them and bring them to class, and tomorrow we will make DNA!"

A few students left the class, but many stayed to argue points of view about the Schiavo case until Tim encouraged them out of the room

The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction

Tim's instruction is a model for culturally responsive teaching. His high expectations for the students were demonstrated in the critical thinking and exploration of issues often skipped due to the pressure of standardized testing. However, Tim has found that these discussions are what help students retain important information for the tests. He expects his students to read text material and complete assigned homework, but he first models the work expected. This ensures that his students know what to do and how to do it. Tim drew upon community and family knowledge as he reshaped the biology curriculum. Students were involved as was witnessed by the vibrant discussions. Several students did not have their books with them. This did not seem to matter because Tim captured their interest. They made connections with themselves genetically and enjoyed bringing family and community information into the biology discussions.

Tim facilitated paired and whole-group instruction that allowed students to use themselves and their families as they learned the basics of DNA. All students were involved actively while completing the chart and during the discussions for the entire class. The reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing afforded students with literacy practice. The "healthy hum" prevailed as students appeared excited about a lesson derived from the readings in the biology text assigned the night before. They completed the chart and seemed to find it all fascinating. Tim allowed the students to shift the discussion to current events. This provoked making use of other cultures and perspectives as part of a critical analysis of values issues and science.

English Class

Kevin is an English teacher of European-American origin working in an urban middle school, with 70 percent African-American and Hispanic students and 30 percent European-American students, who enrolled in my literacy course during the spring 2005 semester. This was his second year of teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English. When we first talked about the literacy course, he shared his issues around classroom management, appropriate literature, and student comprehension and written expression. He had a genuine interest in his students' homes and cultures, but did not know how to make connections for academic achievement. He talked of teaching *The Call of the Wild* and finding that students had no interest in it. "Class discussions were a waste and their writing was even worse."

Kevin's classroom walls are covered with literary figures, musicians, athletes, and historical leaders from all continents and cultures. Their words of wisdom are framed beside them. The desks in Kevin's classes are arranged in a "U" shape, but he constantly creates new seating charts with the philosophy that students need to get to know each other. Every class I observed began with breathing exercises, which he thinks will calm hyperactive teens. He practices Yoga and believes that time spent settling down is essential for preparation to follow the daily class agenda, which is always written on the blackboard.

Kevin appeared to understand a lot about adolescent behavior since he incorporated music and videos for instruction and knew how to draw upon student interests and cultural heritages. However, he did not know how to maintain student focus after he caught their interest. Therefore, while enrolled in the literacy course, he worked on ways to build a strong knowledge foundation so students would read the assigned literature and think more critically about their studies.

The first strategy he tried from the course was the use of multicultural illustrated literature as motivation for teaching poetry units of study. He became familiar with authors such as Walter Dean Myers, Christopher Myers, and Nikki Grimes, and found that the depth of student discussions and comprehension significantly increased. Furthermore, they seemed to enjoy writing and sharing poetry regarding their own neighborhoods.

Kevin also began creating reading guides for literature. First, he chose a trade book that would coincide with the social studies curriculum: *So Far From the Bamboo Grove*, a novel about the Japanese escaping from Korea near the end of the World War II. The unit began with a map study of Korea and Japan using a large Peter's Projection (Arno, 1974) that previously had not existed in his classroom. Students were able to see the United States, Korea, and Japan in relation to each other, thus effectively situating the novel within this historical period. He also invited an expert in Korean culture to talk about this era and about Korean life today. Students connected with artifacts in paired activities and engaged in lively discussion. This set the stage for reading the novel.

Three-level guides assisted the students as they read the chapters silently and in pairs, completing vocabulary and interpretive comprehension activities. The teacher circulated and worked with small groups and individually. The "healthy hum" prevailed as students read,

listened, talked, and wrote together. Kevin gave them time for completing each part of the guide. Those that finished early were given choices to read ahead or complete teacher-designed puzzle games.

