

Culturally Responsive Teaching—Preacher Style

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“You can’t teach what you don’t know.” That’s what Mrs. Williams said to me as I vented my frustration during my first year of teaching in an inner city school. She was an older, African American woman, tall with a very strong presence. She had appointed herself my *unofficial* mentor. I came in eager, enthusiastic, and ready to change the world. Like so many other young, white, middle class teachers at the time, I was completely unaware of what it took to be an effective teacher in an urban school. I believed that if I knew a variety of instructional strategies and had a behavior plan in place, I would be all right. What I had not yet discovered was the impact that my cultural norms and values would have on my practices. What I hadn’t come to realize was the potentially detrimental implications of my lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity.

. Many urban schools have a majority population of African American students from backgrounds of poverty and a majority population of White middle class teachers. Throughout my career as an educator in urban settings, I’ve seen countless numbers of intelligent, well-educated, and well-intentioned teachers that were unable to reach their students. Although they may have a wealth of knowledge, they still struggle with transferring that knowledge to their students. Even as a new teacher, I was able to recognize that differences in language patterns, values, and culture affected my teaching and my students’ learning. A very defining moment in my teaching career came when I read the book *The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by

Gloria Ladson-Billings. A paradigm shift took place within me, and I was able to fully comprehend what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher.

Mrs. Williams told me that I could come and observe her teaching during my planning period. As I watched her, I was amazed at how well the children listened to her and how engaged every student was. The lesson wasn't anything elaborate. It was a simple class discussion, but the students were all sharing, asking questions, and listening. I noticed that Mrs. Williams' speech was vibrant and animated, and the students seemed very accustomed to it. As I observed, I noted that she used lots of call and response, repetition, alliteration, and variation in pace. She seemed to have a natural talent for taking sophisticated concepts and breaking them down into simple ideas. As the discussion winded down, Mrs. Williams asked the class of first grade students if they thought they could go back to their seats and write a couple of sentences about what they had just discussed. The class enthusiastically assured her that they could. "And you *better* not forget to put your name on your paper!" she said in a joking manner. "Turn to your neighbor and remind them right now." She said. Every child, without hesitation, turned to the person next to him or her and said, "You *better* not forget your name!" in the same joking manner that it had been said to them by the teacher. During a debriefing, I told Mrs. Williams how impressed I was with the way she captivated the students during the discussion. "It's called preacher-style honey." She said to me. She explained that if I was going to teach African American students, I had a professional duty to learn about their cultural norms and behaviors. She informed me that many folks in the African American culture use this type of speech, and that the children are accustomed to it.

The speaking patterns that were viewed as “professional” during my preparation as a teacher were quite different from “preacher-style.” I began to put some informal research into practice with my second grade students. Sometimes, I would make a concentrated effort to use a “preacher-style” approach with the students. I kept a journal of notes during this time, and as I read over these and reflected, I was able to conclude that students responded to it very well. I have continued to use this “preacher-style” approach throughout the years and it has been very effective with my students.

Of course, it takes more than adapting the way that one verbally delivers information to be a culturally responsive teacher. Self-awareness of teachers is crucial if one wishes to incorporate a culturally responsive and relevant practice. In the book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (Published by Teachers Press in 1999), G. Howard says “We need to understand the dynamics of past and present dominance, face how we have been shaped by myths of superiority, and begin to sort out our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors relative to race and other dimensions of human diversity.” There is a pressing need for self-analysis and reflection on the part of teachers. Effective teachers are willing to examine their own beliefs and practices to ensure that they are teaching their students in the most compassionate and meaningful way.

Relationships with parents and students must be built and nurtured in order to have a truly culturally responsive practice. Parents must believe that teachers respect the student’s culture. Teachers concerned with developing a culturally relevant and responsive classroom environment take the time to gain the trust of parents and appreciate the insight that parents have to offer. Culturally aware teachers put great

effort into getting to know their students and families. They understand that, by learning the cultural norms and values of the students, they will be better equipped to present knowledge in a meaningful way. Students learn best when they believe that the teacher cares about them.

Quality teacher preparation programs are beginning to emphasize the importance of reflective activities and dialogue with regard to cultural diversity. Universities are beginning to focus more on incorporating cultural awareness and education into the pre-service teacher curriculum. These types of programs are making a positive impact on teaching practices in urban schools.

The research seems to indicate that children from homes in which the language does not closely correspond to that of the school (including African American dialect) may be at a disadvantage in the learning process. These children may become disengaged from learning. African American children tend to prefer to learn in cooperation with others, as opposed to independently. Teachers must become knowledgeable of the cultures represented in their classrooms and present lessons in a way that reflects communicating and learning that is familiar to the students. For many African American students, the “preacher-style” approach for breaking downing information into simple terms and using vibrant, expressive, interactive modes of conversation seems to be most effective. Children learn about themselves and the worlds around them within the context of culture so we (educators) must understand the culture ourselves in order to adequately teach them.