

# Chapter One

## Introduction



Teresa Thomas, CATA 2007–2008 program year

*“Diversity need not mean adversity. Our bonds transcend our differences.”*

David Gewirtzman, Holocaust survivor,  
in a speech given November 20, 2005

## Background of Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Fact: The United States has always been a diverse nation.

Fact: The dominant majority has discriminated against groups who differed from them.

Fact: Unequal treatment of people because of differences is inconsistent with the democratic values contained in the Constitution.

These three facts help to explain, in part, the conditions that have led to periodic explosions of protest throughout U.S. history demanding that the dominant majority become more responsive to the diverse cultures within their midst. Among the most familiar of such reform movements were the antislavery crusade of the nineteenth century and the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth. A more recent example was the drive for civil rights during the latter half of the last century, which led to many societal changes, especially in education. One such change was the introduction of *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT), whose primary goal is to achieve a pluralistic democracy, in which equal rights and educational opportunities will, once and for all, be shared with those who have hitherto been excluded.

Reform efforts within the sphere of education took the form of restructuring schools and teacher education in ways that would enable students of all ages to participate actively in building a democracy based on social justice for all (Banks and McGee Banks, 2005; Gay, 2002; Gollnick and Chinn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999, 2004; Spring, 1997; Suzuki, 1979; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995.)

Results of these efforts included laws such as PL 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) and court decisions, including *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in which separate and supposedly equal educational facilities based on race were determined to be inherently unequal. (See Chapter 4 for other laws and decisions.) While these reforms have remedied some educational inequities, current realities create formidable obstacles to the success of these well-meaning policies.

1. As institutions reflecting attitudes within the larger society, schools continue to be afflicted by racism and other forms of discrimination.
2. Although 40 percent of the nation's pupils are minorities, 95 percent of their teachers are white (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield, 2003; Watkins, 1989). And in 2002, W. B. Harvey noted that 85 percent of *preservice* teachers were white, with few of them having had the opportunity for learning about and interacting with minorities (minorities referring here to groups based on differences in class, race, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, and ability).
3. There is persistent inequality in the funding of public schools attended by most children of color and the poor.
4. Overplacement of African American and Latino children and English language learners in special education and lower-level curriculum tracks continues.
5. Due to the increased resegregation throughout the United States for both African American and Latino students (Orfield and Lee, 2004), the racial achievement gap has widened (Frankenberg et al., 2003). Other potential consequences of resegregation could be a reversal of the social benefits of integrated schools identified by Braddock and Eitle (2004) in their review of the literature. Such benefits have included among both African American and white students a reduction of prejudice and stereotyping and an increase in interracial friendships.
6. The nature of expanded federal and state testing has resulted in discrimination against certain groups of students, particularly English language learners and students with learning disabilities, as well as against the schools they attend (see also Chapter 2).

As long as these realities continue—whether based on apathy or prejudice—children from certain nondominant cultures will suffer the kinds of indignities that prevent them from success in school and consequently in life.

On a more hopeful note, there are currently signs of increased recognition within a variety of different sectors on the need for culturally responsive teaching. Publishers, for example, are competing to provide materials and literature about the what, whys, and how-to's of culturally responsive teaching. Government agencies and professional education associations have created content standards that specify the need for integrating multicultural and global studies curricula across the disciplines. Workshops and professional development courses are being offered by school systems and colleges to assist pre- and in-service teachers in exploring their attitudes about other cultures and how their own backgrounds may affect their interactions with diverse students. Private foundations are contributing to schools—among them public charter schools—that have developed programs for addressing the needs of inner-city children (Tough, 2008). Even the controversial federal No Child Left Behind Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; see Chapter 2) includes such provisions as additional funding for underserved schools and providing quality teachers for *all* students. Although many of these good intentions have yet to be fulfilled and funded, there is—at least on paper—an awareness about the current need for change.

While these actions within both public and private sectors to eliminate educational inequities and promote culturally responsive teaching are steps in the right direction, changes are slow in coming, and there are roadblocks along the way. But this author believes that positive change happens one teacher at a time. This text was written with that idea in mind.

## Culture Wars and Other Roadblocks

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Although there have been some real successes in integrating diversity across the K–12 curriculum, as will be discussed throughout the remainder of the book, restructuring efforts have by no means been consistent or universally accepted. Misconceptions and prejudices persist, for example, in many places across the United States among those who do not recognize the duality of purpose inherent in culturally responsive approaches, which seek to emphasize *both* the commonalities within American society *and* its diversity.

