

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Classroom Practices: A Home Remedy for the Classroom

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Abstract

As a teacher in the biggest public school system in the United States, I found myself struggling to incorporate culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE) into my special education classroom practice. I was curious about how other special education teachers in the same city who had similar students were tailoring their lessons to include CR-SE. Were they also struggling to create effective lessons that students could engage in? Or was I the only one feeling alone and unsupported when it came to creating a CR-SE environment? I created a study whose participants were all graduates of the New York City Teaching Fellows certification program. I focused on finding answers to three main questions: How are other teachers applying CR-SE in their special education classrooms? Has it been effective? What evidence do they have to support their results? I found three common trends showing that teachers continue to need support when it comes to implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom: time, expectations, and accountability. Feeling this was not enough to help me, I continued to search for more answers. I eventually concluded that, in order for students to achieve their full academic potential, teachers first need to learn and practice how to construct and maintain empathy and inquiry in their classroom. These two ingredients together serve as the perfect “home remedy” to create a strong foundation for a CR-SE classroom for any beginner, intermediate, or veteran teacher.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, CR-SE, special education classroom, empathy and inquiry, home remedy

Introduction: A Home Remedy for the Classroom

When people hear the term “home remedy,” they likely think of something holistic, natural, or organic. Home remedies are universal—every country and every culture has its own home remedies for treating sore throats, back pain, dry hair, etc. They are passed down from generation to generation because they are effective and can make people’s lives easier. As educators, we can also create our own “home remedy” for improving our pedagogy. My home remedy for teaching consists of only two ingredients: empathy and inquiry. With some reflection and practice, each of us can find these ingredients easily because we have them within us. In this article, I describe how providing empathy and inquiry can create a classroom environment in which all students and their families can learn about, maintain, and promote cultural awareness.

Background

I am a graduate of the New York City Teaching Fellows certification program. I currently teach in an elementary school in the South Bronx, where my focus is on special education. During my years at the school, several questions have echoed in my mind: How can I generate and maintain [culturally responsive and sustaining education \(CR-SE\)](#) in my special education classroom? How can I raise awareness among teachers and administrators who are struggling to provide CR-SE?

Looking back at my earlier career, I realize that I did not focus on CR-SE as much as I should have. Years ago, when I was teaching preschool children, my main focus was on their social-emotional skills—on how I could help them feel comfortable in a setting that did not include their parents, on

teaching them how to express themselves with their peers, and helping them make friends. Above all, I had to make sure my students were safe.

When I taught grades 2-4, my main focus shifted. My students were older and were expected to reach certain goals and standards, so my lesson plans now targeted academics. I created and practiced strategies that would raise their reading levels and their standardized test scores. However, I quickly noticed that these older students still did not know how to communicate their feelings, frustrations, and emotions. They also did not realize that they had a voice of their own. I thought this would be the perfect time to embrace and embed CR-SE in my classes.

However, I soon started to think about New York State's new learning standards and pictured my students taking the state tests in just a few months. I felt utterly stuck and guilty. Was it more important to spend class time trying to incorporate their histories and cultures into my curriculum or to focus only on academics in order to support my fourth-grade students who were reading at the kindergarten level? Or was there a way for me to balance both?

Methodology

Feeling defeated, I contacted some of my previous classmates who were now teachers in various schools across New York City and invited them to participate in a study.

Essential Questions

I asked my classmates questions such as, How are you including CR-SE in your classroom? Has it been effective? What evidence supports this? However, my main question was whether there is a clear-cut way to include CR-SE in a special education classroom, one all teachers can benefit from. If so, what do those benefits look like?

Setting

As an educator-researcher, I have often used other teachers as resources to improve my own pedagogy. After observing the teachers in my school, I realized that I still needed more support on how to incorporate CR-SE into my special education classroom. I needed to see the different strategies other special education teachers were using without negatively affecting the academic side of the curriculum. I contacted some of my former classmates from the teaching fellows program who were now teaching in grades K-12 across New York City. My criteria for the study included the following: the participants had to work in a Title I public school and be a graduate of the teaching fellows program; I needed at least one participant from each borough and from ICT, 12:1, and 8:1:1 classroom settings. An ICT classroom is an environment in which a general education and special education teacher work together to provide instruction and support in a class that includes students with and without disabilities. A 12:1 and 8:1 classroom has either 12 or 8 students, one full-time certified special education teacher, and one paraprofessional. From June to October 2020, I met all the participants one-on-one via Zoom and Google Meets, as COVID-19 prevented us from meeting in person. In November 2020, I held two in-person sessions where the participants got to meet one another and discuss the trends I had found in the study.

