

Today's Student Is Tomorrow's Leader: Creating Student Relationships through Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Abstract

Families from all over the world leave their homeland, their lifestyle, their culture, and everything they've ever known to come to the United States of America, also known as the land of opportunity. America is often depicted as a "melting pot" because of the number of families of multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural backgrounds migrating into one place. These families want to give their children an upper hand, a fighting chance, an advantage in life. Immigrant parents are faced with navigating new laws, systems, and cultural differences, but they consider those sacrifices worth it for the opportunities they bring to their children. However, the children of these immigrant families face their own obstacles as they enter a school system that is insensitive to their migration journey, where they encounter students who ostracize them, and where language barriers or their accents prevent them from being understood. Although the U.S. school system is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural, the education curriculum has not been updated to reflect and incorporate a culturally responsive and sustaining education.

Keywords: student needs, multicultural education, cultural relevance, student diversity, educational environment

Introduction

Humans crave connection and acceptance in the various spaces we inhabit and the groups we belong to. Our interpersonal connections drive our sense of acceptance and inclusivity and help us shape new groups, especially school-age students. These connections are built when we discover our similarities and gain an understanding of one another's way of life, culture, and economic differences. As children develop and grow, school can play a vital role in helping them establish these connections. Students who are ostracized by other groups tend to internalize their emotions, which shapes the way they interact with others as adults. Beiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 10) note that "CRT [culturally responsive teaching] gives students a chance to learn from an inclusive curriculum. It helps both you and your students understand different perspectives, appreciate others' strengths, and build empathy."

Background

My parents, who moved from Trinidad and Tobago to the United States when I was eight, left behind a thriving business, or what Trinidadians call a parlour, a name adopted when Trinidad and Tobago was under British rule. A parlour is a room used primarily for conversation, and our business lived up to its name. It was situated along the main road that led in and out of the city, next door to the police station, down the block from the government buildings, and directly across from the town's largest outdoor meeting place, called The Savannah. Our parlour was the only place members of our community could get delicious fruits from the neighboring countries, and everyone stopped by to purchase groceries, meet with friends, and catch up on conversations. My parents, who filled weekly orders from the banks, city employees, and local businesses, were loved and cherished by the community we lived and worked in. However, they left it all behind to chase their dream of offering more opportunities to their five children.



GEANTHONY COOPER PRESCOTT, 10TH GRADE

I did not know what to expect when my parents told us we would be leaving Trinidad and Tobago to live in the United States of America. I had heard people talk about this place they called “The States” as if the streets were paved with gold. This was a place that would have better opportunities for our family, where our dreams would come true, and where people from all over the world came together in a melting pot of goodness. I imagined that I would be welcomed by nurturing teachers who would foster my dream of becoming a news reporter. Making things even better, we would be settling in Queens, New York, one of the most diverse cities in America.

When we arrived in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, however, I instead found myself in an education system that pushed me back a grade, with teachers who ignored me because they could not understand my beautiful Trinidadian accent, and among children who were slow to befriend me because they could not accept who I was. My dreams were crushed when a teacher told me I could not become a reporter unless I lost my accent. Coming from a place where we all had the same accent, I had never thought of it as a problem, but now I began to feel too embarrassed to speak. These events made me feel overlooked, invisible, and afraid to show my authentic self, because the true me was different from the others and, as a child, I just wanted to belong.

Although my family had moved to the most diverse borough of New York City, the diverse cultures in Queens are segregated into neighborhoods. My family first settled in a predominantly Asian community where the Chinese immigrant population outnumbered that of Manhattan’s Chinatown. Two-thirds of the residents in our bustling neighborhood were foreign-born, the vast majority from Asia. Whether you are looking for Asian cuisine, an ancient herbal remedy, or a rare

Japanese comic book, *Flushing is the place to go* (Hsu, 2019). However, as a child from Trinidad and Tobago, I was underrepresented and underserved in my Flushing elementary school, and the teachers never really connected with me. Perhaps they simply didn't know how. As Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 10) note, "underserved students may face implicit bias because of their race, culture, or language (implicit bias means the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes we all hold.) As a result, these students are often overrepresented in special education. Other times, their needs may go undetected."

