

## Teaching Practices Responsive to Cross-Border Education of Learners from Culturally Diverse Settings: A South African Perspective

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### Abstract

*Naturally, the process of teaching ought to be a reciprocal interaction between the one who teaches and the one who is being taught. Lisa Delpit (1995:183), a native Alaskan educator is credited for saying the following words: 'In order to teach you, I must know you.....I pray for all of us the strength to teach our children what they must learn, the humility and wisdom to learn from them so that we might better teach.' From this view, it follows that while the learning content may not necessarily be informed by the different backgrounds of the learners, the influence of their backgrounds on their learning must be considered. Teachers ought to assimilate the content by using illustrations, facts, and materials from a variety of cultures and groups to demonstrate important concepts in their teaching. They are duty-bound not to be biased against culturally diverse learners in their schools. Their teaching ought to assist learners to cultivate positive dispositions and attitudes toward different ethnic and cultural groups. They ought to use equity pedagogy, to create an empowering school culture and social structure, concentrating on assisting learners from culturally diverse setting. Cross-border education should be a joint-venture between the school, the community and the parents of the learners at the school.*

**Keywords:** Culture, diversity, culturally responsive teaching practice, cross-border education.

### 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, teachers have contemplated on the best methods of matching teaching to the individual features of their learners. Learning about all culture ends up replacing for learning to teach skills using the cultural lenses of diverse groups. Teachers at times make mistakes when trying to implement culturally responsive teaching practices by assuming that because learners belong to a certain ethnic group, they identify with a set of practices that are believed to portray that culture (Hamza and de Hahn, 2012:76-77).

Diversity as a social construct manifests itself in a number of ways in any teaching and learning space and has the potential to affect what is taught, who is taught and how this is taught in a number of ways. The basic assumption of this article is that in the process of teaching cross-border learners, their cultural backgrounds and the manner in which they are being taught needs to be taken into consideration to ensure that what is taught becomes meaningful and the innate potential of these learners is exposed and developed. Political and legal imperatives, shifting demographics, persistent societal inequalities, and workforce imperatives require a focus on diversity. In light of these trends, culturally responsive teaching requires that diversity is respected as an important part of the classroom practice. In culturally responsive classrooms, all students' voices and experiences have opportunities to be heard, and friendship and mentoring relationships are encouraged (Glimps and Ford, 2010:45).

The nomadic lifestyles of the cross-border learners affect not only the social fabric of the communities and their families involved, but also the learning experiences of these children from such families. In the same strength, the economic conditions of the different communities also exert some pressure on the working lives of parents who have to move around with their children in a pursuit for schools, jobs and better living conditions. In the course of this mobile lifestyle, children are caught up in a dilemma of having to cope with different learning cultures some of which may be foreign to their backgrounds.

The writing of this article was prompted by the researchers' experiences in trying to understand how learners from

neighbouring Mozambique with a completely different education system in terms of the language of teaching and learning are taught in South African schools. This article therefore uses the discourse analysis to reflect on the lived experiences of the teachers in dealing with the learning difficulties experienced by cross-border learners. Confronted with these learning difficulties experienced by these learners, teachers started to take into consideration the issue of their teaching methods, reflecting on the challenges they are confronted with in teaching these learners.

Thuraisingam and Singh (2010:92) argue that coming to a new country for further education is often looked upon as an enriching experience, but many learners are often plagued with uncertainty and disorientation in finding their way around the new cultures and of social expectations. At least this is true to some extent for students at tertiary institutions. Similarly, teachers are also caught up in a dilemma of having to create a multiculturally inviting atmosphere to accommodate the new learners. This is not an easy task for the teachers, more especially where they have to deal with the cultural clash that emanates from the language of teaching and learning.

At the core of this article is the view that given the diverse backgrounds of the learners in schools, culturally responsive teaching methods need to be adopted to ensure that the full potential of each learner is tapped and developed and to close the achievement gap between learners of diverse backgrounds and their mainstream peers (Au, 2009:179). A discourse analysis of the existing scholarly views on culturally responsive teaching practices is employed in this article and an attempt is made to formulate realistic rather than artificial instructional strategies to close the achievement gap alluded to above.

