

The Importance of Acknowledging Cultural Orientation to Guide Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract

Understanding culturally affirmative pedagogical preferences and practices requires a working knowledge of the influences on individual behaviour. Such knowledge extends beyond skin colour, geographical location, birthplace, and socioeconomic status. This article demonstrates the importance of and challenges to remaining flexible when teaching a diverse population. It acknowledges the difficulty of defining culture and of interpreting the characteristics of learners of more progressive nations and dominant cultures. It also examines the possible implications for interpreting behaviour and learning style in the classroom and community. The literature is discussed as it relates to how to include learning preferences from a cultural perspective in instruction. The essay concludes with thoughts about the implications for pedagogical practice of the interweaving of global influences into the classroom culture.

KEY WORDS: *Culture, cultural affirmation, culturally relevant teaching*

Many in society presume that most educators know of the importance of culture and its impact on learning, even if their application of this knowledge is not apparent during instruction. Evidence of this can be seen and heard in the requests and discussions by parents of school-age children who have a range of needs relevant to their culture and social background: e.g., dietary restrictions, prayer or worship requests, and social needs. According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015), the term culture includes the beliefs, thoughts, and customs of a particular society, group, place, or time. Anita Woolfolk (2014) uses a broader definition by including concepts such as attitudes, traditions, and values. She further proposes all of them allow groups to solve problems of living in their environment. Hence, culture and how it is demonstrated and manifests itself through behaviour can vary across and within populations (Marsella 2013).

A 2014 search of a major research database (Educational Resources in Education) yielded 25 terms under the descriptor of culture. These included African-American culture, African culture, American Indian culture, Asian culture, foreign culture, Hispanic-American culture, Islamic culture, Korean culture, middle class culture, popular culture, Spanish culture, student subcultures, and urban culture. All these cultural expressions may be present in the typical classroom at some time or other over the span of many educators' careers. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) highlights the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in her work on culture and teaching African-American children. She describes this practice as an example of good teaching and acknowledges that culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs and simultaneously allow students to maintain some cultural integrity so that they have a desire to learn. Thus, it is important that educators be aware and respectful of the unique cultural practices different groups exhibit, as this can play a major role in whether a teacher "reaches and teaches" or "ignores and disregards" a student. Such student is placed at risk of failure merely by the level of engagement that occurs and the level of interaction with the teacher.

According to one of the school reform models that has demonstrated success in working with culturally diverse student populations, the Capstone Institute's Talent Quest Model (capstoneinstitute.org), all students can learn in demanding settings with high academic expectations when seven recommended principles are considered. These principles include building on assets and focusing on educating the whole student as well as providing multiple pathways to success and an emphasis on continuous improvement. In order to do this effectively, demonstrating some knowledge and understanding of the most meaningful cultural influences on students is essential.

Defining “culture”

Culture matters. It helps to shape and define who a people are and what is important. Definitions of culture cover a wide range of perspectives and have done so for decades. According to Woolfolk (Module 6-5 2014), culture includes the knowledge, skills, rules, traditions, beliefs, and values that guide behaviour in a particular group of people. Everyone is a member of many cultural groups, defined in terms of geographic region, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, social class, and religion, and wide variations may exist within each group.

Even within apparently homogeneous groups, there are classifications beyond culture – such as different behaviours and expectations of people of various skin colours or complexions, economic levels, and social standing – that are not clearly identified when collecting data on various populations (Boykin and Noguero 2011; Ladson-Billings 1994). Such variations within this construct further complicate the ability to clearly define and hence measure culture and its impact accurately. Nevertheless, culture continues to be an essential determinant of human behaviour (Marsella 2013). In 1980, Colleen Moore published research that covered a wide range of definitions of culture. Some of the suggested definitions that Moore adapted from a 1950 paper by Kroeber and Kluckhohn include historical, normative, psychological, and genetic perspectives of this construct. The diversity of perspectives highlights the prolonged difficulty of obtaining a reliable definition of culture, but the root of the term includes both “tillage” and the concept of “raising” (Sheehan 2008).

