

The Precondition of Culturally Competent Teaching for Equitable Learner Outcomes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's increasingly diverse classrooms, cultural competence is no longer a desirable attribute for teachers; it is a critical necessity for ensuring all students feel valued, engaged, and achieve their full academic potential. This white paper examines the concept of cultural competence in education, highlighting the reasons why teachers must actively cultivate this skillset to create a more equitable learning environment for all students.

When teachers lack cultural competence, it can lead to a significant problem where students from diverse backgrounds feel excluded, misunderstood, and disengaged from learning due to a lack of connection between their cultural experiences and the classroom instruction, potentially impacting their academic performance and overall well-being: conversely, culturally competent teachers create inclusive environments where students from all backgrounds feel valued and can thrive, leading to improved student engagement, academic achievement, and positive relationships with their educators and peers.

Research indicates that culturally competent teachers, who actively incorporate students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into their teaching, can significantly improve academic outcomes for diverse learners, particularly for students from marginalized communities, leading to more equitable results across the classroom; however, specific, concrete statistics on this topic can be difficult to find due to the complex nature of measuring cultural competence and its impact on student achievement.

Overall, while precise statistics might be limited, the research consistently suggests that culturally competent teachers play a crucial role in creating equitable learning environments and achieving positive outcomes for all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds. [Source: The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2024]

Culturally Responsive Education Research Facts

[Source: The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2024]

The Need

In the current political environment, when the prevalence of racism and other biases are on sharp display across the country, cities must take a hard look at how public schools either perpetuate or confront these forces. Research shows that racial bias, and its many layers of impact, is widespread across every aspect of the public-school experience:

- High school teachers expect 58% of White high school students, but just 37% of Black high school students, to graduate from college. White teachers were 9 percentage points less likely than their Black colleagues to expect that the same student would earn a college degree. [i]
- White middle school math teachers are three times more negative regarding Black students' emotions and ability compared to white students [ii]
- School staff frequently perceive Black boys as threatening and dangerous for the same behaviors that are seen as innocent for White students. [iii]
- There are significant disparities and stereotypes in how teachers communicate with parents from different racial, ethnic and immigrant backgrounds. [iv]
- Implicit and overt bias are common in schools and drive disparities in engagement and outcomes [v]
- Black and Latino teachers leave teaching at faster rates than their White peers, due to limitations on professional advancement and stagnation in disciplinary and remedial roles [vi]
- In 2015, only 15% of children's books were written by African American or Latino authors, or focused on African American or Latino characters [vii]
- In a national survey of public-school teachers, there was broad agreement that race should be discussed in classrooms, but teachers felt unprepared and unable to lead those conversations. [viii]
- In NYC, 85% of the students are of color, and 60% of teachers are white. There are 266 schools with 0 or 1 Latino teacher, 327 with 0 or 1 Black teacher, and 690 with 0 or 1 Asian teacher [ix]

This reality creates a culture gap between students and the educational system that contributes to student disengagement from school, and to the academic achievement gap. The Connecticut State Department of Education describes this culture gap, and the solution:

... one of the key factors influencing poor student achievement among students of color is the cultural incongruity between the school and the home. This combined with a further cultural mismatch between teaching styles and curriculum, and that of the culture and learning styles of students of color, leads to a failure to engage students effectively. Culturally responsive education is a teaching approach that helps students use their cultural backgrounds to aid in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally responsive teachers use culturally relevant instructional material, affirm student cultural identities, and use cultural backgrounds as a knowledge base for learning and academic success. While helping to close the achievement/opportunity gaps, culturally responsive education also helps fight racism and other forms of discrimination, bias, and oppression. [x]

The Solution

Today, schools must fortify students against hateful and oppressive messages and arm them with a deep knowledge and pride in who they are. Schools can do this by adopting culturally responsive education and becoming safe havens from racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and other biases. Research evidences the success of culturally responsive policies, and many schools, districts and communities are developing their own solutions:

- Research shows that having at least one Black teacher between 3rd and 5th grades reduces a Black student's probability of dropping out by 29% [xi]
- Programs that develop positive feelings about Blackness among African American girls contribute to greater academic motivation, curiosity, persistence, and achievement [xii]
- Students who report receiving culturally relevant teaching also report more positive academic outcomes and positive racial identity development [xiii]
- Individuals who receive research-based, high-quality training in bias, power, and privilege, show reduced bias, increased empathy, and more culturally responsive behaviors in the classroom [xiv]
- An elementary school in Alaska increased math achievement for Native American students and all students by connecting math concepts with traditional cultural activities such as basket making, fire building, star navigating, fishing, collecting food, weaving, etc. [xv]

- New York City public schools now require every single school and district employee to attend at least one-day training on implicit bias. Superintendents, principals, and other leadership attend several days of training and receive ongoing support from a central office of CRE experts.
- Cambridge Street Upper School in Massachusetts builds teachers' capacity by holding weekly small group discussions about race. Teachers examine their upbringing and biases, develop comfort and skill talking about race, and build supportive relationships with their peers around the issue [xvi]
- Parents in the Bronx built collaborations with school staff by leading yearly neighborhood tours, to teach about historic community sites, meet local leaders and learn about students' culture
- At Highbridge Green School in the Bronx, parents and teachers co-wrote a culturally responsive unit in which Latinx students read testimonies of immigrant experiences, interviewed their parents, and visited Chinatown to connect with the experiences of other immigrant groups. [xvii]

The Impact

In Tucson, AZ in the early 2000s, all students were offered the opportunity to participate in a Mexican American Studies curriculum that was academically rigorous and aligned with state standards. xviii Research from 2010 showed that participating students had improved test scores in Math, Reading and Writing and were more likely to graduate from high school. Low-income students and academic struggling students showed the largest gains. xix Students were more engaged in literature and history lessons, and more likely to have a positive perception of their ability to succeed in math and science. [xx] in 2010, the San Francisco Unified School District implemented an Ethnic Studies program for ninth graders. A 2016 research study found that over four years, this program produced improvements in academic performance for students who were in jeopardy of failing. Because of the Ethnic Studies program, 9th grade student attendance increased by 21 percentage points, GPA increased by 1.4 grade points, and earned credits increased by 23 credits.

Key points:

The Problem: When teachers are not culturally competent, they may **(1) misinterpret student behavior**. *Teachers may misinterpret behaviors based on cultural norms different*

from their own, leading to misunderstandings and potential disciplinary issues. Teachers may also be **(2) ignoring cultural context.** *Failing to incorporate culturally relevant examples or teaching methods can make learning inaccessible for learners from diverse backgrounds.* **(3) Stereotyping and bias may also occur from teachers.** *Unconscious biases can manifest in teaching practices, potentially favoring certain learners over others.* **(4) Teachers who are not culturally competent often have difficulty building relationships.** *A lack of cultural awareness can hinder the ability to build positive relationships with all learners.* **(5) Low expectations.** *Unconscious biases can lead to lower expectations for students from certain cultural groups, hindering their academic potential.* **(6) Lack of student connection.** *Difficulty building rapport with students from different cultures, leading to a disconnect in the learning process.* **(7) Alienating families.** *Difficulty communicating effectively with parents from diverse backgrounds, hindering family engagement in education.* **In addition, teachers tend to often alienate learners from diverse backgrounds (other than their own) or from marginalized groups.** *When this occurs, learners might feel excluded or not seen when their cultural identity is not acknowledged or respected in the classroom.*

The detrimental effects of alienation from school are well illustrated by research on school dropout rates. There is broad acceptance that withdrawal from school is not based on a short-term development but is a result of a continuing process of amotivation and disengagement (e.g., Brown et al., 2003, Calabrese, 1987, Finn, 1989, Hendrix et al., 1990, Legault et al., 2006, Murdock, 1999, Wehlage et al., 1989). Accordingly, "... process models conceptualize dropping out as the final step for students who have become progressively alienated from school" (Murdock, 1999, p. 62). Thus, it is necessary to clarify the time course of alienation from school.

