



Equity Now!

Beyond the Buzzwords: Examining Culturally Responsive Teaching



IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

"Every minute of every day I use elements of culturally responsive teaching. It's not something you teach, it's something you do - every day. The kids are excited to be at school...I feel excited to be at work."

-Sarah Skahan

Teacher & recipient of St. Mary's University of Minnesota's graduate certificate in culturally responsive teaching

November 2012



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Meet the Authors:

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Educate

The call is out for teachers and school staff to be culturally responsive. Members of the school community may have even participated in professional development encouraging them to use the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). But how do we know what is relevant to the lives of students and effective for their growth? This question is at the heart of culturally responsive teaching, and in order to effectively answer it, we must first understand the history behind the movement to be culturally responsive and explore questions of relevance and effectiveness.

The movement to encourage culturally responsive instruction can, in part, be traced back to the desegregation efforts following *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Black and Brown students were enrolled into formerly all-White schools where their cultural heritage, history, and beliefs were not always understood or valued. In fact, students of color were often threatened, placed in lower academic tracks, and taught using curricula that privileged Eurocentric and male-dominated points of view, both in content and instructional approaches, often excluding the history,

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perspectives, literature, and accomplishments of women and people of color (Gorski, 2012). In these experiences, then, students of color were marginalized - the very outcome Brown v. Board was attempting to address! In response, civil rights activists demanded that schools and other educational institutions "cease their racist and oppressive practices and distorting [racial minority groups'] cultural heritage and cultural contributions to society" (Harmon, 2012, p.17). As a result of these outcries, the multicultural education movement surfaced with an emphasis on representation in both curriculum and pedagogy (Harmon, 2012).

Though momentum toward *culturally responsive teaching* grew out of an outcry from marginalized groups, it is a practice that holds relevance for all students because of the cultural nature of teaching and learning. Unpacking this phrase, we understand culture to mean the dynamic and shifting beliefs and practices of groups of individuals. Everyone within the school community - adults included - brings beliefs and practices with them through the schoolhouse door. Being responsive means understanding and responding to what everyone brings, including values, ways of learning and approaching tasks, group identification and histories, beliefs about the nature and purpose of education, and so on.

In order to be culturally responsive, we must first recognize that our own attitudes and ideologies influence the ways in which classrooms work. Culturally responsive teaching begins when we ask ourselves whether these beliefs and actions create a classroom environment that appreciates and validates a wide range of people's histories, perspectives, and practices. More concretely, the histories, perspectives, and practices of groups - regardless of race, gender, or national origin - should be recognized as worthy to incorporate into the formal and informal curriculum, rather than viewing only the perspectives and cultural practices of the White, middle class community as "legitimate" or "right" and viewing beliefs and practices that are different as deficient, aberrant, or pathological. One of the most dangerous assumptions is that students from low-income households live in a "culture of poverty" or the expectation that students and families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are unmotivated, linguistically deficient, or destined for low achievement (Gorski, 2008). This belief can distract us from the strengths that students bring with them and how teachers can build on the richness of students' cultural practices to make learning more meaningful for them and contribute to the learning community as a whole. Ultimately, our values and dispositions influence our expectations of and interactions with our students (Ford, 2005); taking time to reflect on these attitudes is a first step toward dissolving often negative assumptions of the cultural practices of students who come from various groups (Lee, 2007).

Recognize, too, that students may share these assumptions - even when they themselves are members of an oppressed group. Proactively working to unravel negative associations associated with race, class, national origin, or gender is part of the work of culturally responsive teachers. One strategy for challenging these assumptions is to bring to the fore the often unseen contributions of members of marginalized groups through literature, current events, classroom visitors, and other means. Another is to respond to the assumptions students make; when a young child says, "I want to be a fireman when I grow up," you can draw attention to the language he used and explicitly state that women can be firefighters, too. If a Black student is withdrawn during math class, ask yourself if she has seen any images or heard stories about engineers, scientists, or businessmen that look like her in your classroom and actively seek out opportunities to routinely incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials.

Equity Leaders Institute

WHEN: February 20-21, 2013

WHERE: Indianapolis, IN

TOPIC: Advancing Educational Equity

FOCUS: Participants will learn to apply key equity tools and strategies for addressing multifaceted issues related to teaching and learning of diverse students.

