Racial inequality in special education and the need for cultural competence

Nicole Rosado
Bank Street College of Education
Racial Inequality in Special Education
and the Need for Cultural Competence

By
Nicole Rosado

Mentor:
Sean O’Shea

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Science in Education
Bank Street College of Education
2013
Abstract

For many years, schools in the United States have been dealing with the persistent overrepresentation of students of color in special education. In particular, African American and Latino children, especially boys, are disproportionately referred and placed in special education settings. The research suggests a variety of causes for this epidemic. At the forefront of the issue is the institutional racism that exists in society, which causes schools to favor White, middle class students while putting students from different racial and socioeconomic groups at risk. The factors that are most concerning are biased assessment practices, zero tolerance behavioral management policies, lack of quality bilingual education programs, and a cultural mismatch between students and teachers. While this problem is complex and multifaceted, one approach that seems to have the capacity to make a difference is cultural competence. After an analysis of the ways in which racially, culturally and linguistically diverse students are on the receiving end of unequal educational experiences, recommendations for the implementation of culturally competent education will be provided.
# Table of Contents

I. Rationale ........................................................................................................... 4

II. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 5

III. Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education ........... 8
   i. Recommendations ......................................................................................... 14

IV. Bilingual Students in Special Education .......................................................... 26
   i. Recommendations ......................................................................................... 31

V. Teacher-Student Cultural Mismatch ........................................................................ 36

VI. Defining Cultural Competence ........................................................................... 38

VII. Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 43
Rationale

Three years ago, when I applied to Bank Street College, I reflected on the journey that led to my ultimate decision to become an educator. What was it about education that called to me so strongly? Looking back on my childhood, I recall that school was the place where I felt the most secure. Growing up in a family that struggled with generational poverty and other related challenges, I relished the stability and sense of hope that my educational experiences provided. One of my greatest life accomplishments thus far has been breaking the cycle of poverty in my family by becoming the first person to graduate from college and pursue a professional career. I have come to believe that education is the absolute most vital tool for overcoming the many obstacles faced by communities of color in this country. Once I truly understood the impact of education on the quality of my life, I developed a strong desire to give this gift back to my community.

Now that I am approaching the end of my career as a Bank Street student, I am once again reflecting on what truly matters to me as an educator. I still hold the same commitment that I started with: to empower students who come from communities with limited resources to be successful in life, no matter what obstacles they face. One thing that has changed, however, is that my understanding of the challenges faced by students of color has deepened through both my classroom experience and my coursework. In retrospect, I was a bit naïve to assume that by simply being a passionate, dedicated classroom teacher, I could solve all of my students’ barriers to success. I now understand that even when students are inspired and motivated, and even when teachers give their all in their academic instruction, students of color still lack equal access to quality
educational experiences, a problem rooted in institutional or “invisible” racism. Not only do these students lack access, but they are even put in harm’s way through biased assessment practices and classroom and school environments that neither understand nor appreciate their cultural identities. As an educator going into the complex field of bilingual special education, I am now filled with an even stronger sense of urgency to make a difference in my community, not only through my own classroom teaching, but also through sharing what I have learned and taking steps to overcome the institutional challenges currently stacked against students of color.

Introduction

The field of special education has made leaps and bounds in the last few decades. The assessment tools that are used to evaluate students and make classifications have become notably more sophisticated and accurate. Many teacher education programs strive to prepare educators to be inclusive and dynamic in their instruction, so that different types of learners can experience academic success. Whereas in years past, students with “invisible” disabilities such as Learning Disability (LD) would be left to sink or swim without support, special education has evolved to the point that fourteen categories of disability are now known, recognized and served.

While much progress has been made, there is still a long road to travel to ensure that all students truly do receive an appropriate education and equal opportunities for success. What this means, particularly in the United States, is that educational policymakers, schools, and teachers must develop awareness of and sensitivity to the increasingly culturally diverse populations we serve. In recent years, statistics show that the number of racially and ethnically diverse students in schools across the country has
grown, while the number of White students has decreased. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the percentage of White students has decreased by about 13% over the last two decades, while the percentage of Hispanic students has nearly doubled. The Center for Public Education (2012) reports that according to Census Bureau projections, the Hispanic, Black and Asian populations will grow significantly through the year 2050, while the White population will increase by only one percent.