As I grew into my new life and time passed, so did my accent, but not without the lingering effects of feeling ostracized for my differences. Kipling D. Williams, a professor of psychological sciences, stated that "being excluded or ostracized is an invisible form of bullying that doesn't leave bruises, and therefore we often underestimate its impact" (Williams & Nida, 2011). These early experiences crushed my expectation of finding a nurturing school environment and left a lasting negative impression that made me put up a wall of self-defense. Halevy (2017, p. 1) states that "emotions shape defensive aggression, advance knowledge on strategic choice under risk and uncertainty, and demonstrate hope's positive effects on social interactions and relationships."

As I grew up, I did not find people to connect with on a deep level, so I kept my friends at a safe distance in order to keep myself safe from hurt or embarrassment. I became insensitive to the opinions of people who labeled me aggressive, dismissive, or even short-tempered, but being constantly misunderstood in school drove me to build emotional walls of defense. My parents, who were now stuck at work for long hours so they could provide for their family, were able to cover our physical needs but their emotional support lay dormant. Over multiple situations and several years, I had to learn how to stand up, speak up, and defend myself because I recognized that, for anything to change, my voice needed to be heard.

According to the Mental Health Center (2019), "childhood trauma chips away at a child's stability and sense of self, undermining self-worth and often staying with the child into adulthood." We all have a choice to make when faced with traumatic experiences, whether we will allow it to cripple us or will use the experience to make a difference and help others. Well, I picked the latter. In 2012, after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, my six-year-old son did not want to return to school out of fear he would be shot. This experience brought back memories of my own traumatic experiences as a child, and it also reminded me of how I had longed for someone to support and empower me. I remember having to find my own courage, to learn how to stand up and advocate for myself and others, and to find my own voice. Two years later, after multiple conversations with my son in which I reinforced the importance of his voice to draw awareness to things that seem uncomfortable or suspicious, my children's book *Don't Snooze on Clues!* was born.

I now realized that I had an opportunity to help other parents start what could be a hard conversation with their kids about topics such as bullying, kids with weapons, child abduction, and other lurking dangers. The book was my way of helping parents empower their children to speak up and give them ways to communicate their discomfort to an adult. More importantly, I was able to help parents be aware of what their children are trying to communicate to them.

Don't Snooze on Clues! was nominated in 2014 for a National Indie Excellence Award as Best Children's Picture Book. This honor supports the fact that the book is a fun, easy-to-understand picture book that empowers children ages five to ten to communicate to an adult that a dangerous situation is happening around them. The feedback from parents has been positive:

Parenting is challenging, especially in a tech-savvy society. *Don't Snooze on Clues!* is a fun and interactive book for children to dialogue with their parents/guardians about things that may seem questionable and scary. The book is a must-have, reader-friendly, and empowers children to trust their instinct and speak up." —Karen Taylor Bass, mom and entrepreneur

Don't Snooze on Clues! is a great read for kids and parents alike! The educational system would benefit from reinforcing the "Strange Activity" terms by using the curriculum in the classroom as a part of the life skill lessons. As a drug and violence prevention counselor

in the Department of Education, I can see how *Don't Snooze on Clues!* will work well with classroom presentations, safety workshops, and PTA Meetings. What a wonderful, child-appropriate way to open a discussion on subjects that may be uncomfortable. Kudos to the author Keba Cairo! —Keisha Williams, substance prevention counselor

With the lack of resources that directly address the hard topics and help guide children through real-life scenarios, I received genuine appreciation from parent readers. After countless discussions with students and families on my book tour, I began to examine the topic of bullying more closely so I could answer the questions students asked me more effectively. One particular passage (Tracy, 2012, para. 6) opened my eyes:

Those who have experienced emotional bullying are more likely to turn around and become emotional bullies themselves. Emotional bullying can have negative effects on a person's mental health. Victims often feel shame, guilt, embarrassment, and fear. These effects of emotional bullying can result in depression, low self-esteem, shyness, poor academic or job performance, & isolation.