Observations

I wanted this study to be reader friendly so that any teacher, new or veteran, could easily understand it. I decided to concentrate on the three most common factors that had emerged about what is happening in the classroom: time, expectations, and accountability.

1. **Time:** Eight of the 12 participants responded that they did not have much time to deliver the CR-SE part of their lessons, so they tried alternatives, such as assigning culturally responsive activities as homework. However, not all students did the activities. The most common reasons for that were a lack of materials, support at home, and motivation.

2. **Expectations:** Ten of the participants stated that their school administrators had said they expected the teachers to connect academic learning to their students' lives outside the classroom. They expected students' cultures and communities to be addressed in the lessons. The remaining two participants stated that the only time they were encouraged to practice CR-SE was in their training programs and in professional development activities outside of school; their administrators and new teacher mentors who provide content and curricular support never mentioned that CR-SE was part of their expectations and it was not reflected much in their school communities.
3. **Accountability:** All 12 participants said they had not been held accountable for including CR-SE in their classrooms. Even if their administrators and mentors did expect them to address CR-SE, they were not rated on it during classroom walk-ins and observations.

Discussion

The eight participants in my study who taught in ICT or 12:1 classroom settings stated that they struggled with incorporating CR-SE into all their lessons, due to having limited time during school hours to plan. The remaining four participants who taught in smaller class settings (8:1) struggled with delivering lessons rich in CR-SE because they had to focus more on behavior and routines in their classrooms. In fact, 3 of the 12 participants did not know how to begin incorporating CR-SE in the classroom because their school offered no clear examples of what it should look like. They were unclear as to whether or not the texts, materials, and activities they had planned were aligned with the expectations that New York State had for CR-SE. Moreover, most of their students were non-verbal and had multiple disabilities, and the participants observed that these students had a harder time participating and engaging in the lessons. This lack of communication made it harder for the teachers to learn about their students' family cultures. Therefore, the participants said their first aim was to prepare their students with basic skills, such as mastering phonics, improving their spelling, and making sure they could compare numbers. Many participants said they felt obligated to focus on these skills when they noticed how far the special needs students lagged behind their classmates. Unfortunately, they felt that they failed in increasing identity safety in the classroom.

Michelle Novelli (2019, p. 3) stated that "culturally responsive teaching was not prevalent, even in diverse public school settings, due to curricular or other constraints. Results of this study revealed a need for culturally responsive teaching to be intentionally interwoven through several semesters of pre-service work and practicum experiences." This led me to reflect on my training during the fellows program. I attended every class, took notes, and made sure to apply the strategies discussed in my classes. My classmates and I felt supported by our program. So why were we still struggling with CR-SE?

I decided to keep exploring this question. I initially believed success with CR-SE was dependent on the particular situation, including the teacher, students, and school. After these visits, I kept thinking about the convenience of home remedies. In classrooms, teachers have to find strategies and tools that work for them. Similar to the way we are in the kitchen, we have a variety of recipes to choose from and we can always change them up to improve the outcome. At this moment, I created the theory that home remedies have a critical place in the education system and that there is in fact a way that CR-SE can be used successfully by all teachers. When we use home remedies, we use what we have at home and mix it together to improve our well-being. When we incorporate CR-SE into a lesson, we use all of the identities in the classroom and find a way to enrich the curriculum and learning experience for the students. I observed that, when educators show empathy and apply inquiry in an education setting, both students and educators can benefit. After analyzing and reflecting on my own personal experience and the observations I made, I learned that a curriculum that includes these two ingredients enables CR-SE to occur seamlessly.

The Role of Empathy

CR-SE comes into play when a teacher invites students to learn more about one another's racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics. But before practicing CR-SE, a teacher must first know what

it is. CR-SE promotes cultural awareness and helps students maintain their cultural integrity and celebrate who they are. Of all the responsibilities teachers have, I argue that the most important is to demonstrate empathy in the classroom. As Hoffman writes (2000, p. 3), “Empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible. It may be fragile but it has, arguably, endured throughout evolutionary times and may continue as long as humans exist.”