One might wonder whether students’ racial or ethnic background actually has an impact on their educational experiences. In a nation known for being a “melting pot,” one might assume that schools are designed to welcome and nurture students from all backgrounds. However, the educational system, like other major institutions in this country, is designed for White, middle-class people. This is especially apparent when considering the prevalence of Eurocentric curricula, even in schools with very few White students, as well as the fact that the overwhelming majority of the teacher workforce consists of White females. Even more disconcerting are the racial demographics of both gifted and talented programs and special education programs, with White students overwhelmingly represented on the G&T end of the spectrum while students of color are overrepresented in special education.

When discussing the inequities in educational opportunities faced by students of color, it is important to distinguish that the issue goes far beyond interpersonal instances of racism. It is the racism that occurs at the institutional level, those policies and structures that are woven into the fabric of society and “invisible” at first glance, that are at the root of the problem. Having a system that is built by and for White people creates a need for there to be an “Other”; this binary distinction between those who “count” as
White and those who do not has historically been used to systemically deny access to rights and privileges. Decades may have passed since the start of the Civil Rights Movement, but the passing of laws does not automatically eradicate the racist infrastructure on which the United States was built. The difference is that now, racial oppression more often occurs covertly. While students from diverse backgrounds may attend the same schools as White students, this does not mean that those schools are truly designed to serve them equally. Kivel (1996) explains that, “American culture has come to mean white European-American norms, values, beliefs and traditions” (p. 78). When viewed through this narrow cultural lens, students of color are at risk for devastating institutional discrimination.

One of the most harmful ways in which institutional racism manifests itself in the educational system is the overrepresentation of students of color, especially Black students, in special education. In particular, the diagnosis of Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD) is applied to Black boys at an alarmingly high rate, and tends to lead students on a downward spiral in what is described as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” In contrast, White students tend to be overrepresented in gifted and talented programs, while gifted students of color fail to be recognized as such. As for those students whose native language is one other than English, the lack of quality bilingual programs and misconceptions about second language acquisition lead to great inequalities in educational experiences. English Language Learners (ELLs) are often either misdiagnosed with Learning Disability (LD), or have disabilities that are mistaken for a simple lack of English proficiency. While there are many factors contributing to the ongoing existence of these problems, one notable finding is that there is a major cultural
mismatch between students and teachers. Over 85% of the teacher workforce consists of White females, while the student population grows more and more diverse (Hansen, 2011). Studies have shown that, in many ways, this lack of teacher diversity is both a disadvantage to students of color, and an unfair advantage to White students.

With all of these factors taken into consideration, it becomes clear that a school system normed around a White, middle-class population is no longer sufficient to serve the needs of the current population of the United States. As we strive to meet the needs of students with varying levels of ability, we must also be attuned to other aspects of their learner profiles, including their cultural backgrounds. In our increasingly diverse society, it is becoming more and more urgent for educational professionals to understand and address students’ cultural identities in a way that allows their differences to be assets, rather than deficits. This situation calls for cultural competence in assessment and instructional practices, at the classroom level as well as school- and district-wide. After an analysis of the ways in which culturally and linguistically diverse students are underserved and even harmed by current policies and practices, recommendations for the implementation of culturally competent education will be provided.

Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education

The overrepresentation of African American students in special education is by no means a new problem. Research over the last several decades has examined, and at times offered inaccurate, offensive reasons for, the differences in the educational experiences of Black and White students. The notion that the academic achievement gap can be attributed to inherent, genetic differences in ability based on race was most prominently put forth by Arthur Jensen in 1969. He attacked the need for existing social programs to
support African American children living in poverty, such as Head Start, by arguing that their lower IQ test scores were caused by inferior genetics rather than external factors. Not surprisingly, his work was published shortly after the Supreme Court ruling to desegregate public schools (Alland, 2002, p. 80). Sadly, while people may not always make such blatantly racist comments today, Black students are still on the receiving end of biased instructional and assessment practices that assume within-child deficits. As a result, they remain at an elevated risk for being diagnosed with disabilities.