I soon realized that much of my own childhood behavior had characteristics of emotional bullying. Because there is no physical evidence, emotional bullying, or hidden bullying as I call it in my programs, can go undetected so that we often miss the effects. If we fail to properly identify these emotions in young children and help them navigate them, the behavior often will be recycled back into the classroom.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education

Was my negative experience with the school environment the sole reason for my bullying behavior? No, there were other factors that led to my emotional bullying. Could my teacher or the curriculum have helped me to bridge the social-emotional gap? Of course! But, the education system failed me, and the lack of social and emotional connection I experienced shaped my outlook on what the system should provide, as reflected in the following:

Today's schools are increasingly multicultural and multilingual with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Educators and community agencies serve students with different motivations for engaging in learning, behaving positively, and performing academically. Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a foundation for safe and positive learning, and enhances students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life. (Weissberg, 2016, para. 1)

Today we are now involved in an intense debate about the role the school system should play in providing a culturally responsive education. Given my history with a culturally insensitive school system, of course I believe this type of education is important. However, that doesn't mean I don't have questions as to how it should be implemented, who will integrate the information into the curricula, what type of information will be provided, and how teachers will be trained in this area before bringing it to our students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all that connections are vital, and connections are precisely what I lacked at school as a young girl who had migrated to the States and was without any friends. Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 2) write that

our brains are wired to make connections. It's easier for our brains to learn and store information when we have a hook to hang it on. That hook is background knowledge. Students bring this knowledge to the classroom every day, including their culture, language, and life experiences.

A culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum is one that is infused with information students can find relatable, that they can draw from in their lives, and, more importantly, that teaches children about cultures other than their own:

Culturally responsive teaching could possibly move schools away from approaching instruction with a deficit mindset. (A deficit mindset would focus on what a student can't do.) Instead, CRT identifies students' assets and uses them to create rigorous, student-centered instruction. This is especially important for students from underserved groups whose skills are often underestimated. (Breiseth and Garcia, para. 7).

As leaders at the forefront of education, it is our job to acknowledge that everyone brings something to the table that we can all learn from. As Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., para. 4) point out, "culturally responsive teaching . . . helps create environments, curricula, and instructional methods that validate and reflect the diversity, identities, and experiences of all students. When we do that, we raise the level of academic rigor for all learners. It also sends the message that educators value all students, and that multiculturalism is an asset." As schools become increasingly diverse, building students' self-confidence, teaching them to accept others' differences, promoting inclusivity, and working as a team are all life skills that can help students of diverse backgrounds integrate into the classroom community.

I've created a company with the same name as my children's book, *Don't Snooze on Clues*, where my mission is to provide today's K-12 children with tools for tomorrow's world. We focus on our belief that life-skills courses can play an integral part in students' overall development. As Prajapati et al. (2016, p. 3) state,

life skills training/education takes into account psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help students to make right decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

Breiseth and Garcia (n.d., p. 3) further support the importance of life skills education and offer several activities for the classroom:

There are various past research indications of life skills being implemented as a training program, as an intervention approach and a model contributing to healthy development of adolescents . . . In the following section researchers have tried . . . with the help of simple activities [to show how] it can be implemented in classroom settings. Different activities that can be used to enhance Life Skills in Students are as follows:

Classroom Discussions: An activity [that] provides opportunities for students to learn and practice turning to one another in solving problems. Enables students to deepen their understanding of the topic and personalize their connection to it. Develops skills in listening, assertiveness, and empathy.

Brainstorming: It allows students to generate ideas quickly and spontaneously. Helps students use their imagination and think out of the box. Good discussion starter because the class can creatively generate ideas. It is essential to evaluate the pros and cons of each idea or rank ideas according to certain criteria.

Role Plays: Along with being a fun activity and allowing the whole class to be active and participative, it also provides an excellent strategy for practicing skills; experiencing how one might handle a potential situation in real life; increasing empathy for others and their point of view; and increasing insight into their own feelings.