Cross-cultural equity in education and any other undertaking is an unrealistic and unreasonable challenge from a practical and historical perspective. Definitions of concepts vary across populations, and it is readily accepted by proponents of global equity in education that educational equity and excellence have multiple meanings (William 2006). Hence, creating a linear, one-size fits all notion of equity in a pluralistic, constantly changing society is an unnecessarily tedious task. When teachers know their group and the intimate dynamics of the cultural variations within it, some semblance of equity can be achieved, but the approach may vary across tasks. More recent attempts to produce homogeneous, culturally harmonious systems have failed to produce excellence in education, in part because there is no uniform and culture-free approach to evaluating performance and embracing everyone in all systems.

It is the author's observation that articles on approaches to teaching such as differentiated instruction focus primarily on different learners and learning styles, but frequently ignore the cultural persuasion of students (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education 2008). This can impact the effectiveness of the programme if the teacher is not knowledgeable about the cultural backgrounds of the students within the classroom and the school. Furthermore, promoting culture as an abstract concept causes problems in describing the complex whole and all the finer aspects of the gestalt of this concept (Moore 1980). From a psychological perspective, Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural approach highlights the importance of culture infused with language and its influence on behaviour (Woolfolk 2014). Most ethnic groups have their own social and psycholinguistic nuances and cultural practices that highlight the various microsystems and macro systems within normative practices. Therefore, trying to create an operational definition (a hallmark of a sound research project) requires time and energy that could be better used in focusing on practical, evidence-based strategies for working with ethnically diverse populations. This article focuses on the latter perspective in addressing the wide range of challenges and possibilities in working with a diverse population.

Cultural interpretation of behaviours in the classroom and community

Observing and measuring the learning styles of diverse populations is often tainted by the subjectivity and cultural persuasion of the observer or researcher. Proponents of the concept of WorldView such as Reginald Jones et al. (2004) support the notion that identifying one's own worldview is generally the first step in embracing and respecting the diversity of others. Additionally, culture has both external and internal representations. Marsella (2013) describes artifacts, roles, activity, context, and institutions as external representations and values, beliefs, attitudes, patterns of consciousness, and personality styles as internal. Comparisons between orientations and the relevance of important concepts and expectations of various ethnic groups highlight constructs such as affect, social time perspective, linear approaches to instruction as well as learning and even spirituality (Boykin 1994; Gibbons Tankard 2000). Even though research does not consistently support significant gender differences in learning abilities (Bruer 1999), the evidence pointing to cultural differences in learning is a relatively new area of exploration.

Consequently, there are a range of challenges impacting the collection and interpretation of data. This helps to explain the inconsistency in outcomes when working with diverse populations. Other factors such as parental work status, socioeconomic status and location of residence (for instance, urban versus rural) have, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's 2012 PISA report, been proven to have an impact on performance. Even in top performing school systems, the learning styles of various ethnic groups have been noted and documented. For example: "Hong Kong shares Confucian heritage culture with Mainland China, but the strong influence of British colonisation makes its culture and educational system relatively different from that of Mainland China" (OECD 2012). Although the research is limited in Eastern cultures, research databases such as Ebscohost and the ERIC online resources reveal that more emphasis has been placed on the learning styles and preferences of African-American and ethnic minority students living and being educated in the US. Once again, the challenges of this research are apparent, as it is becoming increasingly evident that there is no homogeneous description of African-American due to factors such as socioeconomic status, family background as well as immigrant status and in-group variations, including skin complexion. Another compounding factor is the difference between students from dominant cultures versus those from smaller or less represented cultures. Students from the latter groups tend to question their importance and learn about their culture from parents and family members as opposed to from the school (Jones 2001). Boykin (1994) has recognised this challenge among African-American urban students and describes this as a triple quandary (when students have to manage and negotiate among the expectations of the home, school, and community). It has also been noted that urban students in Eastern communities generally perform better than rural students, but in the US this pattern is reversed (OECD 2012).