The statistics surrounding the issue of Black student overrepresentation in special education are astounding. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) reports that while Black students represent only 17% of the national public school student body, they make up a large portion of those students diagnosed in the high-incidence disability categories. In fact, 32% of Black students are identified with an intellectual disability, 29% with an emotional or behavioral disorder, 20% with a specific learning disability, and 21% as being developmentally delayed (Ford, 2012, p. 398). The main cause for concern is that the categories of disability where this racial disparity is most prevalent are those that are considered “judgment categories,” which rely on subjective clinical judgment rather than verifiable biological data (Harry & Klinger, 2006). The four judgment categories of disability are Emotional Disturbance (EBD), Intellectual Disability (formerly Mental Retardation) (ID), Learning Disability (LD), and Speech and Language Impairment (SLI). Unlike disabilities with clear physiological markers, such as visual impairments or Down Syndrome, the traits that define the “judgment category” disabilities vary from child to child, across geographical locations, and by race (Harry & Klinger, 2006). The fact that a child can be considered “disabled” in one context, yet considered “typical” in
another speaks to an issue with the very definition of disability itself. Disability, particularly those categories that are identified through subjective clinical evaluations, is very much a social construct. When children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are assessed against norms that are not based on their real world experiences, they become victimized by these unfair assessment practices and deemed as having inherent deficits, while the contexts in which they exist, including school, family, and larger community, are not taken into consideration.

Harry and Klinger (2006) explain that many of the students of color who are referred and placed in special education settings face a number of external risk factors that affect their academic experiences. Since race and socioeconomic class are inextricably linked, many of these students are struggling with the overwhelming effects of poverty. Students who live in impoverished communities lack resources such as nutritious food, healthcare, and extracurricular programs, and are subjected to high crime rates in their neighborhoods. School-based risks occur in the form of unqualified or inexperienced teachers, low teacher retention rates, overcrowded classrooms, social-class and ethnic biases in assessment practices, low expectations from teachers and school personnel, school personnel judgment towards families, high-stakes testing, and lack of funding for programs and materials.

The lack of consideration given to these circumstances in the referral and evaluation process is especially disconcerting when it comes to the number of Black boys identified as having EBD. A staggering 29% of Black students are identified with this disability. However, according to Turnbull et al. (2010), “genetic influences appear to be at a small to moderate level for most types of emotional or behavioral disorders…"
Although temperament is biologically based, it is the interactions between temperament and environment that shape behavior” (p. 190). When you consider the fact that genetics do not play a huge role in the development of emotional and behavioral disorders, along with the external risk factors faced by many Black students, it becomes clear that assessment practices focused only on the child while ignoring his environment put children at risk for misdiagnosis. What further complicates the matter is that the definition of this disability itself is subjective and unclear. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines emotional disturbance as follows:

“…a condition exhibiting one of more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:
(a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
(b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
(c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
(d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.” (http://idea.ed.gov)

The definition outlined here is inevitably prone to biases. Firstly, who is it that defines “normal circumstances”? Whose cultural values determine what the appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are for a variety of circumstances? Furthermore, how do we make the distinction between a “general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression” and a legitimate emotional response to the hardships induced by poverty and racism? Because systems in this country operate on the values of the White middle-class, this
definition is inherently skewed in such a way that students of color will often be viewed as “atypical.” This problem has long-term detrimental consequences for the African American community as well as society as a whole.

Being diagnosed with EBD can have a profound negative impact on students, given the way this disability is typically treated. Not only does it carry a negative social stigma, but there are other very tangible consequences as well. This diagnosis often leads to placement in isolated, restrictive self-contained settings. In these settings, students are typically offered remedial academic instruction and social skill training. Rather than learning what their general education peers are learning, the academic content is “watered down” and academic expectations are lowered, leading to more limited opportunities after secondary school. In addition, the behavior management policies typically entail a “curriculum of control,” where students are subjected to militant discipline, rigid routines, and punitive discipline measures. Students in settings that employ control-based practices and zero tolerance policies are more likely to develop hostile relationships towards authority figures and be driven to be destructive in order to have a sense of control over their environment (Nichols, 1992). Rather than providing students with supportive strategies to facilitate the development of self-control and healthy social skills, students are placed in intimidating conditions that make it likely for them to want to rebel, thus exacerbating the behavioral challenges. Furthermore, research shows that Black students with EBD are far more likely than their White counterparts to be deprived of the opportunity to be educated alongside their general education peers. Contrary to their right to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), they are typically placed in the most restrictive and isolated environments (Skiba et al. 2006, p. 413).
Ford (2012) argues that this epidemic begins even before the label of EBD is given. She describes a “pipeline to special education,” in which Black and Latino students, particularly males, with perceived behavioral challenges are tracked into the EBD category through the use of repeated suspensions and expulsions (p. 402). Indeed, one of the most common ways that schools interact with students with behavioral challenges is to “push them out.” What this means is that students with behavioral challenges are frequently suspended, expelled, transferred to different classes, and transferred to different schools. They also regularly face out-of-school suspensions, requiring them to miss out on important learning time and fall behind, in a vicious cycle that continually repeats. While these are risk factors for all students with behavioral challenges, regardless of race, Black students are disproportionately affected by these policies. The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) describes the disparity between how White students and Black students are chastised for the same offenses. Black students represent only 17% of national public school enrollment, but account for 34% of suspensions. In addition, Black students with disabilities are three times more likely to be suspended than White students with disabilities. This high level of mobility and instability is unquestionably linked to the fact that students diagnosed with EBD are significantly more likely to drop out of school in grades 9 through 12 than both their disabled and non-disabled peers (Osher et al., 2003).