The ongoing so-called *culture wars* are a clear indication that culturally responsive teaching, a concept often associated with multicultural education, is an issue that continues to divide people, with conservatives (traditionalists) taking the position that first and foremost, teachers should aim to assimilate diverse groups by conveying American values and shared practices (Bennett, 1992; Bloom, A., 1987; Cheney, 1995), while liberals (multiculturalists) generally support a belief in cultural pluralism, that is, teaching about the unique and culturally diverse communities within the United States along with values that all groups share as Americans (Banks and McGee Banks, 2005; Grant and Gomez, 1996; Shor, 1987). Conservatives often accuse liberals of *political correctness*, a view characterized as an overabundance of sensitivity and tolerance toward differences. “Because some, in their zeal for such tolerance, have appeared to be intolerant themselves, this perspective has taken on negative connotations: ‘P.C.’ is how the right wing labels this otherwise constructive attitude” (Chartock, 2004, p. 317).

Another misconception that opponents of culturally responsive approaches harbor is the idea that it is mainly the poverty in which many children live that accounts for their failure in school. While the conditions in which many children of the poor live—conditions that deprive them of decent nutrition, medical care and other necessities—may account for some of their educational problems, “racism and other forms of discrimination play a central role in educational failure, as does the related phenomenon of low expectations” (Nieto, 2000, p. 49).

A battle of words between two academics—one liberal and the other conservative—exemplifies these so-called culture wars. The late Lawrence W. Levine (1997) countered conservative Allan Bloom’s (1987) assertion that the ideal curriculum was represented by the Western canon based on Eurocentric values and history. Levine argued that this canon never existed and that changes in curricula to broaden courses to include other cultures were big steps forward. Levine used his experiences as the son of Eastern European immigrants to support his argument that today’s model is not the American melting pot but a cultural mosaic in which discrete ethnic groups persist and interact with other groups. He noted that he could, for example, have both Moses and Lincoln as forefathers, both Joshua and Joe Lewis as warrior heroes, and the Torah and the U.S. Constitution for his moral foundations (Levine, 1997). New immigrants continue to follow in Levine’s footsteps, albeit with their own references.

Teachers are in a position to help end the “culture wars” by activating the dual purposes of culturally responsive teaching. As change agents they can help students learn about themselves, about diverse others at home *and* abroad, and about “a common vision of liberty, equality, and justice that . . . remains the only guarantee that a multicultural society will live in democracy and mutual respect” (Gagnon, 1991).

Another major roadblock to integrating diversity across the curriculum—which has also divided people according to their political perspectives—is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Those on the political left as well as many moderates see the testing provisions of this act as reinforcing the unequal and unfair treatment of certain groups, including children with special needs, English language learners, and students whose socioeconomic status has placed them in underserved schools. While the intent is to hold schools accountable for overall student achievement and to close existing achievement gaps, there is ongoing debate about the methods by which these goals can best be achieved. NCLB will no doubt remain a roadblock on the path to respecting diversity for the foreseeable future unless and until the act shows signs of fulfilling its promises (see Chapter 2). One purpose of this book is to help teachers overcome the obstacles posed by this controversial act.

## Some Definitions

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Culturally responsive teaching is based on the assumption that culture is central to student learning. *Culture* refers to “integrated patterns of human behavior that include language, thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and norms of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups” (State Action for Educational Leadership Project, 2005).

Culture has also been defined as

a way of life, especially as it relates to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time. Culture is the lens through which we look at the world. It is the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and it influences how we process learning, solve problems, and teach. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005, p. 6)

A case in point regarding the power of culture on students’ lives can be seen in the efforts of Geoffrey Canada. He has, for the past several years, been trying to transform an entire community with his Harlem Children’s Zone, a network of early intervention programs and schools. In order to bring positive changes to their youth, he wants “Harlem’s parents to adopt what he calls middle-class [cultural] values,” including not only pride and devotion to the neighborhood “but also focused on success, learning, working hard, getting to college” (Tough, 2008, p. 125), values that would enable Harlem’s African American and Hispanic students to escape the culturally influenced cycle of poverty.

Canada wants to plant the seeds that will nurture aspirations for a better life among young people, which is, in fact, also one of the objectives of culturally responsive teaching, as well as of multicultural education (addressing the United States as a diverse society) and global education (addressing the world as a diverse place). The primary goals they all share are (1) creating a sense of understanding and respect for differences, (2) overcoming prejudice and discrimination, (3) providing an understanding of the dynamics of racism, (4) replacing historical and cultural distortions about diverse groups with accurate information, (5) ensuring that all students receive equitable benefits from the educational system (Drum and Howard, 1989), and finally, (6) promoting self-respect and respect for others.