Kevin saw the students focused on reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. At the end of the class, he found that the summary discussions were more critical and alive. He wrote no referrals to the office and all students completed the guides, shared with partners, and participated in the whole-group summaries. The special-needs students were involved as actively with learning as the typical students—a new behavior not seen in previous classes. Kevin continued designing reading guides during the rest of the semester. Figure 5 is an example of a three-level guide for reading in the eighth-grade English class:


Figure 5. Reading Guide

So Far From the Bamboo Grove
by
Yoko Kawahima Watkins

The Rope Activity

With a thick rope in hand, teacher asks for a volunteer to tie the rope on a wrist.

Then the class answers the following question: How does it look and how does it feel?



Read Chapter 2 with your partner. Take turns and read very quietly. When you finish reading a page, go back and complete the activity for the page.

Read page 21 Find nine verbs (action words) that end in “-ed”. Write them here.

Read page 22 Find four words ending in “-ing”. Write them here.

Read page 23 Find all of the “-ed” and “-ing” words and write them here.

Read pages 24 and 25 Describe something very scary on one of these pages.

Read pages 26–29 Describe the horrible thing that happened.

Read pages 30–33 *silently*. Share your favorite part with your neighbor and write about it here.

Read pages 34–36 *silently*. Write a few sentences about the decision Mother made. Write on the back of this sheet and then read the sentences to your partner.



Find the causes and the effects in Chapter 2 with your partner.

Here is an example:

CAUSE----->EFFECT

The soldier smashed Mother’s glasses.----->Yoko bit the soldier.

Yoko was kicked in the back and ribs by the soldier.----->She was in horrible pain.

CAUSE----->EFFECT

_____ page 21----->Terribly afraid of the soldiers

I vomited----->_____ page 22

_____ page 23----->The pregnant woman was crying.

_____ page 24----->I trembled at the coldness of his eyes.

She was wriggling desperately to get in----->_____ page 25

Seeing our house----->_____ pages 26–27

Clipped the baby’s fingernails and hair----->_____ pages 28–29

CAUSE----->EFFECT

The Korean Communist Army is inspecting the cars---->_____pages 30-33

_____ pages 34-36----->Bombing the train.

What was the most exciting part of the chapter? Why? Discuss it with your reading partner. Write about it, here.

Decide if you agree or disagree with the following. Be ready to explain why.

Agree Disagree

- ____ 1. Ko was too bossy.
- ____ 2. Older people are always right.
- ____ 3. Riding the train was the best way to escape
- ____ 4. The people on the train were happy.
- ____ 5. Ko, Mother, and Yoko should not have shared with the others on the train.
- ____ 6. Ko, Mother and Yoko should have stayed on the train
- ____ 7. Mother, Ko, and Yoko were learning about the horrors of war.
- ____ 8. War is horrible for everyone-soldiers, children, old people, families, and pets.



Choose one of the sentences above that you believe is the most important one in the chapter. Pretend you are one of the characters in the chapter. Explain how you felt during this chapter. Discuss why you felt this way and tell your partner. Then write a paragraph about your feelings as a particular person in the chapter or tell your feelings to the class pretending you are that person in the chapter.

The Seven Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Instruction

Kevin was surprised by students’ work on the reading guides. He certainly believed that students could think and write critically, but he did not know how to guide students to achieve at their ability levels. The guides seem to establish the foundation necessary for higher level thinking, speaking, and writing. Students supported each other as they read together and completed the guides. Kevin even became confident enough to invite his students to create and teach guides for other short stories and poetry. This evolved into a great learning experience for the students. Their responses were, “Hey, it’s hard to teach!” “Some of the kids can be pains.” “You have to decide what’s important when you teach.” “They have to pay attention and you gotta get ’em to do it.” “I liked it, but I don’t know if I want to do it again.”

Kevin had not thought about bringing in community members, but he understood how important it was for students to meet a community member who was an expert on Korea. The students remembered the information presented, and Kevin realized the necessity of building on prior knowledge; the time spent was important to the understanding and appreciation of reading materials. He observed firsthand that making minor connections with students' prior knowledge and cultural differences sparked interest.