The zero tolerance behavioral policies often enacted by public schools puts Black students in even greater danger. Under this type of policy, students are suspended, expelled and even arrested for simple disciplinary infractions that would never warrant criminal charges if committed by an adult. Actions such as bringing cell phones to
school or smoking cigarettes can result in confrontations with police, setting students on a path towards future arrests. For students with EBD in particular, this chain of events gives way to what is described as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Statistics show that more than half of all adolescents with EBD are arrested within five years of leaving school; among dropouts that figure exceeds 70% (Sacks & Kern, 2008, p. 113). Turnbull et al. (2010) also report that of the approximately 134,000 youths who are incarcerated, about half have been identified as having EBD. Furthermore, Black students are four times more likely than their White peers to end up in correctional facilities.

Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, defines the school-to-prison pipeline as “policies that encourage police presence at schools, harsh tactics including physical restraint, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time.” While these policies need to be altered at the school, district and state level, the positive news is that classroom teachers are students’ most powerful allies. What happens in the classroom has the potential to keep students out of the “pipeline.” With the right intentions and tools, teachers can work to make a difference in overcoming this dangerous cycle.

**Recommendations**

In order to adequately serve African American students in schools today, it is crucial to understand the unique history that they have in this country. Unlike many other ethnic groups, the majority of African Americans in the United States did not come to this country to “fulfill the American dream.” Rather, they were brought here in shackles as “involuntary minorities” (Ford, 2012). The difference between voluntary and involuntary minorities is that those groups who immigrate to this country voluntarily do
so in search of a better quality of life. Many immigrants feel that their circumstances in the United States are better than what they experienced in their homelands. For this reason, although they face discrimination and hardships, they are less likely to “internalize prejudice to the point that they are paralyzed psychologically and socially” (Ford, 2012, p. 394).

Perhaps due to the tragic history of African Americans in this country, another risk factor faced by African American students is that the “colorblind” philosophy is applied to them exclusively (Ford, 2012). While few would deny that other ethnic groups have a culture, it seems that African Americans are often viewed as being acultural. Although schools and educators may claim to celebrate “multiculturalism,” this title often excludes African American students. The level of comfort that is achieved when discussing cultural differences between White people and other ethnic groups is not granted to discussions of African American culture. Research shows that although educators are often open to the idea of modifying curriculum and instruction to be responsive to cultural differences of other ethnic groups, many will respond to the suggestion of doing the same for African American students by claiming that they “don’t see differences” (Ford, 2012, p. 394). While this approach may be well-intentioned, it is ultimately dehumanizing. The African slaves who were forcibly brought to this country were stripped of their cultural identities; to continue to deny the cultural identity of their descendants only serves to further marginalize this population.

We can begin to move towards providing fair and appropriate educational experiences for Black students by first acknowledging the impact of a “colorblind” approach. Hitchcock (2002) highlights some of the pitfalls of this perspective:
- Colorblindness denies that race makes a difference in people’s lives.
- Colorblindness enforces a taboo against talking about race.
- Colorblindness believes color consciousness must be racist.
- Colorblindness sees other racial groups but is blind to mainstream whiteness.
- Colorblindness believes we will all assimilate into the mainstream.
- Colorblindness says we are only individuals.
- Colorblindness believes intent, not effects, are important. (pp. 60-65)

Hitchcock’s points make it clear that not only are Black students negatively affected by “colorblindness,” but White students are also given an advantage over other racial and ethnic groups as well. By upholding “mainstream” values, which are essentially those of the White, middle class, the colorblind approach pushes students who do not belong to that group to conform to a cultural identity that is different from their own. Not only are these students at risk for discrimination and unequal educational experiences, but this approach also deprives all students of the opportunity to learn about and benefit from each other’s cultural differences.

