Title: Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage  
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A disproportionate number of students of color are being placed into special education because teachers lack both the appreciation for and knowledge about different cultures and their learning processes, values, etc. Oftentimes these students are diagnosed with a learning disability and placed in special education based on differences in home values and cultures rather than actual biological or intellectual disabilities. In these cases, diagnosing students isn’t an objective process, rather, it’s based on a Eurocentric, white, middle-class idea of what is the “norm” for students, their learning, and their behaviors.

An example of this may be how African Americans are diagnosed with ADHD or disruptive behavioral disorders while using more movements and being more energetic is simply part of their culture. Another example may be Latinx students being considered unmotivated when they don’t want to engage in individual and competitive learning activities. However, this just may be because they are more used to collaborative/community activities in their home culture.

By implementing culturally responsive teaching, these wrong diagnoses can be avoided and the disproportionate number of students of color in special education will diminish, giving both the students who are not supposed to be in special education as those who are a fair chance at an equal, high-quality education.

Implementing culturally responsive teaching starts with determining, addressing, and eliminating existing practices as well as beliefs such as misunderstanding diversity vs. disability and negative attitudes that teachers may hold regarding certain groups of students.

Differences in cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, etc. for different cultures mustn’t be ignored. Instead, educators should educate themselves on these differences and they should be honored. After all, if a teacher unable to teach a child that is not white, able, or middle-class (what would be considered “the norm”), they oftentimes will end up blaming the child for not learning rather than looking inward and acknowledging their own lack of cultural competency. And when a teacher holds a negative bias towards a student with a marginalized identity, that will automatically and unconsciously result in that teacher’s perception of the student’s behaviors being negatively impacted.

A teacher should also be aware of their own culture, values, attitudes, and beliefs, because this all directly influences classroom activities, teaching styles, and classroom management.

There are four specific practices that altogether make up culturally responsive teaching. They are culturally responsive classroom climates, critical cultural consciousness, culturally congruent instructional strategies, and learning communities.

A culturally responsive classroom climate is important because when ethnic stereotypes are introduced into a classroom, it negatively influences academics of members of these groups, regardless of whether they believe these stereotypes to be true. Therefor it’s important to identify curriculum content, classroom strategies, and educational assessments that are biased.

Critical cultural consciousness allows teachers to recognize behaviors, values, and attitudes in their students that are culture-bound, and they can use these to improve their teaching.

Implementing culturally congruent instructional strategies is helpful because every person connects best with and learns best if what they know is being used. Effectively applying these strategies would be easiest if the primary focus of teaching would shift to substantive elements (e.g., skills, values, ideals, etc.) rather than content.

Lastly, learning communities are important in culturally responsive teaching because when students help each other with and through learning, their academic achievement, their satisfaction with school, their self-efficacy levels, and their relationships with peers across ethnic groups all improve.

Key Terms

* Critical cultural consciousness: Teachers becoming aware of their personal culture, values, learning and teaching styles, ways of communicating, and attitudes and the ways in which these affect their views on and behaviors towards people of other ethnic groups.
* Culturally pluralistic classroom climates: The psychological and emotional tone, social interactions amongst students as well as between students and educators, and the physical features of a classroom. A culturally pluralistic classroom climate feels warm, supportive, and caring, but there are also high expectations. Differences between students and their cultures aren’t viewed as previously set limitations, but rather, they just are. Ethnically diverse images are displayed in the classroom that show the desirability of diversity as well as different accomplishments, positions of power, and leadership.
* Multicultural curriculum and instruction: Using materials as well as teaching techniques in the curriculum that are compatible with students, is familiar to them, and their lives, is challenging for them, and interests them.
* Diverse communities of learners: Rather than taking a competitive and individualistic approach to learning, there is cooperation and collaboration of students. No student needs to fail in order for another student to succeed; instead, no individual student’s learning is complete until all of their peers have succeeded to learn to the best of their ability. This is a call to participate in political and mainly social reform actions.
* Culturally responsive teaching (CRT): Implementing the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of students into the classroom in order to improve the curriculum and make education more equitable for all students and less European-American, middle-class, white focused.