The guides provided a “healthy hum” and active involvement as students read, wrote, and shared in pairs. The students were not anxious, and Kevin was not anxious. He was now free to observe and help students as they read, wrote, and discussed literature in critical ways. He began class with a tangible event related to the literature studied and gave directions for the work to be completed. At the end of class, he facilitated discussions and collected students' work. Kevin expressed his thoughts about his new way of teaching, “I gained control of my classroom when my students were empowered to take control of their own learning.”

Culturally Responsive Teaching Stances

The teachers in this article are at different stages in their careers, but they all have had successful experiences with culturally responsive teaching. Obviously their dispositions were such that they were motivated to connect with their students and make lessons meaningful. Each teacher was interviewed after my observations of their lessons, and each clarified his or her stances concerning culturally responsive instruction. The following are their words:

Jerry: My teaching philosophy is to promote gender equity and justice for those from different ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. I hope I can do this daily in my future classroom as I gain competence in teaching the basic elements required for my content.

Joyce: The literacy classes made me aware of many cultures and made me aware of my Native American heritage. If students are not made aware of other cultures and backgrounds, they may never learn anything about those who are different. That would be unfortunate. I always find that introducing different aspects of mathematics from different cultures can open eyes and bring new perspectives into the classroom. My students begin thinking outside the box!

Crystal: The literacy classes forced me to look at diversity in my classroom. I have never been the same. I use multicultural literature and encourage diverse perspectives in all that I teach. I think my students can have fun while learning to be critical about what they hear, see, and read.

Tim: The literacy courses helped me see that I need to take different approaches to teaching in my biology classroom. I now pay attention to culture and the diverse learning styles in my classes. I have a variety of classroom activities and my students are learning more! I feel successful! I also have become more involved with my students' families and their community. By doing this, I am making connections that benefit my students emotionally and academically.

Kevin: The literacy course this spring changed my lesson planning. I began using focusing events that had an impact on students. It helped me build prior knowledge and catch their interests. We read *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, a book that most of my students could not relate to until I brought in camping equipment and we talked about survival in the wilderness. They had to decide how certain objects might be used in the wild. They really got into it. In the poetry unit, I brought in rap music and printed appropriate ones; we talked about the uses of language. I also informed the class that I did not agree with some of the messages, but I pointed out the brilliant use of words. We had a great discussion on whether these guys read very much. I told the class that they had to have done a ton of reading to have written such powerful poetry. I believe my students love words ... they just don't know it. And I hope I can inspire them by drawing upon what they know to make connections to the curriculum.

The teachers expressed strong ideas about their planning. As I analyzed their lessons, I saw that they emphasized the development of prior knowledge and the use of sensory-focusing events; they emphasized reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing; they emphasized making connections between school and family and school and community; and they emphasized high expectations based on active involvement and student-learning needs. The conclusion briefly addresses these points and makes recommendations for future classroom practice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These and other secondary content-area teachers across the nation are under great pressure to insure that their students pass state standardized tests. Instead of fearing time constraints for teaching and covering course material, these teachers realized that culturally responsive instruction did not detract from the mandated curriculum, but helped students learn and retain the key content-area concepts.

When analyzing the teachers' lesson plans and implementation in their classrooms, five conclusions with specific recommendations emerged. The conclusions and recommendations appear to be essential to culturally responsive instruction

Prior Knowledge and Focusing Events

All of the teachers claimed to think about their students' prior knowledge and experiences as they created lessons. They were responsive to individual students, their cultures, and their communities. They also focused attention on prior knowledge by using the senses to focus attention, particularly at the beginning of a lesson when directions and objectives are presented. This was demonstrated in Jerry's use of hands-on music to introduce the physics of sound; Joyce's use of a field trip to the Onondaga Nation School for geometric pattern studies; and Crystal's use of visuals, hands-on materials, and costume creation and props for Readers Theatre. Tim captured imaginations with PowerPoint and video streaming. Students readily saw key ideas for the day on the screen and were fascinated with DNA models. Finally, Kevin realized the significance of a strong focusing event to begin lessons to draw upon prior knowledge and build prior knowledge for students who may have large gaps in their learning. He brought in tangible objects related to literature and discovered picture books as a means of promoting an appreciation of artwork and strong cultural messages.