However, smaller countries such as Bermuda do not formally record or publish the demographic profiles of the various ethnic groups in the school system. Numerous attempts by the author to secure such information from public sources and Ministry of Education officials resulted in no concrete data and minimal relevant information. Consequently, addressing the cultural nuances of the student population and effectively evaluating growth and improvement as well as differences in learning style cannot be included in a conversation about meeting students' needs. Bermudan practice is not aligned with the practices and focus of more progressive educational systems, which appear to recognise in theory, practice, and research the importance of the cultural variations within the student population (OECD 2012). PISA is a triennially produced document used to measure the effectiveness of educational programmes internationally and identifies similarities, differences, and changes in performance. In developing the assessment tool, considerable effort was made to "achieve cultural and linguistic breadth and balance" (p. 19). The 2012 PISA document provides data that suggest the highest performing school systems tend also to allocate educational resources equitably between advantaged and disadvantaged schools and grant autonomy over curricula and assessments to individual schools. It also provides tracking information related to changes in the state of education across the globe and supports the use of this information to support policy change and improved outcomes.

The behavioural repertoire of students ranges across cultures and varies widely. This is evident in their learning styles in the academic setting. Unfamiliar or unpopular behaviours can be affirmed or rejected based on the reaction of the instructor and possibly other students as well. For some ethnic minorities, this can have a detrimental impact on their performance (NBCDI 2013). Given that the impact of cultural orientation is being embraced by professionals more readily, it is evident that the interpretation and measurement of behaviour can be tainted by the cultural orientation of the observer and consequently impact the outcome or performance of the observed student. Marsella (2013) looked at individual and group preferences and priorities and revealed that it is through socialisation that these are rewarded or punished and, consequently, cultural constructions of reality (behaviour patterns and values) are modified or promoted.

The late Asa Hilliard III, who published numerous articles on culturally affirmative learning and teaching styles, stated that “misunderstanding of cultural behavioural style has been shown to lead to errors in the estimation of a student’s or a cultural group’s intellectual potential, learned abilities or achievement in academic subjects such as ‘reading’ and language abilities” (1992). This has implications for outcomes and student performance at various levels. Students from cultural groups with a high need for affect may be disadvantaged or placed at risk by systems that are less affirming and more linear and rigid in instruction or climate. More recent attempts to improve outcomes and future options for Black boys in particular include former President George Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” initiative, and this objective has remained a priority right up to the current administration of President Barack Obama (APA 2012; Boykin and Noguero 2011). A casual Internet search of the behavioural and learning styles of different ethnic groups indicated that research related to African-American and European students was considerably more abundant than research related to European-American, Bermudian, and Caribbean students. For example, in February 2015 the Education Resources Information Center recorded 15 studies on African-American students and 32 studies on European students, whereas only three were recorded for European-American students, two for Caribbean students, and none for Bermudian students during that period. A further search revealed that since 2011, a total of 2,412 articles were written about African-American students and 1,831 about European students, whereas 188 were about European-American students, 72 about Caribbean students, and two were about Bermudian students. Such inconsistency and unavailability of information suggests that instructors were charged with collecting the information related to the cultural nuances and expectations from their students themselves. This may be a better approach than relying on subjective interpretations of cultural values and behaviours, which may not be reliable indicators. Collecting information related to student preferences, contrived reinforcers, and matters of significance during less formal learning experiences can assist in minimising cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students. Students who select reinforcers that are most important or meaningful to themselves and perform specific behaviours in exchange for “goods” are more willing to perform the expected task, when natural consequences are deferred or perhaps not as appealing. This is aligned with the research related to operant conditioning as described by B.F. Skinner (1982).

A range of research related to the behaviours and cultural practices of learners exists and is summarised in Table 1 below (Boykin 1994; Gay 2000; Griggs and Dunn 1996; Guild 1994; Hui-Michael and Garcia 2009; Jones 2001; Ladson-Billings 1995; Quinton 2013; Tripp 2011; Yale University 1988). Common behavioural characteristics of learners from various cultural groups need to be considered in order to ensure optimal performance and success of different learners.