Some of the teacher participants stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and teaching virtually had made it significantly harder for them to empathize with their students. I observed one virtual fourth-grade class where it was clear the teacher was feeling this way. When I joined her class on Google Meets, I noticed that most students had their cameras off although she repeatedly asked them to turn them on, which a few students did, but only for a minute or two. I could see her growing frustration in her facial expressions. After the meeting, I spoke with the teacher. She said that teaching remotely had made it harder for her to empathize with her students, and after observing her class, I understood completely. However, from my personal experience, I knew her frustration stemmed from more than students not turning on their cameras.

In a physical classroom, I know that my students have the equipment they need—notebooks, pencils, etc.—but in a virtual classroom, my expectations must be different. I have to be flexible and expect that my students do not all have the same materials. Feedback is another element missing in the virtual classroom, which can make teachers feel disconnected. In my physical classroom, I can observe the progress my students are making and give them feedback on the spot, but giving feedback during virtual instruction was very difficult for me. I was able to create separate virtual rooms where I could interact with students one-on-one, but this took twice as long as in a physical classroom. Moreover, when I returned to the whole class, some students had logged off or turned off their cameras. When this happened, I felt as overwhelmed as the teacher I had observed.

I later observed a third-grade teacher at her school who found it quite easy to empathize with her students during the pandemic. I compared this lesson and the student engagement to the previously mentioned fourth-grade lesson. There were some evident differences: most students in the ELA class had their cameras on and everybody seemed to be engaged with the class. The teacher read the book *Outside, Inside*, by LeUyen Pham, which revolves around people who came together to live through the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher stopped and asked questions after every page, such as, “How did you feel the first day you heard about the pandemic?” “How did you react when you found out schools were shut down?” The teacher pointed at the pictures of workers and asked, “Does this remind you of somebody you know?” When the lesson ended, I asked the teacher, “How did you empathize with your students today? Did you plan for it? If so, how?”

At the end of the first class I observed, I knew students’ names but only heard some of their voices. In contrast, by the end of the second class, I felt like they were my own students. I learned how many of them had immigrant parents, how many were bilingual, and even about some of their home traditions. And I learned all this just by observing the teacher’s practice of empathy. Her questions, her text selection, and the way she delivered her lesson reflected how much effort she made to bring empathy into her classroom. From an outsider’s point of view, this teacher was a success.

Earlier I stated that time was one factor that prevented teachers from planning and delivering lessons that incorporate CR-SE. Yet I had just witnessed how this teacher incorporated CR-SE in her ELA lesson from beginning to end. She did not think of CR-SE as a separate strategy or tool. After years of attending trainings and professional development sessions, she expressed genuine interest in her students’ backgrounds; in some discussions she acted as a facilitator rather than an instructor. She had high expectations for all her students, and she welcomed their different opinions on the pandemic. By showing empathy with her students and talking about her own difficulties with remote learning, they learned to do the same. She seemed to instinctively know that, before she could have a successful lesson in which she targeted standards, she had to establish a community in which showing empathy played an integral part.

The Role of Inquiry

This teacher's practice of empathy showed me how effective it can be in a classroom. My observations made me curious and raised certain questions: How long did it take her to get to this point? How did she know that the text she chose would be an excellent conversation starter? Where did she learn these strategies? I became aware that I was beginning the inquiry process, something we all go through when pursuing questions. It enables us to reflect on our professional practice and is a kind of intentional research that aims to deepen our knowledge and expertise. The process may vary, but the goal remains the same: to improve our instruction and our students' academic skills.

One of the most important responsibilities teachers have is to collect data on their students and use it to guide their instruction and the implementation of CR-SE. One of the tools we use at my current school to collect literacy data on our students is I-Ready, a program that can be accessed by any student who has a device such as a laptop, computer, or tablet. Teachers can manipulate which lessons students complete on I-Ready, which depends on the data that have been collected. The beauty of working with other teachers is that no two teachers will look at data the same way. When my team and I discuss data on a particular student, we all bring our personal experiences to the table. For example, if student K's scores show that she is reading two years below grade level, we will ask different questions. For example: Did student K get enough sleep the night before the diagnostic? Did she eat a nutritious breakfast that morning? Were the data even accurate? Having seen a direct correlation between students' grades and their eating and sleeping habits, they may have her take the test again right after lunch. Their questions and subsequent action are an example of how teachers can experiment with empathy and inquiry to guide their actions.