Our cultures shape our beliefs, desires, behaviors, relationships, and many other aspects of our lives. If we fail to recognize that African Americans even have a culture, how can we truly meet their needs as learners? In order to build supportive relationships between teachers and students, and provide learning environments that work for African American students, it is essential to develop an understanding of African American culture. Hale (2001) recommends getting familiar with the following nine interrelated dimensions (as outlined by Boykin, 1986):
1. **Spirituality**, an approach that views life as essentially vitalistic rather than mechanistic, with the conviction that nonmaterial forces influence people’s everyday lives

2. **Harmony**, the notion that one’s fate is interrelated with other elements in the scheme of things, such that humankind and nature are harmonically conjoined

3. **Movement**, an emphasis on the interweaving of rhythm, percussiveness, music, and dance as central to psychological health

4. **Verve**, a propensity for relatively high levels of stimulation and for action that is energetic and lively

5. **Affect**, an emphasis on emotions and feelings together with a special sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency to be emotionally expressive

6. **Communalism**, a commitment to social connectedness, which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privileges

7. **Expressive individualism**, the cultivation of a distinctive personality and a proclivity for spontaneous and genuine personal expression

8. **Oral tradition**, a preference for oral and auditory modes of communication in which both speaking and listening are treated as performances and in which oral virtuosity – the ability to use alliterative, metaphorically colorful, graphic forms of spoken language – is emphasized and cultivated

9. **Social time perspective**, an orientation toward time as passing through a social space rather than a material one, in which time is seen as recurring, personal, and phenomenological (p. 116)

Without an awareness of these aspects of African American culture, education professionals often misinterpret students’ behaviors because they are viewing these
actions through the wrong cultural lens. Perhaps most profoundly misinterpreted are the proclivities towards “verve,” or energetic action, and “affect,” or emotional expressiveness. Very often, Black students are subjected to wrongful interpretations of their behaviors and are deemed hyperactive, disruptive or disrespectful. Thus begins the cycle of disproportionately harsh discipline measures and inappropriate special education referrals. By developing an understanding of African American culture, it becomes possible to incorporate these elements into students’ educational lives so that they can enjoy supportive, unbiased treatment rather than being pushed to conform to cultural standards that are not their own.

The following recommendations for culturally competent teaching of African American children are based on the aforementioned nine interrelated dimensions of African American culture. Firstly, the teaching of reading and writing should include the development of the oral tradition. The connection between the development of language and literacy skills is widely documented, so this is a practice that will not only support African American students, but will benefit students of other backgrounds as well. Another recommendation is to ensure that classroom experiences include a great deal of group activities. Students should be given opportunities to interact with peers in educational contexts, simultaneously developing their social skills and collaboratively constructing understandings about academic content. Instruction should be dynamic and multimodal, providing an outlet for kinesthetic activity as well as creative expression. Hale (2001) recommends alternating quiet, independent work with opportunities for students to get up and move around as they learn and engage in active learning experiences. Furthermore, she recommends that educators work on reconceptualizing
what is often viewed as “rambunctious” or “hyper” behavior. In other words, teachers and other school professionals must accept that some students simply need to be more physically active than others. This is hardly a reason to “pathologize” students’ behavior and recommend medication and/or special education placement (p. 117). Instead, we must continually strive to modify our learning environments and instructional and assessment practices to match the needs of our learners.

One of the pressing concerns about the education of African American children is that inner-city schools and the schools of the suburban middle-class tend to result in very different long-term outcomes. Education activist Jonathan Kozol described this difference as one in which certain students are educated to be governors, while others are trained to be governed. While certainly a valid statement, this may be putting it lightly. Representative Augustus Hawkins (D-California) articulated the problem of the achievement gap quite straightforwardly when he asked, “What do you do with a former slave when you no longer need his labor?” (Hale, 2001, p. 111). Given the long, complex history of the systematic oppression of African Americans in this country, it is hardly far-fetched to view the difference in educational quality as part of that tradition. As our society continues to evolve, and blatant racism becomes less and less accepted, we must reframe societal institutions to reflect that change in our belief system. One way in which we can begin to address the problem of providing unequal long-term outcomes for Black and White students is to provide all students with authentic, meaningful educational experiences that foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills and leadership qualities. Currently, White middle-class students have far more access to progressive educational philosophies than their Black peers. While many White students are being provided with
a “whole child” approach to education, where they can safely develop their social skills, self-confidence, self-advocacy skills and be trained to become leaders, Black students in lower income areas receive the shorter end of the stick. In these schools, students are far more likely to be taught through a more traditional approach, with lots of repetition and memorization, rote worksheet activities, and primarily independent work. What tends to be missing is the opportunity for creative, hands-on learning experiences and training in how to be a successful leader. For this reason, teacher education programs must move in the direction of focusing more on progressive educational philosophies that teach to the whole child and develop leadership abilities in all students. To do otherwise is to continue to provide unequal educational experiences to students of color and maintain the status quo of White privilege.

