

NCLB and the Mixed Mechanism of Culture, Curriculum, and Pedagogy

By Marshalita Sims Peterson



Introduction

Most school reform efforts have focused on general strategies aligned with state curriculum standards to improve education for students. These strategies seek to raise student achievement in public schools and narrow the achievement gap. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has brought increased attention to teacher accountability for student achievement. The education reform law is designed to change the culture of America's schools by focusing on four key pillars: expanding local control and flexibility, giving parents more options, teaching students based on what works, and demanding more stringent accountability for results.

The urgent need for excellent education and equitable opportunities for every child draws attention to NCLB. In 2003, the Center on Education and Policy concluded a study of the implementation and effects of NCLB during the second year of the act's existence. The study indicated that states and school districts across the country are taking NCLB seriously and working hard to achieve its goals. The Center on Education and Policy also reported that many school

districts are experiencing difficulty with some of the requirements of NCLB, not because of fear of accountability or rejection of the goals of the act, but rather because some of the requirements are deemed too rigid and not viable in many situations. Additionally, many school districts reported difficulties due to limited funding and staff.

A myriad of problems associated with NCLB have emerged, including the pressure of high-stakes testing, lack of guidance on working with children to help them succeed, and lack of funding to implement support services in meeting the goals of NCLB. The need for funding is indeed significant for accomplishing NCLB's goals. There are areas, however, that don't necessarily require more money. These areas relate to cultural sensitivity, responsive curricula, and better pedagogy.

Regardless of the varied opinions and controversial issues related to NCLB, it is the law, and it is essential that teachers work within the school system to enhance their students' chances of success, improve student achievement, and close achievement gaps. These goals all lead to the classroom and to teachers understanding the connectedness of effec-

tive/engaging instruction, curriculum, and culture. A major objective of NCLB is to ensure that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity or income, have the best teachers possible. With a greater emphasis on accountability and the impact of teacher instructional practices, a well-prepared teacher is vitally important to a child's education.

The highly qualified teacher must understand the significance of the links among culture, curriculum, and pedagogy. This connectedness is often neglected, however, because these three areas intersect at different points according to the different settings and the backgrounds of institutions, students, and teachers. Each institution has its own culture. Each classroom has its own cultural composition. But in general terms, we must invite the interplay among differences by broadening curricular goals rather than narrowing them.

Culture, curriculum, and pedagogy are interconnected. The manifold forces that shape academic settings have been inadequately scrutinized: We must design curricula according to the dictates of individual students and their backgrounds, as well as according to the cultural environments they will eventually inhabit. If we neglect opportunities to create harmony among what we teach, how we teach, and the manifold cultural forces that prevail on both teachers and children, we risk perpetuating social and cultural impasses that beset even the best classrooms. How the teacher constructs knowledge should be linked to effective instruction in the classroom.

Effective teaching comes from understanding not only curriculum and teaching methodologies but also the students. Teachers must be equipped with knowledge about students—in particular, their strategies, their approaches to learning, and their strengths. Without insight into these areas, we risk implementing curricula designed according to standards that are not responsive to a student's culture.

Irvine (1990) recognizes the important link between the potential of teachers to make a difference in the lives of their students and the social and organizational structures of schools as systems. Irvine emphasizes the need for teachers to become familiar with the background of the child through location of self, location of the cultural other, and location of knowledge and best practice.

Location of self refers to teachers gaining an understanding of their own cultural identity and cultural frames of reference. Eliot (1919) states that:

Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are "more critical" than we... (5)

Eliot goes on to emphasize the importance of understanding the "tradition" that influences one's own cultural frames of reference:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance....It involves, in the first place, the historical sense...and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence....This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (5)

Bruner (1996) echoes the importance of understanding the wider significance of culture; culturalism takes as its first premise that education is not an island, but part of the continent of culture. He asks first what function "education" serves in the culture and what role it plays in the lives of those who operate within it. His next question might be why education is situated in the culture as it is, and how this placement reflects the distribution of power, status, and other benefits. The point is that teachers cannot acknowledge the cultural background of the student without gaining some insight into their own cultural identity and cultural frames of reference.