Experts in the field of culturally responsive teaching have defined the concept in ways that make clear their general agreement on its meaning and purpose. Ladson-Billings (1995) calls CRT 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 in teaching can bridge and explain the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' own culture.

Hollins (1996) explains that the link between culture and classroom instruction is derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which then serve as tools for learning within and outside of school. Thus, according to Nieto (2000), culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments.

The project of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), *Classroom to Community and Back* (2005), is an excellent source for ways to use "culturally responsive, standards-based teaching to strengthen family and community partnerships and increase student achievement" (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005). NWREL's School-Family-Community Partnerships Team has defined culturally responsive teaching as an approach that "infuses family customs—as well as community culture and expectations—throughout the teaching and learning environment" and is built on a foundation of knowledge and understanding of "your own and your students' family and community culture" (2005, p. 5).

Becoming culturally responsive is an ongoing process that evolves as we learn more about ourselves, our world and other cultures. To become culturally responsive, first look at your own culture—especially if it is part of our country's dominant culture—from the worldview of others; have an open mind to what you don't understand; and be ready to learn new ways of looking at and doing things. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005, p. 6)

Villegas and Lucas (2002) refer to the expansion of cultural awareness as gaining "socio-cultural consciousness," or gaining an awareness that "one's worldview is not universal but is profoundly shaped by one's life experiences" (p. 27). They offer by way of example how a white upper-middle-class man raised in a wealthy northeastern suburban community experiences the world very differently from a poor Mexican American woman raised in East Los Angeles. They emphasize that both preservice and in-service teachers need to inspect their own beliefs about students from nondominant groups and confront negative attitudes they might have toward these students (p. 38).

In a culturally responsive classroom the needs and interests of all students from all backgrounds would be addressed within a climate of respect for differences. Diller and Moule (2005) believe that culturally responsive teaching by culturally competent educators means successfully teaching students who come from cultures different from their own and entails mastering certain personal and interpersonal awarenesses and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching.

In a culturally responsive environment, lessons "blend information on how students can become more comfortable with American culture with ways that other students can become culturally responsive to members of diverse cultures" (Stickey, 2003).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) issue an appropriate warning here on making assumptions about someone's cultural affiliation. They note that the most obvious cultural characteristics that people observe are physical. "Physical characteristics, however, provide a cursory sense of who we are. Our families, friends, jobs, organizational ties, and lifestyles draw upon a repertoire of behaviors, obstructing a clear view of who we might be culturally" (p. 5). They stress that our unique personal histories and psychological traits interact dynamically to distinguish us from other members of our *own* cultural groups. "The subtle complexity of who we are makes it difficult to define human beings according to narrow, static lists of expected characteristics" (p. 6).

## Principles That Guide Culturally Responsive Teaching

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On the Education Alliance at Brown University (2006) website there is posted a synthesis of several principles that guide culturally responsive teaching, all of which can be observed in the lessons and units of instruction in this primer:

1. *Communication of high expectations.* Both teachers and schools convey the message that students will succeed (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tomlinson, 1999; Williams, 1996) while appropriately challenging them to think critically (see Appendix D for Bloom's taxonomy).

2. *Utilization of diverse learning strategies.* Teachers incorporate cooperative learning and differentiated teaching that recognizes different learning styles (Gay, 2002). (See Appendix C for Gardner's multiple intelligences.) Active teaching methods promote engagement by requiring students to play an active role in shaping and developing the curriculum and related activities (Banks, 2005; Oakes and Lipton, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999).

3. *Teacher as facilitator.* The teacher's role is one of guide, mediator, and knowledge consultant as well as instructor (Banks and McGee Banks, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas, 1991).

4. *Positive perspectives on parents and families of culturally and linguistically diverse students.* There is ongoing participation by not only students and teachers but also parents and community members on issues important to them, along with inclusion of these individuals and issues in classroom curriculum and activities (Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, 1991; Hollins, 1996).

5. *Cultural sensitivity.* Teachers gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms and translate this knowledge into instructional practice (Banks, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Villegas, 1991).

6. *Reshaping the curriculum.* Curriculum should be designed so that it is interdisciplinary (Banks, 2001) and connected to students' real lives (Chion-Kenny, 1994), while challenging students to develop higher-order knowledge and skills (Villegas, 1991) and capitalizing on students' cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them (Abdul-Haqq, 1994).