Recommendations

These sensory experiences capture and maintain interest throughout lessons and units of study. In this media-driven world, children respond readily to multimedia literacy events. Therefore, drawing upon and building prior knowledge using multimedia and firsthand sensory experiences seems to be worth the time and planning necessary (Xu, 2004; Xu, Perkins, & Zurich, 2005).

Making Connections

Family and community contributions were utilized by most teachers. Joyce, Crystal, and Tim regularly worked with family and community members. They fearlessly reached out to the community, finding ways to communicate beyond the letter home or parent conference in the school. They had no problem meeting outside of school, on neutral ground, and in places that were comfortable to family members and teachers, such as a local coffee shop, park, or recreation center. They also met in homes and used the phone conference as a form of positive communication. These efforts helped them develop working relationships with families and connect lesson plans with family and community knowledge.

Jerry brought scientists into the classroom through the video. Joyce made use of parent talent when teaching about Hawaiian quilts. She also invited parents into class to discuss the use of mathematics in their careers. Crystal requested parental visits to talk about the world of work. Tim invited family members to discuss careers in the health professions. Students showed their pride when families were recognized for contributing to the school. Kevin saw the value in community guests with the Korean expert and planned for future guests as an integral part of his teaching.

Recommendations

Developing a working relationship with students' families is key to successful implementation of culturally responsive instruction (Edwards, Danridge, McMillon, & Pleasants, 2001). Families in impoverished areas often feel uncomfortable about coming to school because they may have negative memories regarding their own educational experiences. Therefore, since the teacher is in a position of power, it is believed that the teacher has a responsibility to blur the boundaries between home and school (Edwards, 2004). Teachers may reach out and attempt to make connections with families by meeting on neutral ground to discuss goals and objectives for the term. A recreation center, park, or coffee shop may offer a site where pleasant and positive discussions may begin to take place concerning individual students or a class of students. A teacher who makes the effort to communicate with families is demonstrating a respect for family involvement (Schmidt, 2000).

Many teachers systematically have begun communicating by phone on a regular basis, starting at the beginning of a school year, one night a week. A quick greeting with a positive statement about the student and a summary of the month's unit of study inform parents. Parents or family members are given a voice when asked about any ideas they might like to share regarding the content or school in general. Teachers who make these contacts have greater access to information regarding students' lives, and as a result are able to work more effectively with families for student achievement (Izzo & Schmidt, in press).

Thematic Instruction

Thematic instruction for interdisciplinary learning was another theme that emerged from teacher observations and interviews. Several teachers used thematic instruction to their advantages. Jerry wanted to do more, but felt he was beginning to link mathematics, music, and physics. He was concerned about ethnic and cultural relevance but also gender relevance. "I want to make sure that young women are comfortable in my classes and that they will be as likely to consider a mathematics or science career as the men in my classes."

Crystal believed thematic instruction helped with the retention of material. "When students see connections they remember."

Joyce saw the cultures of the world connecting with mathematics and was intrigued with the similar designs seen around the world. "I think that's because of nature. People copied from the natural world so even though there are differences, there are similarities in biomes at different latitudes."

Tim also perceived a worldview of biology. “It’s the study of people, so what could be more relevant for our students?”

Recommendations

When students see connections among the content areas, learning seems more relevant. In secondary schools this is often difficult due to standardized testing in particular content areas. In addition, thematic instruction is difficult due to departmentalization. However, when teachers begin to see connections with other content areas themselves, they can make adjustments in their own lessons and help students become aware. Concept maps and other graphic organizers can demonstrate connections with other content areas (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). This may seem like an added burden, but the teachers in this article did this as part of their lesson planning because it seemed to make sense.

Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Viewing

Before students wrote anything in any of the classes, they talked, listened, read, and possibly viewed videos, overhead transparencies, websites, and other significant visuals. Students and teachers agreed that this was easy to do because they had many hands-on activities that involved communicating with partners and group members. Students practiced effective communication. The use of oral expression freed African-American and Hispanic students to express themselves. They could talk and then write: “Our teacher understands us.” “You always learn in his class.” “I do good work in her class.” “We can talk and learn in her class.” “It’s not boring when you can talk.”