Location of cultural other includes knowledge of the history of the cultural other: understanding the whole child, gaining knowledge of family and community. The location of knowledge is exemplified by what has been called preferred practice. As the curriculum is aligned with standards, so must the implementation of the curriculum be aligned with pedagogy that promotes inquiry, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Culture

Culture is central to learning because it not only shapes the thinking process but also defines modes of communicating and receiving information. It is essential that we examine the effects of cultural forces and how they influence the classroom. While every classroom has its own chemistry, interpersonal dynamics, and climate, there are, indeed, cultural factors implicit in both the content and the presentation of classroom assignments. Forms of pedagogy may either harmonize or conflict with the student's cultural background. Hilliard (1996) contends that teachers often design and implement curricula as if diversity didn't exist. A uniform system for implementing curriculum that is inherently incongruent with a child's cultural background threatens to distance a child from the classroom setting. Hilliard (1987) further contends that "misunderstanding of cultural behavioral style" has been shown to lead to errors in the estimation of a student's or cultural group's intellectual potential (the consequences of which—mislabeling, mis-

placement, and mistreatment of children—are enormous), learned abilities or achievement in academic subjects such as reading, and language abilities.

Culture encompasses curriculum and pedagogy, both of which in turn generate “culture.” For the purposes of this examination, we may speak of culture in relation to curriculum as a mechanism that liberates or inhibits, expands or limits, a child’s efforts to learn and our efforts to teach children. This reversibility of the term has led to some ambiguity when discussing “culture” in general. Culture should never be so narrowly conceived within the context of curricular goals that it applies to one thing. Our interpretations of the term itself may actually have a cultural basis, so that two people from different cultures look at the word itself in different ways. The challenge of the teacher is to unify and embrace such differences in perspective, showing how two such perspectives are not mutually exclusive, while at the same time finding a curriculum and teaching strategy that is responsive to both.

Harmon and Holman (1996) offer the following definition of culture:

In a state of nature, humankind survives by directly struggling with the environment; in time, the elements of that struggle—practices, habits, customs, beliefs, traditions—become institutions, the body of which is known as *culture*. Because *culture* changes from place to place and from time to time, we speak variously of English *culture*, Elizabethan *culture*, Victorian *culture*, working-class *culture*, and so forth. (135–136, italics in original)

This definition is relevant to our discussion because it highlights the temporal or historical implications of the idea of culture and its capricious nature. Culture is a nebulous term, composed of many elements, which could be applied to the American mainstream, African-American culture, contemporary movements, pop culture, or a collectivity of subcultures. The classroom is a laboratory of culture: It both generates culture and is generated by it. Decisions about curriculum are often shaped by competing values within the same culture; when multiple cultures are involved, the decision process becomes even more complex.

Educators, of course, are creatures and creators of culture. One of the aims of education should be to make all students part of the universal knowledge by embracing and elevating diversity, not by devaluing specific cultural backgrounds. Curriculum should transcend any one culture. Yet culture, specifically Western culture, defines the curriculum. Why is education situated in our culture the way it is? How does this placement reflect the distribution of power in our society?

Curriculum

Curriculum development focuses on deliberate and planned learning experiences, but the curriculum should be flexible enough to change as the student progresses. Taba

(1962) outlines curriculum planning as a diagnosis of needs, a formation of objectives, a selection of content, an organization of content, a selection of learning experiences, and an evaluation.

Disciplines serve as the primary source of curriculum content. Knowledge can be added, as there is a continuing process of changing subject matter. This structure of knowledge approach involves phases of knowledge to be taught according to the background of each student. The *human traits/process design* centers around the development of specific human traits. Some identifiable traits incorporated in this design are creativity, initiative, self-confidence, sensitivity to others, communication, leadership, cooperation, planning, observation, and decision making. The *individual needs and interest/activities design* reflects a child-centered curriculum with emphasis placed on independent learning activities. This curriculum design focuses on the needs and interests of the learner with the teacher as guide, and emphasizes student skill development, scientific methodology, and constant interaction between school and home environments. The *social functions/activities curriculum design* is based on societal concerns such as civic responsibility, religion, recreation, natural resources, and community life.

Saylor, Alexander, and Lewis (1981) emphasizes curriculum development centering on knowledge and experience, which are shared with the student. Four basic questions are asked: What kinds of learning opportunities are needed for students? What types of learning experiences will be provided? What knowledge is of most worth at designated educational levels? What are the time and space constraints?