Alienation, however, is not only a powerful precursor of school dropout but serves several maladaptive functions. Taking the individual's perspective, alienated students leave school with multiple negative experiences; including a failed attachment to school as an institution of learning and education, and lack of further academic qualification (e.g., Ekstrom et al., 1986, Frey et al., 2009, Tarquin and Cook-Cottone, 2008, Wehlage et al., 1989)

Impact of culturally incompetent teaching: (1) Lower academic achievement. *Students may struggle to perform well in a classroom where their cultural experiences are not acknowledged or valued.* **(2) Increased dropout rates.** *Students may feel disconnected from school and be more likely to drop out.* **(3) Negative self-esteem.** *Students may feel marginalized and develop a negative self-image due to lack of representation in the curriculum.* **(4) Social and emotional issues.** *Difficulty managing classroom dynamics due to misunderstandings and cultural conflicts.*

Impact of culturally competent teaching: (1) Enhanced student engagement. *Students feel seen, valued, and motivated to participate actively in the learning process.* **(2) Improved academic outcomes.** *Students from diverse backgrounds achieve higher academic success when their cultural experiences are integrated into the curriculum.* **(3)**

Positive classroom climate. *A more inclusive and welcoming environment fosters positive relationships between students and teachers. (4) Cultural awareness development.* *Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for different cultures.*

Benefits of culturally competent teaching: (1) Equity in education. *Ensures all students have equal access to quality education regardless of their cultural background. (2) Social cohesion.* *Promotes understanding and respect between diverse groups in the community. (3) Lifelong learning.* *Develops critical thinking skills and the ability to navigate diverse perspectives.*

Solutions to promote cultural competence in teachers: (1) Professional development. *Provide teachers with ongoing training on culturally responsive pedagogy, including cultural awareness and sensitivity workshops. (2) Diverse curriculum.* *Incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences into the curriculum to reflect the student population. (3) Community engagement.* *Build relationships with families and community members to gain insights into cultural practices and needs. (4) Self-reflection.* *Encourage teachers to critically examine their own biases and cultural assumptions. (5) Collaboration.* *Foster collaboration among teachers to share strategies and best practices for culturally responsive teaching.*

Key takeaway: Culturally competent teachers play a crucial role in creating inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and supported, leading to better educational outcomes for diverse learners.

Review of Challenges to Cultural Competence

[Source: Mental Health Management Group, 2023]

Lack of Awareness:

Teachers may be unaware of their own cultural biases or the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students.

Limited Cultural Knowledge:

Insufficient understanding of specific cultural practices and beliefs can lead to misunderstandings.

Curriculum Bias:

Traditional curricula may not adequately represent the experiences and perspectives of diverse student populations.

Important considerations from research for cultural competence

training to be effective [Source: Cultural Humility vs. Cultural Competence: A Lifelong Journey. Sacred Heart University, 2024]

Cultural humility:

Shifting focus from simply acquiring cultural knowledge to developing a lifelong commitment to learn and respecting cultural differences.

Context-specific training:

Tailoring training content and delivery to the specific cultural context and needs of the target audience.

Ongoing evaluation:

Regularly assessing the impact of training on individuals' cultural competence and adjusting as needed.

Recommendations:

To create culturally competent teachers, key recommendations include: getting to know your students deeply, actively assessing your own biases, building strong relationships with students, adapting teaching practices to diverse cultural backgrounds, incorporating culturally relevant curriculum, and encouraging students to share their cultural experiences within the classroom: essentially, creating a learning environment that values and respects each student's unique cultural identity.

Conclusion

When teachers lack cultural competence, students from diverse backgrounds may feel alienated, disengaged, and misunderstood, leading to decreased academic achievement, lower self-esteem, and potential negative impacts on their overall educational experience due to a lack of connection between their cultural identity and classroom instruction; this can also perpetuate stereotypes and inequities in the learning environment, hindering the progress of marginalized students.

To mitigate these issues, teachers should actively work towards cultural competence by:

- Learning about the cultural backgrounds of their students.
- Utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy and materials.
- Examining their own biases and assumptions.
- Fostering an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives are valued.

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