7. *Culturally mediated instruction.* Instruction is characterized by use of knowledge within given cultures, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content. Culturally appropriate social situations refer to relationships among students and between teachers and students that are congruent with the culture of each student (McCarty, Lynch, Wallace, and Benally, 1991) and culturally valued knowledge is that which is relevant to students' lives (Banks, 2001; Hollins, 1996; Nieto, 1999).

8. *Student-centered, student-controlled classroom discourse.* Students are given opportunity to control some portion of the lesson, providing teachers with insight into the ways that speech and negotiation are used in the home and community (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999).

The culturally responsive teaching approaches that characterize the lessons and units of instruction in Chapters 2 through 7 can help to lay the philosophical foundations on which teachers can begin to create social change.

## Myths about Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Aldridge and colleagues (2000) have identified several common misconceptions or myths about multicultural education that are also applicable to culturally responsive teaching, and they have been adapted in this section for that purpose, along with a few additions and omissions. It should be noted again that CRT is inclusive of both multicultural curriculum (related to diversity within the United States) and global education (related to diversity in the world), so there are, indeed, similarities among all three in terms of definitions and goals and the myths that surround them. Clearly, the main similarity they all share is valuing diversity in all aspects of the classroom environment, whether content, method, perspective, personnel, students, or cultures.

It should be noted that teachers are not the only ones who need to become aware of the following myths. The general public as well, once these myths are dispelled, will be able to see the intrinsic value of culturally responsive teaching across all disciplines and grade levels so that meeting the needs and interests of *all* students will become a reality.

### Myth 1

*People from the same nation or region, or those who speak the same language, share a common culture* (Aldridge, Calhoun, and Aman, 2000). The fact is, for example, that while most Latinos share a common language, the cultures, say, of Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Argentina are distinctly different from one another.

### Myth 2

*Families from the same culture share the same values.* In reality, a continuum of cultural identity exists, and, interestingly, the entire range can often be found within the same family.

### Myth 3

*Children's books about other cultures are usually authentic.* Not necessarily. For example, a popular book, *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, offers inaccurate depictions of Chinese culture, especially in relation to names.

### Myth 4

*Multicultural education (culturally responsive curriculum) just includes ethnic and racial issues.* In fact, such education goes beyond these issues to include concerns for gender, class, ability, language issues, and the values of cultural diversity. Furthermore, a number of texts identify additional goals for culturally responsive teaching, especially the promotion of equal opportunity in the school for all students as well as social justice for all peoples beyond the

school environment, human rights, and respect for all no matter their differences (Banks, 1994; Davidman and Davidman, 1997; Gollnick and Chinn, 2005; Sleeter, 1996).

### Myth 5

*The seasonal/holiday approach is appropriate for teaching multicultural education.* This approach involves incorporating culturally responsive curricula at certain times of the year based on a holiday (e.g., studying Native Americans in November when Thanksgiving occurs or learning about Martin Luther King, Jr., during Black History Month or at the time of his birthday). Ironically, Aldridge notes that students often come away from such teaching with even more biases. When all Americans are sufficiently a part of courses of study and daily instruction, notes Aldridge and colleagues (2000), there will be no need for these special months or weeks.

### Myth 6

*Multicultural education (culturally responsive education) should be taught separately.* Such an approach, like the holiday focus just mentioned, sends the message that certain groups are still on the fringes of the society. Culturally responsive curriculum should actually be an organic component of *all* disciplines, regardless of the fact that its presence has traditionally been overlooked.

### Myth 7

*Multiculturalism is divisive.* It is not multiculturalism or culturally responsive teaching approaches that are divisive, but rather intolerance and prejudice toward people or groups who are different in some way. Multicultural education (culturally responsive teaching) can assist in teaching students of all ages about tolerance and the idea that “we are all alike and all different in certain ways” (Aldridge et al., 2000) and that our identities are usually influenced by others and thus change over time.

### Myth 8

*Historical accuracy suffers in multicultural education.* There is no question that some curricula promote certain cultural perspectives. For example, Eurocentric curriculum teaches that Western civilization started in Greece as opposed to Egypt, as asserted by Afrocentric curriculum. In order to help students seek historical accuracy, they need to be taught how to investigate controversial questions and do extensive research when confronted with discrepancies in historical literature.

### Myth 9

*Most people identify with one culture.* The fact is that many students come from families that are multicultural. Attention therefore needs to be given in school not only to the existence of differences between groups, but *within* groups as well, so that children from such families, as well as others, view this as a common phenomenon within the United States.

