ENHANCING CORE READING PROGRAMS WITH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

Katie Toppel

Teachers implementing core reading programs can enhance instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students by mindfully using cooperative learning and engagement strategies to respect students’ cultural learning and communication styles.

In 2009, four years into my teaching career, I moved to Germany to work at an International School for the 2009–2010 school year. My experience living and working in Germany gave me firsthand knowledge of what it feels like to be different and to experience the culture shock of living in a foreign place without the support system of the friends and family I left behind in the U.S.

Although I tried to learn the German language, I struggled a lot. Even after living there for an entire year, using Rosetta Stone language software, and taking German lessons, I could barely string together a sentence. I recall the feeling of intense victory when I called a restaurant and made a reservation; yet, the entire time, my eyes were glued to a script that I had created with my German teacher indicating what the person on the other end of the phone would likely ask me and what I should say in return. I know that I am

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an intelligent person, yet I continuously felt stupid when I didn’t understand the words being spoken to me and around me.

When I switched roles from a classroom assistant to a K–12 special education teacher a few months into the school year, I recall hearing that one of the teachers had complained that an American had been chosen for the job. Being ostracized due to my nationality gave me insight into what it feels like to be treated negatively because I was different. My experiences in Germany helped me understand what a lot of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families go through in the U.S. when they enter school systems that don’t reflect their cultural values and don’t use their native languages. Fueled by my interest in culture after teaching in the very multicultural environment of an International School, I began participating in extensive professional development focused on equity in education when I returned to the U.S. in 2010 so that I could better prepare myself as a culturally responsive and more equitable educator.

**CARE Training**

In 2011, all of the kindergarten teachers from my school in Oregon attended a series of Collaborative Action Research for Equity (CARE) trainings presented by the Pacific Educational Group (PEG). The training consisted of four full-day sessions as well as interim assignments that participating teachers conducted at their school sites with their fellow CARE team members. We began with selecting three to five students of color (terminology used by PEG) who were struggling with some aspect of school, such as academics, classroom participation, motivation, engagement, or attendance, to serve as “focal students.” We then collected “below-the-line” information about those focal students in order to get to know them better, took notes on what engagement looked like for each of those students, and finally created a series of culturally responsive CARE lessons geared toward better engaging the selected focal students. We explicitly focused on building relationships with our focal students in order to help them achieve school success, and we specifically planned lessons with them in mind.

**Culturally Responsive Instruction**

In addition to participating in the series of CARE trainings, I found great inspiration in the work of Geneva Gay on culturally responsive instruction. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive instruction as “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Table summarizes the components of curriculum and instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students that Gay identifies.

As I started to read books and literature about culturally responsive instruction, I discovered three recurring themes pertaining particularly to culturally responsive reading instruction: (1) culturally appropriate texts, (2) engaging students’ voices, and (3) incorporating students’ funds of knowledge (Bell & Clark, 1998; Hefflin, 2002; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Morrison, Robinson, & Gregory Rose, 2008; Powell, 1997; Toppel, 2013). The phrase “funds of knowledge” refers to the knowledge students acquire from their family and cultural background (Lopez, 2006). When given freedom over the creation of curriculum and implementation, teachers have more latitude to include these elements in their reading programs; yet many contemporary teachers, like myself, use prepackaged commercial reading programs. Weakland (2014) notes that approximately 75% of districts choose to use one of the various publisher-created reading programs.

**Pause and Ponder**

- What do you know about the lives of your culturally and linguistically diverse students outside of school?
- What steps do you take to get to know your culturally and linguistically diverse students?
- Does what you know about your culturally and linguistically diverse students come from general information about their cultural/ethnic affiliations or directly from them/their families?
- What do you think engagement looks like?
  Do you think all students show engagement in the same ways?
“Components of culturally responsive instruction can be addressed within practices many teachers already use while implementing core reading programs.”

Despite my interest in crafting instruction that incorporates the components of cultural responsiveness, I struggled to see how to fit some of these elements into the already existing reading program that I was using. I questioned how I could incorporate culturally appropriate texts, given that my core reading program already included texts that were particularly chosen to address the weekly theme and comprehension strategies. Even if I could locate texts that represented particular cultural groups, how could I be sure that I wasn’t perpetuating generalizations or stereotypes about cultures that do not apply to my particular students and their families? I also wondered how I could ensure that all of my focal students felt connected to each weekly theme by drawing from, and incorporating, each child’s funds of knowledge. I started to question whether or not culturally responsive instructional practices could coincide with the implementation of a core reading program.