## 2. Hypothesising the Notions of Culture, Diversity and Culturally Responsive Teaching Methodologies

It is important at this point of the article to give different perspectives of the concepts of culture, diversity, and culturally responsive teaching approaches. For this purpose, we are going to use the Marxist philosophy of cultural hegemony as a lens to understand the above concepts upon which the entire article is founded. According to this philosophy, cultural hegemony describes the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who manipulate the culture of the society – the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores – so that their ruling class worldview becomes the worldview that is imposed and accepted as the cultural norm; as the universally valid dominant ideology that justifies the social, political, and economic status quo as natural, inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class (Bullock and Trombley, 1999).

Taken separately, the word hegemony, derived from Ancient Greek to mean ‘leadership and rule’ refers to the geopolitical method of indirect imperial dominance, with which the *hegemon* (leader state) rules subordinate states by the implied means of power (the threat of intervention) rather than by direct military force – that is, invasion, occupation, or annexation (Hassig, 1994). This notion went through an evolutionary process over the years and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; political scientists gave it a new denotation to mean “dominance” which included the cultural domination by a ruling class, of a socially stratified society. Through this dominance, the ruling class would be able to intellectually dominate the other social classes with an imposed worldview that ideologically justifies the social, political, and economic status quo of the society as if it were a natural and normal, inevitable and perpetual state of affairs that always has been so. The latter view of cultural hegemony as cultural domination of one group by another suffices to explain the dominant teaching approaches in our schools. More often, teachers use a ‘one size fits all’ approach to teach all learners, without considering their different backgrounds.

This article argues against a one size fits all approach to teaching in favour of culturally responsive teaching that takes into account the different cultural backgrounds of learners and their different learning abilities. Au (2009:179), a literacy scholar, views culturally responsive teaching as a construct that resides in a pluralist view of society, recognizing that the cultures of different ethnic groups provide content worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. The challenge with this view is that the dominant class designs the curriculum and lays down the approaches to its delivery. This leaves the teachers with no alternative but to deliver the curriculum as it is and this has a negative effect on learner and school success, which is the core of culturally responsive instruction for learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For the purpose of this article, we use the works of Ladson-Billings (1994), Hollins (1996) and Nieto (2000) and Gay (2002) to define what culturally responsive teaching practices are. Ladson-Billings (1994) defines this concept as an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The use of cultural referents during the teaching process is used as a vehicle to bridge and explain the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the cultures of the non-dominant group of learners. In support of Ladson –Billings’ view above, Hollins (1996) indicates that the link between culture and classroom instruction is derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside of school. Nieto (2000)

concur with Hollins' view by indicating that culturally responsive teaching practices recognize, respect and use learners' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments and this view is supported by Gay (2002:106) who is credited for indicating that culturally responsive teaching uses the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them effectively.

According to Tylor-Gibson, cited by Johnson (2000), in our multicultural societies, culturally responsive teaching reflects democracy in its highest level. It means doing whatever it takes to ensure that every child is achieving and ever moving toward realizing their potential. The notion of culture carries several definitions, connotations and denotative meanings. For the purpose of this article, Ebony Johnson's definition will be adopted. Johnson (2000) defines culture as shared perceptions and norms. It reflects the way people give priorities to goals, how they behave in different situations, and how they cope with their world and one another. People experience their social environment through their culture. In support of Johnson's view about culture, Maria Wilson-Portunando, cited by Johnson (2000) argues that the increasing diversity in our schools, the ongoing demographic changes across the nation and the movement toward globalization dictate that we develop a more in-depth understanding of culture if we want to bring about true understanding among diverse populations.

### **3. Culturally Responsive Schooling as a Societal Responsibility**

It is a challenging profession when it comes to changing existing attitudes and teaching practices, especially those who have had partial interaction with culturally and linguistically diverse learner populations. However, the obligation lies with teacher training programs. It is critical for teachers to model a dialogue in which other teachers and learners have the opportunity to obtain the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes necessary to engage in dialogue that seeks equity and excellence in culturally responsive teaching (Barnes, 2006:93).

In concert with Tylor-Gibson's view that culturally responsive teaching is a reflection of democracy in its highest level, we argue in this article that the practice of culturally responsive teaching is a societal responsibility. Sleeter (2011:19) contends that culturally responsive teaching pedagogy is not only about teaching, but is also a political endeavour directed toward equity and justice. What this means is that the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices should not aim only at the transfer of knowledge, but also at ensuring that there is recognition of the different backgrounds of learners and their different learning abilities are taken into account.