Table 1: Characteristics of Learners

	Ethnic/cultural group			
	African-American	European-Americans	Asian-American	Latino
Teacher relationship	Affective learner; positive relationship with teacher is critical to success	Views teacher as expert	Highly respects knowledge of teacher, will not disagree	Seeks contact and personal relationship with teacher
Movement level	Strong preference for movement	Prefers routine and less kinesthetic instruction	High level of concentration when working	More hands-on, active learners but generally not high movement expressive
Time perspective	More focus on social time perspective	Very time oriented/conscious	Conforms to rules such as time constraints	Prefers routine and structure
Interaction with peers	Very communal learning style	Independent learning preferred	Prefers indirect and nonverbal communication; minimal body contact preferred	Benefits from group activities and community support
Academic competitive level	Group competition preferred, e.g., team work	Individualised competition; improvement preferred	Individualised: High level of self-discipline, persistence, motivation and self-control	Communal preference for learning and achievement
Orality/ communication	High preference for conversation/ dialogue during instruction	Prefers to work independently in a controlled setting/silence	Nonverbal preference during instruction; possible language barriers in some subgroups	Prefers discussion and modelling of strategies

Common Learning style characteristics

Note: This does not imply that these characteristics are demonstrated by all learners within these ethnic groups.

Teaching in the cultural diverse classroom

Teaching and learning cannot occur when the divide between instructor and student is too great or blurred based on affect, inappropriate expectations, or cultural biases. Accordingly, Quinton (2013) highlighted the importance of teachers recognising culture in order to make students feel valued. However, Quinton noted that in order to accomplish this task, teachers have to confront painful realities about American culture and sometimes their own biases and perspectives. Hilliard III (1992) noted that the most significant feature of discussion of style and learning (as it relates to African-American, Hispanic, and European students) is that it provides the opportunity to raise issues pertaining to general pedagogy that would not otherwise be raised. Even though the initial approach is

generally deficit centred, that is, focuses on what is not working or why these students are traditionally performing lower than their European counterparts (a trend that still exists as students move up the educational ladder), more progressive and affirming approaches are being looked at by research agencies such as the Capstone Institute (which uses a more asset-based perspective). Keeping the spotlight on diverse populations and ensuring that effective and appropriate practices are put in place to instruct and educate ethnically diverse student populations is of benefit to all communities.

Implications and considerations for pedagogical practices

Culture matters but varies in strength and impact based on the learner's context and environment. Additionally, different cultural contexts create different realities (Marsella 2013). This is not a problem when students are respected and their views and values are formally and informally represented in the learning environment. However, penalising students for expressing their cultural variations within the classroom may hinder their ability to perform optimally and disrespects that which may be very important to many ethnically diverse children. Incorporating students' experiences and perspectives when teaching; encouraging the sharing of cultural experiences (for example, during holiday periods) in a manner that is affirming and accepting of differences; providing examples of other perspectives when introducing concepts; having open and written discussions about familiar and less familiar cultural practices; and providing opportunities for students to express themselves in culturally affirming patterns are some practical and easy-to-adopt practices that educators can use when working with a culturally diverse population.

With a closer eye on accountability and outcomes, future directives will need to focus on ethnic and cultural groups and performance in different settings as variables of significance. Collecting clear data that recognise these variables and making the necessary adjustments and accommodations to ensure success and excellence can aid in ensuring optimal achievement for a wide range of students who do not readily embrace mainstream teaching strategies. Also, in a global world where cultures are expected to coexist, instructing students while attempting to minimise the importance of their cultural ethos to their behaviour and performance is unaligned with the global acceptance of expression and learning that exists in progressive school systems. Teaching children in a way that embraces their learning style and cultural nuances is essential in helping them reach their highest level of brilliance within and outside the academic setting.

THE DRUM

Daddy says the world is a drum

Tight and hard;

And I told him, I'm going to beat out

My own rhythm

Nikki Giovanni

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