In addition to creating learning environments that work for African American students, we must also address the “discipline gap,” in which African American students are disproportionately on the receiving end of harsh, sometimes even nonsensical, discipline practices. Monroe (2005) offers recommendations to help make discipline policies and practices logical and unbiased. Firstly, professional development for teachers and administrators should include training on appropriate discipline. An integral component of such workshops is having school professionals engage in self-reflection to become aware of their underlying perceptions, and misconceptions, about students of color. Monroe also advocates for holding workshops that bring together teachers who work in various communities, to increase exposure to and understanding of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Creating an authentic multicultural context to have meaningful discussions about approaches to discipline “provides opportunities for
teachers to be exposed to experiences and approaches that may challenge marginalizing beliefs about African American youths” (p. 48). Another safeguard against harmful, overzealous discipline practices for minor infractions is to create advisory boards specifically for school discipline. Monroe (2005) states that the boards should begin by “monitoring demographic trends in referrals and highlighting discriminatory patterns that emerge” (p. 48). Of particular importance is identifying problems early in the school year as a preventive measure, and having the well-qualified professionals on the advisory board give feedback on how to serve students’ and teachers’ needs most effectively.

Aside from modifying instructional practices and learning environments and participating in professional development trainings regarding cultural differences, there are even more actions that teachers can take to reduce the overrepresentation of Black students in special education and avoid the school-to-prison pipeline. To ensure effectiveness, we must use what we learn directly from students themselves about how to best teach them. One heartbreaking finding about the experiences of Black students in schools is how they tend to feel about their teachers’ perceptions of them. In a survey conducted at a high school in California, Black students responded in overwhelming agreement to the statements “I think education is important” and “I want to go to college.” However, when given the statement, “My teachers support me and care about my success in their class,” the results were quite the opposite. A mere 8% of Black male students said that they “strongly agreed” with that statement. Equally disturbing is that nearly half of Black males “strongly disagreed” with the statement. On the other hand, 33% of White males and 44% of White females agreed that they are supported and cared for by their teachers (Noguera, 2002).
“My teachers support me and care about my success in their class.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black Male</th>
<th>Black Female</th>
<th>Asian Male</th>
<th>Asian Female</th>
<th>White Male</th>
<th>White Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the findings of this study are disturbing, they also pinpoint an area that teachers have the power to change. Relationship building is a vital part of the educational experience and is something that benefits all students. However, a focus on positive teacher-student and student-student relationships has also been shown to support students with behavioral challenges. In order to prevent students, especially Black boys, from getting caught up in the tangled web of misdiagnosis of disabilities, suspensions and the criminal justice system, we need to go back to the basics of letting students know how much they matter. This entails creating and managing a social environment in the classroom where students and teachers genuinely get to know each other and operate in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Practices such as morning meetings, community building activities, a social-emotional curriculum, and classroom management programs such as Responsive Classroom truly facilitate this process. When working with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties in particular, Laursen (2002) offers the following guidelines (p. 129):
### Seven Habits of Reclaiming Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habit</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Trust</strong></td>
<td>Doing what you say you are going to do</td>
<td>I’m accountable to the young persons I serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Attention</strong></td>
<td>Putting the young person at the center of concern</td>
<td>Children and youth are valuable and worthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Empathy</strong></td>
<td>Seeing the world through the young person’s eyes</td>
<td>There are many versions to the same story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Availability</strong></td>
<td>Making time for children and youth is a top priority</td>
<td>Young people are important and worth an investment of my time and energy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Affirmation</strong></td>
<td>Saying positive things to and about a young person and meaning it</td>
<td>Even troubled youth have positive qualities and constructive behaviors which can be acknowledged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Respect</strong></td>
<td>Giving young people a say in decisions which affect them</td>
<td>Feelings are valid and young persons are the best experts on themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Virtue</strong></td>
<td>Holding young persons accountable for their behavior without blaming; being a role model</td>
<td>Children must learn self-discipline, and those who teach them must practice what they teach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. John Seita, the lead author of this list, was a troubled boy who had sabotaged a dozen court-ordered placements by the time he was 12 years old.*

By being clear about what supportive, nurturing partnerships with students actually look and sound like, we can begin to make a difference for those youngsters who are at risk for school failure due to emotional and behavioral challenges. Allowing these principles to guide our actions in the classroom sets a foundation for an environment where students
are understood, treated well, held to higher expectations, and have opportunities to be successful.