Gay (2000), in support of the view that culturally responsive teaching is a societal responsibility, contends that culturally responsive teaching practices should be able to validate the values, prior experiences, and cultural knowledge of the learners; to be inclusive, transformative and emancipatory; to build on what the learners previously know; to help learners recognise that there is more than one way of knowing; to encourage them to embrace their different viewpoints and develop a love of learning; and to highlight their strengths, and give them self-confidence to challenge their weaknesses.

Sihem (2013:47) explains societal responsibility as a practise whereby the entire community communicates to the next generation appropriate principles, mores, skills and cultural norms. Societal responsibility is, according to Berman (1990) cited by Sihem (2013:47), a personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet. In his work paper: "Social Responsibility of Teachers," Lexi Sorenson contends that it is a teacher's responsibility to provide a nurturing and welcoming environment for all her students, and to take seriously the position of influence that she is in. In order to exercise their societal responsibility and to ensure that every learning experience fulfils the ideals of democracy such as human rights, equality and equity, social cohesion and community responsibility, teachers need to adopt culturally responsive teaching practices which are responsive to the realisation of education by border-crossing learners from Mozambique. The teaching practices need to provoke discourse in the classroom, the dialogue that embraces the different cultures and learning experiences and abilities of the cross-border learners. Teachers have a duty to ensure that cross-border schooling and learning environment is well-adjusted and also their personal opinions and beliefs do not influence the learning processes in schools.

Teachers are expected to be aware of the fact that we are all cultural beings, with our own beliefs, prejudices, and suppositions about human behaviour. They are obligated to acknowledge the cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences that exist in schools that are culturally diverse. There is a need for teachers teaching cross-border learners to be fair and unbiased. They are expected to strive for "colour-blindness" in their actions. For teachers to be culturally responsive, they need to acquire "cultural content knowledge." They need to learn, for example, about their learners' family backgrounds, their previous educational experiences, their cultural norms for interpersonal relationships, their parents' expectations of discipline, and their opinion about time and space. Cultural information ought not to be used to label or categorise, nor to infer a clear understanding of another's cultural beliefs and world view. Culturally responsive classroom management

requires that teachers understand the ways that schools reflect and perpetuate discriminatory practices of the larger society. Teachers need to be aware how the differences in race, social class, gender, language experience, and sexual orientation are linked to power. Again, teachers need to know that the structure and practices of schools, for example, the unevenly distributed resources, and uniform testing may privilege a certain group of learners while disadvantaging or isolating cross-border learners (Weinstein, Curran and Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003:270).

#### **4. The Role of the School in a Culturally Diverse Schooling Environment**

We explore this discourse by acknowledging the fact that teachers are the major resource in the teaching and learning enterprise and it is through them that the potential of cross-border learners can be realised. There is an abundance of literature that deals with the different roles and responsibilities of teachers towards culturally diverse learners and to a large extent; this literature explores the need for teachers to adopt teaching methods that cater for the different learning aptitudes and upbringings of the individual learners in schools. This part of the article provides a tapestry of ideas and activities which teachers should further explore to ensure that the different learning needs of cross-border learners are addressed and that none of their learners are left behind.

Teachers need to be culturally relevant in order for them to use culturally responsive teaching methods. They need to develop a socio-cultural awareness that includes an understanding that people's thinking; acting and being are shaped by their race/ethnicity, social class, language and gender. For this purpose, teachers will have to go through an in-depth course of professional development that will require time and commitment on their part. Furthermore, teachers need to know and understand the nature of relationships between schools and society, and also acknowledge the many ways in which schools can reproduce social inequalities and the ways in which they can also be sites for transformation and social justice. Developing a socio-cultural awareness in teaching cross-border learners is indeed a far-reaching and life-long exercise that teachers need to work on in their schools.

The attitude of teachers towards learners from culturally diverse backgrounds is important as it is viewed as one of the major variables that shape the level of expectations teachers may hold for cross-border learners. The notion of a 'colour-blind' method to teaching, while great in principle, is flawed. A 'colour-blind' method disregards the history of discrimination and inequity in our society which has placed many ethnic groups and diverse learners in disadvantaged situations. The challenge is that teachers may assume that cross-border learners function as computers that can be rebooted at the flip of a switch and cleared of all of their biases which they have developed in their homes (Culp, 2013:7-8).