__Bruner (1996) explains how curriculum reflects cultural beliefs as well as social and political values. Curriculum linked to culture focuses on the language of the child, the belief system of the family, values, the educational environment, and relationships. In such ways we strengthen the learning experience by making connections. The teacher “connects” to the student. The curriculum structure/design should encompass the use of a variety of content sources from different disciplines, including research, textbooks, multimedia instructional materials, and participatory activities to facilitate learning. Curriculum content must be accurate, contextualized, and intrinsically motivating, igniting a quest for learning, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy embraces the use of a variety of content sources from different disciplines and the use of student experiences to generate inquiry. For example, something as simple as a short story about a family who has immigrated to the United States and their experiences assimilating into American culture may engage students who come from other countries. This in turn may open up other lines of inquiry that could be instituted as part of the course. A student’s interest, once sparked, will likely improve his or her performance on future assignments. Culturally responsive curriculum design ensures that the curriculum content is accurate, authentic, and intrinsically motivating. Culturally

responsive pedagogy creates a learning environment in which teachers understand how students' knowledge is organized and interrelated.

Gay (2000) identifies some key methods teachers can use to facilitate progress. The student's complete immersion into the daily activities of the classroom is one of the objectives of culturally responsive pedagogy. The methods Gay identifies include getting students personally involved in their own learning using varied formats, providing multiple perspectives and novelty, modeling the learning process, using cooperation and collaboration among students to achieve common learning outcomes, and, finally, learning by doing. All of these methods incorporate different types of skill development (intellectual, social, emotional, moral) in teaching and learning experiences. Gay cites three crucial skills: transferring knowledge from one form or context to another; combining knowledge, concepts, and theory with practice; and reflecting critically on knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and actions.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) states that culturally relevant teaching should be understood as "politically relevant teaching" because the benefits ascribed to segregated schools and teachers by many communities were not due simply to the cultural similarity but, rather, to the understanding of the existence of oppression in their students' lives and their effort to counteract it. She states that cultural similarity and understanding are important but insufficient for teaching students from marginalized groups; "political, historical, social" understanding is needed.

There are fundamental beliefs that provide the foundation for a culturally responsive learning environment. These beliefs also highlight the link among culture, pedagogy, and the curriculum and the significant role of the teacher:

- Culturally responsive educators hold high academic and personal expectations for each child and believe that each child can learn and should be able to develop to the maximum level of his/her potential (Darling-Hammond, 2000).
- Culturally responsive educators promote classroom climates built on social justice, democracy, and equity (Delpit, 1988; Villegas, 1991).
- Culturally responsive educators promote individual empowerment, self-efficacy, positive self-regard, and a belief in societal reform (Banks, 1993).
- Culturally responsive educators value diversity as well as human commonalities (Greene, 1993).
- Culturally responsive educators believe that it is their role and responsibility to provide effective and empowering instruction for each child (Oakes & Lipton, 1999).
- Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

As they gain insight into students' ways of learning, teachers can align curriculum objectives to more innovative and effective instruction. Teachers must engage in a process

of self-assessment to facilitate a "culture of learning" for students and to internalize the linkage between culture, curriculum, and pedagogy. Critical questions that should guide the self-assessment include: Who am I teaching? Are there any special considerations? How might I make this a meaningful activity? In which context should the lesson be framed? How might contextual details be utilized to enhance instruction?

An Example of Linked Instruction: The Diagnostic Essay

In any educational system, culture, curriculum, and pedagogy are integrated into a mixed mechanism in which relations of power and knowledge come into play. The individual student who is "at risk" may be misunderstood in light of the necessity of meeting uniform standards. Children encounter varying challenges, from language barriers to learned behaviors, that may shape their perceptions of the curriculum and classroom environment. Standards should be strengthened in ways that facilitate rather than impede the progress of each student.

Because high-stakes testing is so crucial to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, children at risk of educational failure comprise the fastest growing student population in the United States. Understanding academic failure involves multiple disciplines. We are interested not only in the personality dynamics and learning styles of the student, but also in his or her life situation—what his or her stresses have been and what they are at the present time. Here we are concerned with the student's past and present home, community, academic performance, and plans for the future. Without such information concerning the student's general life situation, any understanding of the reasons for failure may be incomplete, and the planning of effective pedagogical approaches may be severely handicapped.

The diagnostic essay is an effective method to assist the teacher in gaining a better understanding of a student's culture through writing activities. Information in diagnostic essays provides an introduction to the student's world through histories of experiences, biographical sketches of the student/family members, and memorable events. The diagnostic essay should be a creative endeavor where the student's writing gives voice to his or her world. Students may present their diagnostic essays at various developmental stages: emergent writing, beginning writing, and fluent writing. Students who are not yet writing or displaying emergent skills may use drawings, picture stories, and collage profiles. In addition to offering insight into the student's culture, the diagnostic essay serves as an avenue for curriculum design and instruction.