The guidelines for reclaiming relationships with students are clearly not aligned with the “curriculum of control” that is currently the norm for students with emotional and behavioral challenges. Ironically, research has shown that this militant approach to behavior management actually exacerbates the very behaviors that it is meant to suppress, as students tend to rebel against such a domineering style. As the level of oppressive control over students increases, so too does their need to be in control of something themselves, and therefore the more likely it is that they will engage in destructive, power-seeking behaviors. While this approach may appear to be effective at the surface level, Nichols (1992) explains that, in actuality, “the use of power is often effective at intimidating students who need control least and is seldom effective with students whose behavior is most unproductive” (p. 79). The question of whether or not the curriculum of control “works” also depends on what result you are looking for. If the goal is to get students to be quiet and follow orders in the classroom, then to a certain extent, it is effective. However, when the goal is to truly develop students’ abilities to have self-control, make healthy decisions, and do well both academically and socially, then a new approach is desperately needed.

Fortunately, when we forego the control-based approach for a relationship-based model instead, we have the ability to set boundaries with students without creating hostility. The difference between admonishing a student in a control-based environment versus in a relationship-based environment is that in the latter, students are confident that they are safe with you, that you care, and that you still expect the best from them. In the
former, students feel unsafe, judged, and realize that teachers have low expectations for them, thus lowering their self-image. Bondy and Ross (2008) describe how teachers can be “warm demanders,” who are firm, yet supportive, in their interactions with students. First and foremost, to be an effective “warm demander,” a caring relationship in which students know that you believe in them must be established. Within this context, even harsh-sounding reprimands can be interpreted as a sign of caring, because students know who you are and what your intentions are for them. When students have been shown that you have their best interests at heart, they are less likely to feel hostility and the need to rebel against your demands. A crucial element of this type of teacher-student relationship is “unconditional positive regard” (p. 2). Students must know that it is acceptable for them to make mistakes, and that your love and care for them will not be taken away simply because of behaviors that they engage in. The trust that is so essential to make this relationship work is built on the fact that students are safe enough to try again. Students deserve the opportunity to learn and grow from their mistakes, rather than having their growth stifled by illogical punishments.

Although the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and the school-to-prison pipeline are rooted in institutional racism, teachers still have a great deal of power to make a difference. Teachers know their students better than any other education professionals, and therefore, can be very strong allies for their students. The main focus should be on keeping students in the classroom, and out of the world of suspensions and interactions with police. Likewise, we must do all that we can to ensure that students are only placed in special education after all possible attempts to educate them in the Least Restrictive Environment have
been implemented. These attempts absolutely must take into account the cultural identity of students. A “one size fits all” approach does not work for various learning styles and levels of ability, and it certainly does not work for diverse groups of students either.

**Bilingual Students in Special Education**

When it comes to students whose native language is one other than English, the issue of disability is complex. At first glance, the data appears to show that English Language Learners are underrepresented in special education. However, when the data is sorted by factors such as ethnic group, state, district, and disability category, the issue becomes a bit more convoluted. Due to a lack of understanding about language development, along with insufficient training and resources for quality bilingual instruction and assessment, bilingual students are simultaneously at risk for both under-referral and over diagnosis of disabilities.

While nationally, ELLs are underrepresented in special education, Sullivan (2011) reports, “at the state level, students identified as ELLs are increasingly overrepresented in special education and in each of the high-incidence categories of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) and Mild Mental Retardation (MIMR)” (p. 324). ELLs are most commonly misdiagnosed with the label of Learning Disability. This is due to the fact that both English Language Learners and students with learning disabilities tend to score low on assessment tasks that require a strong command of language (Sullivan, 2011). On the other hand, ELLs who have disabilities sometimes fly under the radar as their learning difficulties are solely attributed to language acquisition. When this happens, students might receive support with learning English, but their other needs as a learner are not addressed. Sullivan (2011) states that “students
identified as ELLs begin receiving special education services 2 to 3 years later than the average for students who are English-proficient” (p. 320). The category in which ELLs are most underrepresented is Emotional Disturbance. This suggests that many bilingual students are wrongfully treated as if they are intentionally misbehaving, and receive punishments rather than support for their disability.