Confronted with the same situation, teachers will ask different questions and take different actions, each of us deciding what we feel will best support our students. I am trying to find a balance. How can I use the various data to affirm my student's identity? What does that look like? How does cultural bias influence a teacher's data collection and analysis? What cultural bias do I have that may affect the rigor of my instruction?

Since becoming a teacher, I have often heard the term "scaffolding," which I initially thought meant making the school work easier for my students. Without conducting much research, I took steps to do just that. However, when my students' academic skills were not improving, I took a different approach. I started to question why the scaffolding wasn't helping my students and whether I was doing it correctly. I needed answers, so I asked other special education teachers, but their students were different from mine and their approaches didn't always work for me. In time I learned that scaffolding does not mean I need to make the work easier for my students but to find ways to support them so they can complete a task successfully. I learned that I can simultaneously scaffold lessons and practice CR-SE. For example, I realized that my students were not understanding the math lessons because they felt no personal connection to the word problems. I now create my own math problems, in which I portray my students' different cultural and linguistic identities.

During a recent conversation with another educator, Olivia, we reflected on whether empathy and data need each other. We know that empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of another, and that it is not tangible. Meanwhile, the data we collect in the classroom are tangible and we are always using them to differentiate and support our students. I said that I am more comfortable allowing empathy, rather than inquiry, to guide my instruction and to create an effective and equitable environment. Olivia argued that empathy and data rely on each other and challenged me to think about what data are and if there is only one form. She helped me to see that data are information and that I rely on qualitative data regularly in my teaching. So, there is a way to use the empathy I have for my students to collect data and then use it to support them.

Combining Empathy and Inquiry

During the 2020-2021 school year, I was able to practice combining empathy and inquiry and to see whether it truly benefited me and my students. We used a mix of virtual and in-person lessons that year, which I used to my advantage. In an effort to create empathy between me and the students'

parents, I included family members in the virtual lessons. When I was reading books, I asked parents in advance if they would like to be guest readers. At first, some were really excited, others were hesitant. Just like my students, once some parents saw others try, it motivated them to try, too. Most important, the students were excellent listeners and tried to help the parents if they struggled to pronounce certain words. Having their family members participate enabled my students to learn patience and to get a glimpse of their various home environments. This strategy promoted a sense of community and gave me the opportunity to practice CR-SE and empathy, even though I was only connected with my students virtually.

As educators, we need to remember that our identities are as important in what happens in the classroom as our students' identities. As a child of immigrant parents, I reflect on what I loved about my education and what I wish had been better. Each of us has life experiences that enable us to empathize and connect with our students, and teachers who reflect on their upbringing and use lessons learned in their own instruction will likely see an improvement in their class environment. Treating students and their families with genuine warmth, care, and sensitivity will make them feel comfortable and valued enough to take intellectual risks that will benefit them academically and emotionally.

Combining empathy and inquiry is not as hard as it sounds. I believe the hardest part is being aware of when we are doing this and reflecting on it frequently. However, once we are readily able to combine empathy and inquiry, we can start to address the inequities we become aware of in the education system. Most importantly, we can start experimenting to find the best ways to affirm our students' identities and provide them with opportunities for success.

Conclusion

By practicing empathy with my students and their families, I am able to build relationships of respect and rapport. When I practice inquiry, I find ways to improve my students' learning outcomes. And when I combine the two, I create an environment in which my students feel comfortable embracing and sharing their cultural and linguistic identities. Students learn to love who they are and appreciate the unique characteristics of others, and feel valued enough to bring their own family knowledge and culture into our classrooms. If you are an educator and are ready to try this home remedy, keep in mind that it might not come out perfectly the first time you try it. Learning to practice empathy and inquiry might start out messy, but your trial and error will help you develop the perfect recipe. Have patience and keep trying, because the end result will enable you to give more to your students, their families, and even to yourself as a culturally responsive educator.

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