The diagnostic essay enables the teacher to formulate a plan to help each student further develop a voice in his or her writing. The essays represent an authentic exploration of the student's culture; they provide connections to real pieces of a child's world. This type of teaching technique seeks to optimize the harmony and linkages among what is taught,

who is taught, and how they are taught.

It is crucial that we address not only the results of academic failure but also its origins in the cultural, social, and economic infrastructure of the world the student inhabits. Inevitably, this is a task that involves many disciplines and approaches, making the very idea of a single test measurement almost an invitation to fail for some students. The No Child Left Behind Act should ensure that every child has a fair shot at academic success. It implies that nothing is irrevocable when it comes to a child's educational opportunities. Instead of inviting the disadvantaged child to fail by instituting high-stakes testing procedures, we should invite every child to succeed by employing pedagogical techniques that require creativity, insight, and cultural awareness. The diagnostic essay fulfills this goal.

It is a denial of the complexity of the student's life situation to simply evaluate it through the lens of a single instrument. The distortion caused by stresses outside of the classroom—emotional, social, financial, or cultural—may mask the student's true abilities. It is possible for the educator to see through some of these distorting mechanisms or behaviors and consider the deeper causes, many of which may only be temporary. The present system imposes permanent sanctions, such as "academic failure," to problems that are often temporary. The diagnostic essay seeks to reveal the stresses students face and whether these are temporary or long-term issues.

Furthermore, the education we provide each student should be the transfer kind of education, which yields dividends far beyond the immediate present. Some skills, especially in writing, reading, and literature, may manifest themselves in other domains years after they were first taught. The type of education students receive should yield long-term as well as short-term benefits; unfortunately, we are testing only the short-term, immediate gains and with dubious accuracy. The evaluation methods of NCLB must address the long-term needs of students and the concept of transfer education.

Because decisions affected by test scores are so critical, it is imperative to examine aspects of the teaching and learning process in the context of student assessment. The regulatory sanctions of student testing at designated grade levels through NCLB limit the impact and concept of transfer education. One-dimensional tasks of assessment provide samples of performance at one particular point in time and do not allow for long-term competencies, which encompass cultural knowledge and prior experiences. According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive pedagogy is defined as using the cultural knowledge, experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. Student performance cannot be limited to a single measure of assessment; student engagement and culturally responsive pedagogy are facilitated by building on prior knowledge and transferring knowledge and skills to new contexts (Amrein &

Berliner, 2002).

Conclusion: From "At-Risk" to "At-Promise"

If teachers incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy, an awareness of culture, and a more inclusive curriculum, students can move from "at-risk" to "at-promise." The diagnostic essay is one tool for reaching this goal, but it is one that can be incorporated within the fiscal and other constraints of NCLB.

A shift from "at-risk" to "at-promise" involves creating a safe and supportive learning environment, which depends on the implementation of an engaging curriculum. This shift also requires building supportive relationships, creating opportunities for participation, and encouraging collaboration and service.

Darling-Hammond (2000) observes that the challenge of the twenty-first century is creating schools that ensure for all students in all communities a genuine right to learn. The paradigm shift calls for two key elements: to teach for understanding and to teach for diversity. To teach for understanding means teaching all students to understand ideas deeply and perform proficiently. To teach for diversity requires one to teach in ways that help different kinds of learners find productive paths to knowledge. Both teaching for understanding and teaching for diversity are connected to understanding how children learn, which is linked to the culture of the child.

Teachers should be encouraged to design curriculum around students. For example, perceptive reading assignments might include texts from writers of various cultures; students should be allowed to select stories or essays that are relevant to their own experience. Anthologies that incorporate writers of diverse origins might be used to introduce students to new cultures and engage students who want to read about experiences relevant to their own cultural backgrounds. If teachers assign diagnostic essays early in the semester in an effort to ascertain details about each student's background, hobbies, interests, struggles, and so forth, they are more likely to develop a culturally responsive curriculum. Nieto (1996) asserts that schools must take a serious look at the curriculum, pedagogy, retention and tracking policies, testing, hiring practices, and all the other policies and practices that create a climate either empowering or alienating for those who work and learn there. Teachers must feel empowered in order to empower and inspire their students. Schools have the capacity to cultivate a synergy among the cultures and teaching approaches and learning styles of the students. At a time of greater demands and fewer resources, schools and teachers must harmonize culture, curriculum, and pedagogy to make each classroom a vehicle for growth, opportunity, and the cultivation of every child.

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