

Culturally Appropriate Education

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My experience, or lack thereof, with culturally appropriate curriculum as a student has influenced my own teaching philosophy and approach. A culturally appropriate education, as outlined by Singh (2011), “melds instruction to better fit the expectations and cultural patterns of the group being served. The group’s language, culture, and its worldview are built into the routines, curriculum, and structure of the school” (p. 14). Based on this definition, I would argue that I did not have a culturally appropriate education

growing up. For the most part, I had excellent teachers who did not allow me to use negative social expectations as an excuse for failure; frankly, if it wasn’t for the dedication of a few, I would not be writing this paper right now. Although I am academically successful, I wish my culture had been incorporated and celebrated throughout my studies. I went through the various stages of ethnic minority identity development and naturally spent time in the “I don’t trust white people” stage. (That’s not the technical term of the stage, but for a while I was consumed by discovering my heritage and purposely sought connections with other Latina students.) Eventually, I realized that I could be Mexican-American; I could maintain relationships with people of all cultures and that would be okay.

Maintaining diverse relationships didn’t detract from my identity as Mexican or as American. If anything, diverse relationships have shaped me for the better. Now, as a teacher, I

hope to share the same view with my own students.

I see my students’ cultural pride and conflict. They’re proud to be Mexican; they don’t want to relinquish their Spanish or culture-based values and traditions. They’re ashamed to be Mexican; no one wants to stick out for being *too* Mexican and risk being asked for documents they do not possess. In the classroom, this conflict can spread from internal to external because as Singh (2011) points out, “conflict between classroom culture and home culture may make it difficult for children to participate in class or force children to deny their family and heritage in order to succeed in a culturally alien school” (p.13). This cultural conflict adds stress to a student and could even impact whether or not he or she finishes high school. As a minority teacher and member of my students’ culture, I feel a sense of obligation to use our culture in everyday teaching and curriculum. In my English Language Learner (ELL) classes, for example, I urge newcomers to participate in Spanish



then I even encourage Spanglish. Before I know it, pre-emergent students are initiating conversations, reading out loud, and submitting written work in English. In American Literature, I try to keep a diverse syllabus of texts. Admittedly, this can be hard with the pressures of high-stakes testing and limited resources, but I know that when I am passionate about a piece, they are also more invested in their own learning. Ultimately, student investment translates to student success—including success on standardized tests. Providing my students with a culturally appropriate education is one of my top priorities.

It is important to expose students to a culturally appropriate education for a variety of reasons. Singh (2011) highlights that a culturally responsive education is able to liberate the students from the teaching that a “single version of ‘truth’ is total and permanent” (p. 17). Students grow up being taught, whether explicitly or indirectly, that the mainstream culture is the correct culture and even the only culture. Consequently, this makes teaching

one sided and one dimensional; it fails to acknowledge the experiences and contributions of all cultures involved. In my opinion, the most important result of a culturally appropriate education is empowerment. It is through empowerment that students develop “academic competence, self-efficacy, and personal initiative” (Singh, 2011, p. 17). Academic competence leads to success after high school. Self-efficacy leads to positive self-image and overall well-being. Personal initiative is marked by perseverance and grit. When one considers the obstacles minority and low-income students are battling, empowerment is what will break the cycle of stereotypes and submission to failure. Empowerment will also help students develop into effective progressive group leaders that can positively impact our national and global society. ★

Reference

- Singh, N. K. (2011). Culturally appropriate education: Theoretical and practical implications.
- In J. Reyhner, W.S. Gilbert & L. Lockard (eds.), *Honoring our heritage: Culturally appropriate approaches for teaching Indigenous students* (pp. 11-42). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