Recommendations

The “healthy hum” in the classroom can be defined as focused conversation among students (Schmidt, 2001). This allows for students’ active participation in small groups and pairs. When students have opportunities to listen and talk, they can write and read more easily. Listening to others in the group promotes learning. Talking about what they are learning helps them think and write. When they read what they have written, they have opportunities to rethink, edit, and revise. They hear their own and others’ errors and significant ideas, thus developing critical eyes and ears. Students actively involved in the small groups and pairs also experience less anxiety and are better able to practice their literacy learning. When students have opportunities to practice without fear, they are learning in ways that free the mind for deeper levels of thinking (Schmidt & Pailliotet, 2001).

Expectations

All of the teachers in this study had high expectations for their students, but all have learned that high expectations must be in line with the principles of human behavior and learning. When lecture is the only method used in classrooms, it seems to result in poor retention of information. Therefore, to get the most from students, teachers must plan instruction for the diverse populations in their classes and make learning relevant to motivate students to do their best. The paired and group work were configurations in all of the classrooms and the “healthy hum” prevailed.

When teachers gave students the responsibility to learn in their paired or group settings, the teachers were saying implicitly that students were capable of doing the work and lesson objectives would be met. Jerry’s Web assignment demonstrated hands-on media research. Joyce began with manipulative activities, Crystal set the stage for Readers Theatre, and Tim’s students collected data both in and out of class. Kevin was so inspired by the students’ excellent work that he proposed they create and teach reading guides for a novel. He discovered greater capabilities than he expected.

Crystal and Kevin clearly stated that “active engagement is a must.” Joyce talked about the fact that her students learn from each other.

Furthermore, the teachers saw themselves as facilitators who were freed from constant lecture in order to maneuver around the classroom and support the learning of pairs and small groups. This was Kevin’s biggest surprise. He liked the newfound freedom that allowed him to work with small groups and pairs by expecting that most of his students would stay on task and read and appreciate the literature required for the seventh and eighth grades.

Recommendations

It seems clear that high expectations require active involvement (Dale, 2005; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003). When teachers facilitate a learning community, they must leave center stage to guide. This allows them to learn more about individual students and frees them to help those who need special attention. It also demonstrates that the teachers believe their students are capable of learning with carefully planned direction. It demonstrates that the teacher trusts the students to share and discuss information gained and completed in the assigned work. The teacher as facilitator can then circulate and assess individual, paired, and group learning. The teacher can observe students’ reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing for gaining new information, understanding new concepts, evaluating new ideas, and applying and extending what has been learned.

Final Word

The populations of our world appear to be in constant flux. War and economic and social upheaval are sending people across the planet to American shores. Consequently, teachers are being called upon to deal with the social and emotional attitudes related to culture and academic achievement, overwhelming charges considering the nations standardized testing requirements (Schmidt, 2005).

Thankfully, though, we are beginning to learn positive strategies for adding the contributions of under represented people to our school curricula and our nation's heritage (Boykin, 1978, Boykin, 1984; Cummins, 1986; Moll, 1992; Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Schmidt, 2002). Teacher education programs are moving in the direction of developing present and future teacher awareness and appreciation of diverse cultural backgrounds (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Florio-Ruane, 1994; Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993; Osborne, 1996; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Tatum, 1992; Willis & Meacham, 1997). These programs are analyzing the ways we can reach the children and families of those who have been ignored for too long (Edwards, 2004; Schmidt, 2005). The goal is for all children to see school as a place that welcomes and recognizes who they are. The teachers in this article are doing just that. And what seems more apparent than ever is that culturally responsive instruction is excellence in teaching—excellence in teaching for successful learning.

Note: It is with great gratitude that I thank the exemplary teachers who shared their classrooms and lives with me so that we might spread the good word. They are Jerry Parton, Joyce Lewis, Crystal Ponto, Tim Fitzpatrick, and Kevin Salamone.

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