### Myth 10

*There are cultural group learning styles.* Based on research among five major cultural groups in the United States—African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans—Dunn and Griggs (1995) concluded that there are instead cross-cultural and intracultural similarities and differences among all peoples, which

are enriching when understood and channeled positively. Teaching students using a variety of diverse methods that address their specific needs while having high expectations are the greater determinants of success among minority students. Whether you agree with Dunn and Griggs or not, it would be wise to consult other studies that have been done on the learning styles of particular cultural groups.

### Beyond the Myths

No matter the depth of one's commitment to culturally responsive teaching, we are all subject to misconceptions about its meaning and purpose. You are more likely to move beyond these myths if you make a continual effort to examine your own beliefs and attitudes about diversity and seek objective, research-based studies related to diversity and culturally responsive approaches. This primer seeks to assist you in fulfilling these important goals.

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- Multicultural Review*  
Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., P.O. Box 5007,  
Westport, CT, 06881-5007.
- Teaching Tolerance*  
Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Ave.,  
Montgomery, AL, 36104.

## Websites

- Culturally Responsive Teaching (Brown University)**  
[www.lab.brown.edu](http://www.lab.brown.edu)  
Provides information and strategies to adapt teaching so that it meets the needs of all students.
- Diverse Schools: "Skewing Myths About Diverse Schools"**  
[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)  
Presents discussion by education columnist Jay Matthews of author and parent Eileen Gale Kugler's debunking of seven myths that frighten concerned parents away from diverse schools. (*Washington Post*, August 2004)

## Journals

- Multicultural Education*  
Caddo Gap Press, Inc. 3145 Geary Blvd., Suite 275,  
San Francisco, CA, 94118 (415)750-9978. Journal of  
the National Association for Multicultural Education  
(NAME).

**Diversity Calendar**

[www.kumc.edu/diversity](http://www.kumc.edu/diversity) (University of Kansas)  
Shows ethnic, national, and religious days in a monthly listing.

**Diversity Web**

[www.diversityweb.org](http://www.diversityweb.org)  
Describes a resource center for higher education (part of a larger communication initiative titled Diversity Works) whose purpose is to create new pathways for diversity collaboration and connection through the Internet as well as more traditional forms of print communication.

**Educating Teachers for Diversity**

[www.ncrel.org](http://www.ncrel.org) (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory)  
Addresses the crucial issue of preparing future teachers to advance “meaningful, engaged learning for all students, regardless of their race, gender, ethnic heritage, or cultural background.”

**Equity and Diversity Resources**

[www.enc.org/topics/equity](http://www.enc.org/topics/equity) (Eisenhower National Clearinghouse)  
Presents articles, checklists, and other resources regarding equity and diversity in the schools.

**Glossary of Terms Related to Judaism**

[www.philo.ucdavis.edu/zope/home/bruce](http://www.philo.ucdavis.edu/zope/home/bruce) (University of Pennsylvania, prepared initially by Robert A. Kraft)  
Provides definitions and historical backgrounds of people, places, and things.

**Multicultural Education and Ethnic Groups: Selected Internet Sources**

[www.library.csustan.edu/boyer/multicultural/main.htm](http://www.library.csustan.edu/boyer/multicultural/main.htm) (California State University Stanislaus Library)  
Blends a variety of Internet resources on multicultural education and diversity, including websites for school

teachers, bibliographies, biographies, as well as Web articles on ethnic cooking, religion, and various other topics.

**Reading Resources: Celebrate Reading 365 Days a Year—Multicultural Web Resources**

[www.nea.org/webresources/readmulticult0509.htm](http://www.nea.org/webresources/readmulticult0509.htm)  
Promotes multiculturalism through literature that opens a window on world cultures for students.

**Tolerance.org’s Resources for Teachers, Administrators, and Counselors (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center)**

[www.tolerance.org/teach/index/jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/index/jsp)  
Encourages people everywhere to resist hate and nurture tolerance; provides the following teaching resources free on request:

- *Teaching Tolerance* magazine subscription (one copy per issue)
- *Responding to Hate at School* booklet (available in bulk)

**Scholastic: Diversity Lesson Plans**

[www.teacher.scholastic.com/professional/teachdive/index.htm](http://www.teacher.scholastic.com/professional/teachdive/index.htm)  
Features lesson plans, activities, and professional resources to assist teachers in coping with the challenges of the diverse classroom.