Teachers are expected to respect the cultural differences of their learners and affirm this by communicating and developing their cross-cultural learning communities in the schools. Au (2009:180) warns against an method to culturally responsive teaching that duplicates home and community settings in the classroom. Instead, teachers are recommended to think of culturally responsive teaching in terms of hybridity, that is, the creative combination of features from learners' home beliefs with features typical of the classroom and school learning. Teachers can achieve this by focussing on school goals that learners from diverse backgrounds, like cross-border learners, should fulfil to do well in schools and in later life; and provide learners with a relaxed, comprehensible setting that supports them to meet their aims. Gay (2002:20) warns against the ignorance of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and culture of teachers as variables that define good teaching. The recognition of these variables nullifies the saying that "good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere," which repudiates its proponents the ability to realise and embrace that their standards of goodness in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups.

Schools are expected to support culturally responsive teaching practices that will enable cross-border learners to settle well in the South African schooling system. According to Lucas (2000), the success of teachers in dealing with the challenges and teaching of cross-border learners depends on the schools settings and the conditions that schools create to develop and embrace culturally responsive teaching. Schools are expected to provide and support professional development activities that will enable teachers to build the knowledge, skills and dispositions for teaching culturally diverse learners from neighbouring countries. They should also inspire and provide opportunities for teachers to critically evaluate curricular and instructional resources and school policies that contribute to discrimination and unequal access to learning by cross-border learners. Schools need to use their resources to build collaborative partnerships with parents of cross-border learners and their communities.

The notions and actions of schools highlighted above are aimed at ensuring that all learners from different cultural backgrounds and with different learning abilities benefit from receiving schools. In a classroom where culturally responsive teaching practices are used, learners are unlikely to be passive recipients of knowledge. The level of engagement between the learners themselves and their teacher(s) on their respective cultures and experiences has the

potential to turn the entire teaching and learning process into a collaborative exercise where every learner contributes. Villegos and Lucas (2002) indicate that learners should be involved in the construction of their knowledge by allowing them to work collaboratively in small groups of mixed abilities; allowing them to engage in authentic dialogue; and ensuring that they assume increasing accountability for their own learning.

Culturally responsive pedagogy involves three dimensions which aid in creating successful learning settings for different learners, namely: (i) institutional, (ii) personal, and (iii) instructional. The institutional aspect reflects the management and its procedures and principles. The personal aspect refers to the intellectual and emotional developments teachers must engage in to become culturally responsive. The instructional aspect comprises resources, strategies, and activities that form the basis of instruction (Culp, 2013:4). The use of a variety of teaching strategies, overlaid with cultural sensitivity, can foster learning settings that provides meaningfulness and relevancy for all the learners in the class. While contemplating the implementation of instructional styles, culturally responsive teachers need to reflect the cultural situations from which their learners have come. Methods to teaching and learning differ by culture, and when cross-border learners are expected to abandon their initial way of being taught, there may be interference with their intellectual development and achievement. When teachers learn about their learners' cultural upbringings, with its practices, rituals, and shared methods to teaching and learning, they may consider some ways of integrating their teaching methods in their classrooms that will allow opportunities for learners to participate in those different methods, which can support all learners' access to content (Young and Sternod, 2011:5).

## 5. The Aspects of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teachers not only connect class lessons to home, socio-cultural, and school practises, but they create a community of learners with empathy and understanding. They embrace an approach that supports diversity, knowledge and skills that integrate content with culture relevant to individual learners to facilitate learning (Bennett, 2012:382). These teachers constantly study about their learners, plus their individual challenges. They admit that they will at times make blunders in learning about their learners, and they take risks and learn from their mistakes. Sometimes these teachers foster a relentless belief in the potential of various learners. They believe that all learners will learn, given the enactment of effective practices. They are culturally responsive teachers who engage in planning and instruction that are standards-based, challenging, engaging, and relevant to the needs of the learners.

They hold themselves responsible for learner success by inspiring learners and providing appropriate frameworks for learning. They constantly adjust their teaching by altering to complex second-language acquisition and sociocultural, socio-emotional, and socioeconomic factors that impact learners' motivation for learning. They are especially expert at using physical structures, space, and instructional materials that make content and language accessible for learners. They are able to generate a material culture that reflects the experiences of learners and their families. These teachers also engage in respectful and caring classroom management through clear and consistent expectations and practices that build on learners' communicative skills. They incorporate content that reflects students' life experiences, they validate multiple perspectives through curricular materials, and they identify bias in curricular materials and make appropriate adjustments. Culturally responsive teachers differentiate instruction based on personalized, cultural, linguistic, and familial needs. They identify bias in pedagogical practices and use instructional strategies that build on students' cultural ways of knowing.

