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TEACHING IN AN INCREASINGLY POLARIZED SOCIETY

by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine

Abstract

Our democracy and equal opportunity for all students are endangered as schools become increasingly polarized. The author calls for better-prepared and more committed teachers in the areas of social justice and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Key words: *culturally responsive pedagogy, democracy, political climate*

Schools, regardless of grade level, public or private, urban or suburban, are experiencing unprecedented stress and anxiety associated with America's increasingly polarized political climate. UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (Rogers, 2017) reported that, compared to previous years, teachers are seeing more students with high levels of stress about issues such as immigration, racism, sexism, LGBT rights, climate change, and their family's health care. Moreover, teachers reported that hostilities surrounding these issues in schools and classrooms are found in predominantly White schools. Newspapers across the country have described incidents where immigrant students were taunted with

xenophobic comments like, "Go back where you came from."

A Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) survey supported the UCLA findings. Teachers in this study observed similar levels of stress, anxiety, and fear among students being harassed by displays of swastikas, Confederate flags, and Nazi salutes. An increasing number of incidents have triggered fights, violence, and property damage. Moreover, the widespread use of social media has extended these provocations into after-school hours.

Multiculturalism and Democracy

Some critics blame growing tensions and clashes in our schools on the fact that America has become so racially, culturally, and religiously diverse. A groundswell has developed into orga-

nized efforts to slow down or dismantle multiculturalism in schools. Individuals who support this movement contend that diverse groups have different worldviews and political ideologies that ultimately fuel conflict and impede student learning and positive student relationships. This misguided perspective blames school programs in diversity for a perceived decline in national identity and allegiance to traditional American values and beliefs. Skeptics even argue that the focus on multiculturalism and inclusion defeats their intended goals and instead promotes more, rather than less, segregation.

There are no inherent tensions between the two notable ideals of multiculturalism and democracy. On the contrary, I argue that criticisms of multicultural education have serious national implications because limiting equal opportunities for all students threatens the very nature of our system of government. Geneva Gay (1997) as-

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serted that conjoining the principles of democracy and diversity ensures the rights of marginalized and oppressed groups, and improves the academic performance of all students in all subjects. In our democracy, students who identify with various groups can embrace their cultural and ethnic identities, and also share a common national identity. James Banks (2015) stressed the need for the national culture to accommodate these diverse students without forcing them to abandon their cultural/ethnic group in order to become successful citizens.

After decades of educational research and teacher education, misconceptions and myths about how culture affects student learning persist among some educators. *Culture* is a group's shared history, language, values, norms, rituals, and symbols that are important for their survival in a particular environment. These attributes are passed down from one generation to another and serve as a roadmap that guides and shapes behavior. All students—White, African American, Latino, and Asian—are cultural beings who bring their beliefs, values, and perceptions to school. Although culture, particularly ethnicity, is clearly a powerful force that influences teacher–student relationships and student learning, it is not static, deterministic, or predictive.

Students are not mere products of their culture. Consequently, culture affects individuals in different ways. It is constantly evolving and, although some students may share the same cultural background and predispositions, not all members of the same cultural group behave in identical ways or identify with their culture to the same degree. The complex underpinnings of culture and learning cannot be understood with “quick fixes” and cursory

knowledge. Strategies such as assigning learning-style labels to different groups, hosting trivialized multicultural celebrations, and taking field trips to diverse communities are not effective.

With growing enrollments of students from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups, teachers are eager for effective professional development they can apply in their classrooms. For the first time, in fall 2014, the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in American public K–12 classrooms surpassed the number of non-Hispanic Whites. This demographic trend is driven largely by the dramatic growth in the Latino population and a decline in the White population. In 1997, White enrollment was 63.4%. By 2022, Whites will represent only 45.3%, while students of color will constitute 54.7% of the total public school student population (Krogstad & Fry, 2014).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Finding sustainable solutions requires a multi-focused approach, starting with involving significant stakeholders including educators, parents, community members, elected officials, religious leaders, and community organizers. One example of this involvement is Kappa Delta Pi's partnership with *Teach Us All*—a documentary (Lowman, 2017) accompanied by a social justice project (www.teachusallfilm.org). The Teach Us All movement has developed a comprehensive community engagement campaign with diverse groups of stakeholders committed to dismantling the lingering vestiges of segregation and inequality in schools. The Teach Us All town hall initiative includes specific guidelines for K–12 schools and teacher preparation

programs that are interested in hosting a screening of the film and mobilizing local communities for an ongoing partnership.