Feeling as though culturally responsive reading instruction was better suited to constructivist environments in which teachers have a high degree of control of curriculum creation and implementation, I returned to Gay’s (2010) four components of culturally responsive instruction to see how those elements might work in conjunction with the use of a commercial core reading program. Over the past few years, I have worked hard to figure out how to enhance the core reading program I use with Gay’s elements of culturally responsive instruction. After many discussions with and observations of my CARE colleagues, I ultimately realized that Gay’s components of culturally responsive instruction can be addressed within practices many teachers already use while implementing core reading programs (i.e., demonstrating care for students, incorporating opportunities for student collaboration, and strategically using instructional techniques to elicit better engagement).

Teachers who use commercial core reading programs may not have the flexibility to create reading units entirely from scratch that reflect students’ lived experiences and cultural affiliations; however, the use of such programs is certainly not a barrier to cultural responsiveness. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with specific examples from myself and from my colleagues that illustrate how cultural responsiveness can be achieved when we demonstrate care, incorporate student collaboration, and carefully use engagement strategies in conjunction with our core reading program.

Caring for Students

In my opinion, the most significant aspect of being a culturally responsive educator is building relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly students whose backgrounds differ from that of the teacher. Rather than viewing differences as deficits to be overcome by students representing non-dominant languages and cultures, we need to foster relationships with those students in order to achieve a “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012) that supports the value of a multilingual and multicultural student population. Once teachers have invested time in getting to know their students and obtaining that below-the-line information, they can more effectively use student collaboration as well as strategies to increase engagement in ways that are culturally responsive.

Gay (2010) refers to the act of culturally responsive caring as caring for students instead of about them. She encourages teachers to go beyond simply feeling concern for students and calls us to become actively engaged in creating positive outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Culturally responsive caring begins with building relationships as an avenue to better understand students. Teachers can then place students at the center of learning by using students’ interests and strengths as opportunities for academic success. Culturally responsive caring shares common ground with Noddings’s (1992) ethic of caring because they both call teachers to thoroughly understand students’ perspectives and experiences. Culturally responsive caring, however, carries a distinct challenge in that teachers must try to understand the perspectives of an increasingly diverse population of students whose lived experiences may differ greatly from their own.

Teachers can use a variety of strategies for collecting below-the-line information: home visits, talking with students’ parents, observing students in various school settings, talking with students in both structured and non-structured conversations, arranging for students to have conversations with staff members in their native language if possible, and using students’ narrative experiences and cultural affiliations; however, the use of such programs is certainly not a barrier to cultural responsiveness.

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writing pieces as a source of information, for example. Teachers can make it a habit to check in with their focal students more often, as illustrated in Figure 1, in order to make personal connections and to learn about what their students do outside of school and what their interests are. The information gathered about focal students can help teachers come up with ideas for meaningfully making adjustments to, or enhancing, the core reading program in order to better engage those particular students. By making concerted efforts to connect with focal students, teachers can better understand how their linguistic and cultural influences affect how they learn and communicate in the classroom. Teachers can then use the appropriate “teaching chops,” or the masterful use of appropriate techniques (Weakland, 2014, “teaching chops,” or the masterful use of appropriate techniques (Weakland, 2014, p. 21) for those students.

One of my favorite ways to collect information about my students is having each family create a personal alphabet that includes one word for each letter of the alphabet that has meaning to their child (Toppel, 2012). Since we spend a lot of time in kindergarten learning letters and their corresponding sounds, I like to ensure that students are hearing words they truly connect with, rather than simply hearing the words that are included in the phonics and phonemic awareness exercises in the core reading program. I send a template home to families at the beginning of the year, and they return their personal alphabets with the names of family members, special friends, relatives, and pets, as well as favorite foods, favorite activities, places they’ve visited, games or toys they like, and other things that are significant in their lives. I allow my families to include words from their native languages if they wish. Figure 2 shows an example of a personal alphabet that uses words in both Spanish and English. Each week, as I introduce the letter of the week, I also read the word from each child’s personal alphabet that corresponds with that letter and sound. Children are always delighted to hear their words, and it’s fun to recognize things that students have in common as well as unique words that families contribute to our lessons. This simple activity contributes to a sense of connectedness and community in the classroom and also results in increased engagement because students are excited to hear their names and their words.