Equity Spotlight



Danny Martin, a professor at University of Illinois at Chicago, takes a powerful stance in pursuing equity for all children, but specifically for students of African American heritage. He states, "A hallmark of my work is that I argue, forcefully and unapologetically, for equity and meaningful mathematical experiences for all children, but especially Black children. It is important for me to highlight Black children's success; challenge research and policy that often demean them in both subtle and explicit ways; and to reshape the discourse and future directions of both research and policy with respect to these children."

For nearly two decades, Danny Martin's empirical study has focused on understanding the salience of race and identity in African Americans' struggle for mathematics literacy. Specifically, his research is focused on undertaking critical analyses of mathematics education policy to ensure that mathematics education is responsive to the needs of African American learners. Martin's research takes into account socio-historical, community, and school forces and draws from culture-practice theory, cultural-ecological theory, critical theories of race, and racial identity development theory. He is currently developing a perspective that frames mathematics learning and participation as *racialized forms of experience* and this

As culturally responsive teachers, we learn what is relevant and effective for students by sharing responsibility for how the physical environment will look, what will be taught, and how learning will occur. To do this, teachers must see themselves as facilitators of learning rather than the only or primary source of knowledge in the classroom. In other words, students become a key source in determining what is relevant to them as individuals. For example, the class might be asked to develop selection criteria for what should be displayed on the classroom walls. During this process, the teacher and students would have opportunities to share and challenge notions of what “good” or “commendable” work/art/messages look like. Positioning herself as a member of the learning community, the teacher is able to discover what students value while simultaneously sharing her own views.

As students explore the world around them, they also can be empowered to explore the social problems that are relevant to their lives and engage in opportunities to take civic action. If the state standards require that students must learn to write a formal letter, why not open up the possibility of investigating a nearby business’s financial and environmental impact on the community and writing the letter to the CEO? To teach mean, median, and mode, students might explore the home values in their community and raise questions about the creation and distribution of these values. When these projects originate from discussion with the students and are directly related to their lives, teaching and learning become truly life-serving.

In the end, then, awareness of histories of marginalization and shared decision-making are both important to determining what is relevant and effective for our students. Through our critical stance and our willingness to share power over and responsibility for learning goals, processes, and outcomes, students experience a responsive education and they, too, develop as culturally responsive individuals. The ultimate goal remains to move students into a position in which a sense of empowerment in their learning environment, content, and outcomes is evoked.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



To the members of Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ), a Chicago-based organization, teaching extends beyond monitoring hallways, grading papers, or attending weekly faculty meetings; teaching is a political action (Freire, 1998). Political actors - teachers, administrators, pre-service teachers, and other educators working in public, independent, alternative, and charter schools and universities in the Chicago area - are dedicated to confronting

perspective is applicable to all students.

Martin began his work at UIC in the fall of 2004 after teaching mathematics for 14 years in a California community college, where he not only served as Mathematics Department Chair but also a Principal Investigator for several prestigious grants and fellowships related to the STEM areas. At UIC, Martin holds a joint appointment in education and mathematics and teaches mathematics courses for pre-service teachers, elementary math methods, and graduate courses in [mathematics education](#).

Listen In!

Great Lakes Equity Center Podcast:

Episode 1



In our first podcast, a policy review team engages in a critical reflection process.

Upcoming Events

Illinois

Dec. 14, 2012
Constitutional Rights Foundation
Chicago
[2012 Equal Justice Under the Law](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

Jan. 22, 2013
[Reading Textbook Caravan](#)
Indpls, IN

Michigan

Dec. 4, 14, 2012
[Michigan Institute for Education Management](#)

all forms of oppression and exploitation within themselves, their work and the global society. It is through an anti-racist ideology coupled with a strong commitment to multiculturalism and multilingualism that these teachers work to create liberating classrooms for all children based upon their authentic experiences.

The members of TSJ began their work over a decade ago out of response to what they felt were top down decisions and policy enforcement implemented without the consideration of all stakeholders. Since their inception, they have vowed to reshape how policy is implemented and they actively work to ensure that not only educators, but parents, students, and community members are involved in collectively reshaping how all school decisions are formed. This first collective action step has led to forming not just a group of teachers but a coalition of educators acting as transformative agents for equity through the pursuit of social justice.