### 5.1 Demonstrate passion and urgency.

Culturally responsive teachers are passionate and possess a sense of urgency. They demonstrate their own passion for lifelong learning and they communicate a sense of urgency in accelerating educational equity. Culturally responsive teachers demonstrate commitment and skill in making content relevant to the interests, strengths, and needs of diverse learners, thereby engaging students to be passionate about their own learning and develop a sense of urgency in terms of their own success.

### 5.2 Engage in systematic reflection.

Culturally responsive teachers engage in continuous and systematic reflection by assessing their own practice when students are learning and not learning. They use a myriad of data to tell the story of achievement for their students and they identify and seek out missing data that could inform student progress. Culturally responsive teachers recognize that while use of data is good teaching practice in any context, it is imperative for identifying the strengths and needs of

diverse learners and setting challenging and attainable learning targets. In addition, culturally responsive teachers anticipate, respond to, and reflect on cues of struggling students regarding language development, content knowledge, sociocultural adjustment, and socio-emotional needs

### 5.3 *Develop critical consciousness.*

Culturally responsive teachers develop critical consciousness by questioning their unexamined assumptions while also creating opportunities for students to question their unexamined assumptions. They integrate content that challenges students to articulate their beliefs about diversity and question the impact of those beliefs on others. They also facilitate structured opportunities for parents, guardians, families, and communities to co-construct knowledge.

### 5.4 *Access resources for learning.*

Culturally responsive teachers actively pursue material resources that support students' learning inside and outside of school. They secure necessary resources from families, communities, businesses, or foundations to support student learning. Culturally responsive teachers recognize that teaching diverse learners is both rewarding and challenging, and they effectively collaborate with others to increase resources for learning.

Culturally responsive teaching has the following advantages, amongst others, namely:

- The acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum;
- it builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities;
- it uses a wide variation of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles;
- it clarifies students about their culture and others' cultural heritages; and
- It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (Griner and Stewart, 2012: 589).

### 5.5 *Use systematic thinking to navigate the complexity of teaching diverse learners.*

Culturally responsive teachers are scholars of diverse learners. To navigate the complexity of teaching diverse learners, they engage in systematic thinking; including teacher research, professional learning communities, and on-going professional development, that is, specifically targeted to maximise their strength.

### 5.6 *Pursue leadership roles to advocate for students and families.*

Culturally responsive teachers take on leadership roles at the school, district, state, and national levels in order to support diverse learners and their families. They promote asset perspectives of diverse learners and their families, and they advocate for practices that promote diverse learners' academic achievement, language development, and sociocultural competence. They play multiple roles such as being teachers, and agents of change at the same time.

### 5.7 *Foster self-efficacy for self and students.*

Culturally responsive teachers foster their own self-efficacy by being realistic about the commitment it takes to meet the needs of diverse learners. Self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable of achieving challenging goals (Salazar, 2008:83-86).

## 6. Recommendations

This article recommends the following strategies as adapted from Agirdag, Merry, and Van Houtte (2014:5-6) in dealing with the teaching of cross-border learners from a culturally diverse setting, namely:

- Teachers should assimilate the content by using illustrations, facts, and material from a variety of cultures and groups to demonstrate important concepts in their teaching;

- In the knowledge construction process, teachers should not be biased against culturally diverse learners in the school;
- They should prepare lessons and activities that will assist learners to cultivate positive dispositions and attitudes toward different ethnic and cultural groups and this may reduce prejudice in schools;
- they should use equity pedagogy, that is, in their teaching procedures, strategies and styles teachers should aim at improving the academic achievement of learners from diverse background; and
- they should create an empowering school culture and social structure, concentrating on assisting learners from culturally diverse setting to be treated fairly.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, culturally responsive teaching practices are about the recognition of the different cultural backgrounds and learning abilities of cross-border learners. To support culturally responsive pedagogy and instruction, specialised learning should explicitly provide guided opportunities for teachers to examine their own culture, teaching practices, beliefs, and prejudices as interrelated to their teaching of culturally and linguistically different learners while engaging in doing and talking about issues pertaining to culturally responsive teaching practices. Teaching cross-border learners should be a joint-venture between the schools, the community and the parents of the learners. Equality and the right to education should be taken into account in addressing the issue of dealing with the practices of teaching culturally diverse learners in schools.

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