Last year, one of my Pacific Islander students was very quiet in the classroom. Despite my efforts at trying to ask him questions about himself and find out more about him, I was not successful in getting a lot of information from him. Yet, when I read his personal alphabet, I discovered his interest in professional wrestling, his love of sushi (something we had in common!), that he liked to go fishing with his grandpa, and that he played both the piano and the drums. Once I knew these things about him, I could use them as conversation starters to help him develop the vocabulary to talk more about his interests. If any of these topics were included in our reading texts, I could easily draw him in by mentioning that I remembered his interest in the topic of discussion or asking him to share something he knows about it.

Another very effective way to gather information about focal students is through peer observations. As part of the CARE process, we were asked to visit each other’s classrooms and observe the other members of our team during instruction. The purpose of the observation was not to evaluate the teachers’ instruction but rather to take detailed notes on the teachers’ focal students. We took notes about when focal students were and were not engaged, students’ body language, students’ interactions with the teacher and other students, and students’ participation. In discussing our notes with each other, we realized that the observing teachers were able to pick up on a lot of things that the instructing teacher was not aware of. It is quite challenging to teach and also thoroughly observe students in order to determine how they react to instruction. Having information from our CARE team members really helped us to get a detailed picture of which activities and instructional techniques were most effective for our focal students and to understand how our focal students learn on a deeper level than we could ascertain by watching while we taught. Many students, particularly young students, may not be able to vocalize—or may not even be aware of—how their culture affects their learning and communication styles. Consequently, peer observations gave
us pertinent information about our focal students that we were not able to get simply through our conversations with these students.

It can be said that teachers should make efforts to demonstrate care and learn about all of their students, not just their culturally and linguistically diverse students. However, I am addressing the achievement gap that exists between various student groups in which many culturally and linguistically diverse students are at the lower end of the performance scale (Howard, 2010). Therefore, demonstrating culturally responsive care for our students at the lower end of the performance scale is of upmost importance in order to make instructional adjustments specifically for their benefit. Demonstrating care is the key element in culturally responsive instruction because it is the means by which teachers can gather the information used to modify their instruction and elicit better engagement from their focal students.

**Student Collaboration**

Cooperative learning is considered one of the dominant instructional practices throughout the world because of its applicability to all subjects and all age levels (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Research affirms that student achievement drastically improves when students have opportunities to collaborate (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Kagan, 2010; Slavin, 1991). Cooperative learning techniques are typically part of any teacher’s toolbox, but when teachers plan for activities that require students to collaborate, they may not take into consideration how students’ cultural affiliations influence their learning styles as well as how they tend to communicate.

Cultural congruity in teaching and learning reflects the need for teachers to understand that students’ cultural identities inherently influence how they learn and process information (Gay, 2010). Additionally, culture strongly influences communication styles and how people convey understanding to others. It is imperative that we do not dismiss students as being uneducated, illiterate, or undignified simply because the way they communicate is not standard (Gay, 2010).

Teachers can carefully use cooperative learning strategies to achieve cultural congruity in teaching and learning as well as culturally responsive communication in their classrooms. Furthermore, cooperative learning engages student voices because students have opportunities to share ideas and talk to one another, which helps them feel validated as important members of the learning community. Gay (2010) notes that cooperative learning can be particularly effective in educating marginalized Latino, Native American, African American, and Asian American students because these cultures prioritize human connectedness and collaborative problem solving. Cooperative learning may also appeal to students who don’t feel comfortable speaking in open classroom discussions, such as students from certain Asian American cultures that encourage docility and restraint from expressing thoughts and feelings directly (Gay, 2010). When students respond to prompts or questions in small groups or in pairs, they may experience less anxiety or feel less pressure because their responses are more private.