Groups: Groups are helpful when the time is limited as it maximizes student input. Allows students interactions, allows them to know one another better[,] which in a way enhances team building and teamwork.

Educational Games and Simulations: It promotes fun, active learning, and rich discussion as participants work hard to prove their points or earn points. They require the combined use of knowledge, attitudes, and skills and allow students to test out assumptions and abilities in a relatively safe environment.

As noted above, classroom discussions, brainstorming, role-playing, groups, educational games and simulations are all activities that enhance life skills and are embedded into the fabric of quality programs. At Don't Snooze on Clues, we provide after-school and virtual programs that use a project-based learning approach inspired by social-emotional learning (SEL), as Breiseth and Garcia explain: "When you plan social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons, you can use that knowledge to make sure your lessons value your students. By pairing SEL with CRT, you can also help students navigate multiple contexts both inside and outside of school" (n.d., para. 12).

Don't Snooze on Clues focuses on lessons that are not a part of the usual school curriculum but are aligned with New York City Department of Education standards. We center our SEL-inspired lessons around four core topics: character building, effective leadership, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. In our character-building course, we teach students the six pillars of good character and how they relate to each other, as well as the relationship between respect and trust and the role of caring in good citizenship. Our effective leadership course focuses on identifying the characteristics of strong leaders, discovering types of leadership styles, recognizing why it's important for leaders to give a voice to all, and why teamwork is a crucial part of leadership. In our financial literacy course, students learn the fundamentals of making, spending, and saving money. This topic is critical to helping students invest in their future, and it also helps them build confidence and self-awareness. Lastly, our entrepreneurship course pulls the other three courses together to show students how their developed SEL skills can help them build relationships with their customers, make responsible decisions, and run a business efficiently.

One of our high school students at Hofstra University's Science Technology Entry Program commented on our course:

I advise other students to take this course, because it is not just a class where you sit and write information, do a test, or do homework. No, it's not like that! It's interactive, you put yourself out there. It can help to motivate students and have them thinking of what they want them to be. I wanted to take this class, it was fun, I learned a lot and I applied a lot.

All of our courses enable students to reflect on their own behavior, build their social skills, and improve their interactions with others. Our after-school courses are designed so that students engage with their peers in a collaborative atmosphere that includes pairing and group activities. Each course offers opportunities for students to dive deeper into their thinking while enjoying activities that are rigorously challenging and engaging. As noted by Durlak et al. (2010), research has shown that after-school programs focused on social and emotional development can significantly enhance students' self-perception, school connectedness, positive social behaviors, school grades, and achievement test scores, while reducing problem behaviors.

In response to schools shutting down and going virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic, Don't Snooze on Clues launched an online platform, www.DontSnoozeAcademy.com, where we were able to make our courses 100% virtual. Facilitated by licensed industry professionals and Department of Education certified educators who specialize in student social and emotional health, our online courses provide unlimited 24/7 access to our modules and instructors via chat, which provides students with the extra support they need beyond the classroom. Our online courses also include individual log-in, progress reports, pre/post assessments, and access to our growing catalog, which now includes courses in mental health, financial literacy, college and career readiness, cooking and nutrition, technology, language, and more.

I have emphasized in this paper how important it is for people to feel connected to their social groups, coworkers, families, and even to their education. A culturally responsive and sustaining education is a proven way to help students connect their education to the world they live in, but this connection can only be made if this model of education fully reflects the diversity of our communities. Programs such as those we provide at Don't Snooze on Clues and www.DontSnoozeAcademy.com can help create opportunities for students to connect to and learn from each other by having classroom discussions where everyone's voice is heard.

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Keba R. Cairo, MBA, has spent more than 15 years cultivating her craft and sharpening her skills. Keba was named a 2015 Goodwill Ambassador by the iChange Nations Interfaith Peace Building Initiative for her continuous community work. In 2015, her children's book, Don't Snooze on Clues, was nominated as Best Picture Book by the National Indie Excellence Awards. Keba can be reached at keba@dontsnoozeonclues.com.