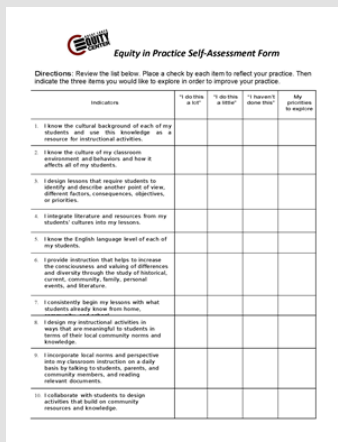
This pursuit is powered by a collaborative network of TSJ members that routinely meet to share ideas, resources, meet as study groups and provide support intentionally designed for the task of dismantling systemic pitfalls that plague educational spaces. Their network has grown to over a thousand active members strong and the influence of their coalition is evident in the turnout of over 15,000 educators attending their annual TSJ Curriculum Fair in Chicago, Illinois. This year at their 12th annual fair, they not only displayed the culturally responsive work of teachers, but also offered workshops and professional learning opportunities that promoted grassroots educational movements grounded in social justice.

As an Equity Assistance Center, we recognize TSJ for embracing and pushing the boundaries of culturally responsive teaching, challenging top-down policy and practices, and forming alliances with all stakeholders in the name of social justice.

Empower

Something to Do!

An initial step towards developing cultural responsiveness is to become aware of our values and practices. Our new [Equity in Practice Self-Assessment Form](#), adapted from the Teaching Tolerance TDSi Educator Check-In on Culture and the Educator Check-In on Abilities, is a tool designed to guide you through a process of self-reflection. Use it to initiate dialogue with your colleagues and to take steps toward cultural responsiveness. You can pair this tool with our [Equity in Practice Observation Form](#) to promote even greater awareness of classroom practices. These resources were featured in our recent webinar, [Educational Equity: What's it all About?](#)



Equity in Practice Self-Assessment Form

Directions: Review the list below. Place a check in each item to reflect your practice. Then indicate the three items you would like to explore in order to improve your practice.

Indicators	1 do this all the time	2 do this most of the time	3 haven't done this	My priorities to improve
1. I know the cultural background of each of my students and use this knowledge as a resource for instructional activities.				
2. I honor the culture of my classroom, encouragement and behaviors and how it affects all of my students.				
3. I design lessons that require students to identify and describe another point of view, different factors, consequences, implications, or problems.				
4. I integrate literature and resources from my students' cultures into my lessons.				
5. I assess the English language level of each of my students.				
6. I provide instruction that helps to increase the confidence and ability of differences and diversity through the study of historical, current, community, family, personal events, and literature.				
7. I consistently begin my lessons with what students already know from home.				
8. I design my instructional activities in ways that are meaningful to students in terms of their local community norms and knowledge.				
9. I incorporate local norms and perspectives into my classroom instruction on a daily basis by talking to students, parents, and community members, and reading relevant documents.				
10. I collaborate with students to design activities that build on community resources and knowledge.				

Common Core: Leading the Change
Spring Arbor University

Minnesota

Dec. 5, 2012

Minnesota Department of Education
[Positive Change with Purpose, Data Practices, Discipline](#)
Roseville, MN

Ohio

March 6-8, 2013

Ohio School Board Association
[Moving the Profession Forward: Preparing Teachers for a New World of Learning and Work- P – 16 Partnerships](#)
Dublin, OH

Wisconsin

February 22, 2013

Western Wisconsin Education Conference
[WWEC 2012: Educating the Whole Child](#)
La Crosse, WI

National

April 27, 2013

[Teaching Equity Conference](#)
Des Monicas, WA

Questions? Comments?



Idea for a future newsletter topic?

Let us know!!

Something to Read!



This brief, titled [Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Strategies](#), presents the merits of cultural responsiveness in the management of diverse classrooms and offers some guidelines on how teachers can become more culturally responsive. The document will introduce you to culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) and disproportionality and teach you how to use Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) as a tool for CRCM. This resource also provides a list of useful books and online resources that should help you explore the topic further.

Something to Watch!

Culturally Responsive Teaching has been described as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Watch as algebra students are empowered with math concepts taught through the lens of their everyday experiences in the Algebra Project.



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