Partner sharing, often referred to as “turn and talk,” is a great way to allow for variations in how students from different cultural groups prefer to communicate. Having students respond in pairs has many advantages over the traditional response method, in which the teacher calls on one child at a time to answer, because all students are able to contribute their perspectives, share ideas, and use language simultaneously in their preferred ways. It can be helpful to assign specific partners so students acquiring English can become comfortable sharing ideas with a particular classmate. Additionally, once assigned partners are established and partner routines are in place, teachers can easily ask students to turn and talk during read-alouds and stories in order to respond to texts, answer comprehension questions, or make predictions. Providing students with sentence frames and sentence starters to use when collaborating with partners is a helpful way to ensure that students acquiring English are utilizing academic terms and vocabulary when they speak. Partner sharing also calls for active participation among students and elicits language and communication...
from all students as opposed to just a few. Providing students opportunities to actively participate in challenging ways, asking students to respond to lessons by communicating with one another, and eliciting high-quality responses were listed on the motivational framework for culturally relevant teaching we used in CARE training as strategies to enhance meaning and establish inclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Kagan and Kagan (2009) published a great resource describing numerous structures for cooperative learning, some of which call for more spontaneous pairing and movement, such as Mix-Pair-Share and StandUp-HandUp-PairUp. Students may enjoy these structures because they are afforded more choice in who they partner with.

One of my colleagues, Linda (pseudonym), described one of her activities as a mixer with letters and sounds, where, instead of just using flash cards for rote practice, she handed out letter cards to the children and they had to partner up with another child, say the sound on their card, listen to their partner, and then switch cards and go find another partner. This activity is often referred to as a “tea party” because it calls for lots of active engagement and socialization among students. It is also quite similar to Kagan and Kagan’s Quiz-Quiz-Trade. Linda liked how students got to teach and learn from peers during this activity. She explained that the children were given the answer in advance if they needed it, then repeated it to someone else, which was another layer of practice. Providing students with “safety nets,” or built-in support, as Linda’s activity demonstrates, was also listed as a strategy on the motivational framework for culturally relevant teaching we used in CARE training to enhance meaning for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Linda’s students loved the activity because they really enjoyed working collaboratively, having the freedom to choose partners and helping each other learn. This type of activity could easily be used for practicing letter naming, letter sounds, vocabulary words, and sight words or for sharing ideas in response to texts read.

Interestingly, Brenda (pseudonym), another kindergarten teacher on my team, tried the same mixer activity that Linda had done and found that her focal students were not at all engaged. When she received feedback from our CARE team, who had observed her lesson, she learned that her focal students slowly walked around the periphery of the group but did not partner up with other students and therefore were not practicing their letter sounds. Brenda realized that her students lacked the comfort level to meaningfully participate in such an interactive activity. She decided to take a step back and first explicitly teach her students how to work in pairs by assigning each student a particular partner in order to get them accustomed to talking with one specific child in the class. Once she had provided her students plenty of practice at partnering repeatedly with a specific classmate, her focal students were less timid about participating in the mixer activity, where they then partnered up with many different classmates.

The difference between how the mixer game activity worked for Linda and for Brenda is a great example of why teachers need to attend to their students’ cultural learning and language styles. Although both teachers started with the same activity, Brenda used what she discovered about her particular students to adjust the cooperative learning activity so that it was better suited to the needs of her particular focal students. Although cooperative learning strategies are meant to be highly engaging for all students, it is important for teachers to be familiar with how their culturally and linguistically diverse students respond when placed in various collaborative situations. Some students, particularly students who are learning English, will benefit from language supports such as sentence starters or sentence frames in order to experience success in a partnership or in other cooperative learning structures. Familiarity with focal students’ language levels, comfort levels, and personalities can help teachers know the proper level of scaffolding or support to provide for students during cooperative learning activities.