The next focal point is working with teachers at the preservice and inservice levels, specifically in the field of culturally responsive pedagogy (Irvine, 2001). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has theoretical roots in research about learning as a socially mediated process related to students' cultural experiences. CRP builds on the premise that learning may differ across cultures. Teachers can enhance students' achievement by acquiring knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds and translating that knowledge into effective instructional practice.

In addition to issues related to culture, CRP addresses pedagogy and content knowledge. Pedagogy concerns classroom management, lesson planning, and delivery of instruction. Content knowledge refers to knowledge proficiency in subjects taught. A thorough and deep understanding of all three of these competencies helps teachers to effectively instruct their students. Competent culturally responsive teachers know how to employ multiple representations of knowledge that use students' everyday lived experiences to motivate and assist them in connecting new knowledge to their home and community. Offering multiple representations of subject matter knowledge involves finding pertinent examples, comparing and contrasting, and bridging the gap between the known (students' personal cultural knowledge) and the unknown (materials and concepts to be mastered). Armento (2001) argued that inclusion of diversity in the curriculum makes good sense both in terms of pedagogy and content. She stated that diversity makes “a curriculum more complete, honest,

and accurate, and better represents the full picture of the past and of any field of study” (p. 25).

CRP addresses the need for teaching unified democratic values—what Banks (2015) called “full citizenship.” This pedagogical method rejects the notion that it leads to polarization, divisiveness, and cultural isolation. On the contrary, CRP respects the uniqueness of individuals and cultural groups, as well as the ideals and core values we share as a nation. These shared values include the belief that with hard work and persistence, native-born and naturalized citizens can realize their dreams and aspirations. Most citizens value the Constitution as the foundation for our country’s democratic system and believe that every person should be guaranteed equal protection under the law. There is evidence that in times of national crises, such as war, international conflicts, and natural disasters, Americans from all backgrounds stand together.

Teachers who are culturally responsive do not avoid civil discussion of controversial topics because of unfounded fears of polarization and potential conflict. Effective CRP teachers use discussions of controversial issues to help their students understand various points of view while developing their analytical skills, critical thinking, facility with language, and verbal and written discourse. These are the widely accepted skills that are essential for success in a high-standards curriculum. Furthermore, these skills and predispositions are fundamental for a responsible, thoughtful, and active citizenry.

CRP also not only attends to students’ cognitive academic achievement, but also underscores the importance of their social and emotional development. Darling-Hammond (2017) urged teachers to be

explicit in their social justice agenda and help pre-K through college students deal with their emotions, including anger and prejudice, and assist them in expressing compassion and empathy for others.

CRP teachers work with their colleagues to ensure that all students thrive in safe, nurturing classrooms and school climates. Teachers also need comparable supportive and safe work environments to examine their own implicit and explicit biases. Teachers cannot implement CRP unless they have encouraging administrators who value their input and give them the space to “unlearn” habitual teaching practices that are ineffective. CRP teachers require time and mentorship so they can disentangle significant challenges and questions as they cooperatively grapple with implementing a multicultural, anti-racist, social justice curriculum. These questions are complex: Should every culture represented in their classes be included in the curriculum? Who decides? What is the purpose of curriculum inclusion? To make students proud of their ancestors? To enhance students’ self-esteem? It is this type of teacher reflection that distinguishes CRP from other methods. It is not a single program or packaged intervention. CRP teachers are problem solvers and astute observers who monitor, evaluate, and continually revise teaching practices.

Closing Thoughts

Culturally responsive pedagogy is an effective strategy for instilling democratic principles and decreasing growing polarization in our schools. CRP helps students to

- Find meaning and purpose in what is to be learned;
- Construct meaning by organizing, elaborating, and representing knowl-

edge in their own ways;

- Positively change their community and society, not simply to exist or survive in it; and
- Work with diverse groups to develop solutions and creative ideas that enhance the common good.

CRP recognizes that a democracy cannot succeed unless all students, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, are educated to reach their highest potential in classrooms and schools, absent of polarization and hostilities. John Dewey’s 1899 statement is still timely: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (p. 3). ■

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