Student Engagement

Ethnic and cultural diversity in curriculum content aims to empower ethnically diverse students by making content knowledge accessible to them by connecting it to their lives and experiences outside of school (Gay, 2010). In my opinion, this is the most challenging component of culturally responsive instruction to use in conjunction with prescribed curricula, yet Gay emphasizes that it is the most important and necessary component. Because teachers may not have the flexibility to modify the actual content, such as the themes and stories that are contained in core reading programs, my focus is on how

“Empower ethnically and culturally diverse students by making content knowledge accessible to them by connecting it to their lives and experiences outside of school.”
teachers can change lesson delivery to elicit better engagement from culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Teachers can try different strategies in order to make instruction relevant to their focal students, to make instruction more appealing to their students, and to help those students connect to the content and instruction. Gay suggests that a dramatic performance style of teaching, as well as using music and movement in learning, are particularly effective for African American students. Using music and movement capitalizes on integrating students’ experiences and interests into the development of course content, which was listed on the motivational framework for culturally relevant teaching as a strategy for helping culturally and linguistically diverse students develop a positive attitude. The use of dramatization, music, and movement doesn’t explicitly incorporate students’ funds of knowledge; however, it does provide teachers the opportunity to enhance core reading programs with some features of ethnic and cultural diversity.

When conducting the read-alouds that are included in core reading programs, teachers can practice their acting skills by dramatizing characters, fluctuating voice volume, and incorporating props or costumes to make stories more comprehensible and engaging. Teachers can also have students chime in for repetitive lines, repeat certain words or phrases, or engage in call and response. Roser, Martinez, and Moore (2013) identify five forms of drama (mime, choral response, tableaux, Readers Theater, and story reenactments) that lead to better story comprehension, help students understand the perspectives of others, and foster critical thinking. Without changing any of the story content, teachers can enhance the learning experience for culturally and linguistically diverse students by teaching in ways these students learn in their communities. Dramatization can also be used in conjunction with vocabulary concepts to help students remember word definitions.

Another fun way to engage students is by incorporating rhythmic patterns, music, and movement into instruction (Gay, 2010). Teachers can create songs or chants to pair with instruction, emphasize the cadence of rhyming stories, or have students physically participate in stories by copying certain movements or actions that go along with the story events.

My CARE colleagues and I use music and movement daily in our reading instruction. We use sight word songs to help students learn and remember all the sight words in our core reading program. In addition to using flash cards and simply pointing to words on our word wall as we rehearse them, we sing and dance along to songs that reinforce the word spellings through rhythm and memorable lyrics. Students also have access to a playlist of sight word songs on their iPads so they can enjoy the music and practice their sight words while they work. During writing time, we can always hear songs being whispered (or sometimes sung loud and proud!) as students groove along to the tunes they clearly remember and correctly spell the sight words in their work. When students ask for help, I can typically hum the tune of our sight word song and their eyes light up as they remember both the song and how to spell the word.

Monica (pseudonym) uses music to motivate her focal students by first asking them what radio or Internet radio stations they listen to, then making it a habit to tune into those stations to familiarize herself with popular songs. She spends time creating songs and chants that incorporate concepts she teaches to the tune of her students’ favorite songs. The addition of music makes a big difference in her students’ motivation because they are thrilled when the stuff that is part of their lives outside of school is also academic. Monica loves to begin class by reviewing concepts through quick songs, and she knows that students are better able to remember information when she puts it into a song or chant.

It can often be challenging for students to sit quietly and still while listening to stories and attending to reading instruction for long periods of time. Providing students with opportunities to participate in stories or lessons through movement can be extremely motivating and engaging. Figure 3 shows students using their
arms to portray the movement of the large crane pictured in the book being read. I also incorporate movement into phonics practice by having students reach in the air, touch their shoulders, then touch their feet respectively as we say the name, sound, and object pictured for each alphabet card on the wall. In the past, my CARE colleagues and I have also used an alphabet chant to reinforce letter names and sounds as a daily component of our core reading instruction.

**Final Thoughts**

I think one of the most challenging and frustrating things about culturally responsive instruction is that there is not a guidebook or a comprehensive training that prepares teachers to be culturally responsive. The term *culturally responsive* itself implies a responsiveness to specific individuals; therefore, it cannot be generalized or prescribed. In order to be culturally responsive, educators must invest the time to study their culturally and linguistically diverse students in order to better equip themselves to implement practices specifically geared toward engaging those particular students. Often, cultural responsiveness is misconstrued as an additive pedagogy in which teachers incorporate units on how people celebrate holidays around the world or traditional foods and clothing from various cultures. Cultural responsiveness is actually a much deeper introspection of instructional practices in order to ensure that teachers are not simply teaching content but teaching students in ways that respect, promote, and incorporate diverse ways of thinking, learning, and communicating.

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