There are many factors at play in the complicated issue of second language learners and disability. Firstly, the “English Learner Label” itself is subject to clinical judgment and varies according to several factors. Garcia et al. (2008) argue that the English Language Learner label is “fluid,” as children can move in and out of this category depending on what state or even which school district within a state they attend school in. Much like the high-incidence categories of disability, this label is determined by external factors surrounding the child, rather than anything biologically inherent within the child. Furthermore, ELLs face obstacles such as the lack of high quality bilingual programs, culturally and linguistically biased assessment practices, a lack of cultural competence on the part of school personnel, and language and cultural barriers between parents and the school system. For those students who have immigrated to the United States from other parts of the world, the process of transitioning to life in a new, unknown country often brings social-emotional stressors. Unfortunately, this process is not often treated with the care and sensitivity it merits. Overall, a major challenge faced by bilingual children is that their fluency in a language other than English is often viewed as a deficit, rather than being as an asset that should be celebrated and built upon.

In order to address both the misdiagnosis of bilingual children with disabilities, as well as the lack of support for ELLs with special needs, a push towards culturally and
linguistically appropriate instruction and assessment is greatly needed. It is essential for schools to provide students with native language as well as second language instruction, form proactive partnerships with families, engage in unbiased assessment practices, and address learning and behavioral challenges through the use of culturally and emotionally sensitive support strategies.

The first step towards serving bilingual children appropriately is getting to know who they are. Although English Language Learners in this country come from a multitude of places around the world and speak many different languages, for the sake of this paper, we will be focusing on Spanish-speaking students. The majority of ELLs are Spanish-speaking, constituting about 75% of the bilingual students in the U.S. Garcia et al. (2008) offer other general characteristics of bilingual students to use as a framework for educational decision-making. Most bilingual students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, live in urban areas, and about half were born in the United States. Most ELLs live in homes where none of the adults speak English proficiently, and half live with parents who have less than eight years of formal schooling. Finally, few bilingual children have had the same access to early childhood or preschool programs as their monolingual English-speaking counterparts.

Another crucial step that must be taken to overcome the problem of mislabeling bilingual children with disabilities is to understand the process of second language acquisition. Unfortunately, current bilingual education policies are based on misconceptions about the length of time it takes for a child to successfully acquire a new language. This is evidenced by the fact that bilingual students are expected to take, and pass, standardized exams in English after only one year of schooling in this country.
(citation needed). Clearly, this demanded is not rooted in an understanding of language development. There are two types of language that children must develop, each with its own pattern of acquisition and development. The term Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) refers to social language, which are the skills required to interact with others in day-to-day situations. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), on the other hand, refers to “the language patterns and concepts required in processing, understanding, and communicating curriculum-based content” (Gottlieb, 2006, p. 25). When students are in environments where they must learn a second language, it will typically take them about two years to develop conversational fluency, or BICS. However, it will take anywhere from five to ten years for these students to achieve the level of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency that is necessary for school success. Considering the length of time it takes for children to truly become academically proficient in their second language, it is troubling that in many cases, students are expected to receive bilingual services for no more than a year. Furthermore, students are required to take and pass standardized exams in English after only one year of exposure to the English language.

As English Language Learners get older, the problems associated with the lack of bilingual services become increasingly severe. The overrepresentation of bilingual children in special education increases beginning in fifth grade, and is most prevalent in secondary school. Furthermore, students who receive no native language support in the classroom are significantly more likely to be served in special education settings (Sullivan, 2011). As the academic language demands increase in complexity, those students who have not been able to build on their native language skills to increase
English comprehension are at a major disadvantage. One of the most alarming trends among ELLs is that more than 59% of Latino ELLs drop out of high school, as opposed to only 15% of Latino students who are proficient in English (Garcia et al. 2008, p. 17).

Unfortunately, one of the greatest obstacles to providing bilingual students with appropriate services is the political climate surrounding immigration. While immigration has been a hot button topic for some time, in recent years, the push for an English-only agenda has become quite strong. Perhaps the clearest evidence for how these political beliefs have seeped into the world of bilingual education is the way in which bilingual programs have been reframed. It seems almost as if the word “bilingual” has become something to be ashamed of. As the focus has shifted towards making people learn English in the fastest amount of time possible, even the names of policies and organizations have been changed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silencing of Bilingualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title VII of Elementary and Secondary Education Act: The Bilingual Education Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title III of No Child Left Behind: Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient (LEP) and Immigrant Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for LEP Students (OELA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While an English-only policy has not officially been enacted, the demand for it exists beneath the surface. Changing the terminology from “bilingual” to “Limited English Proficient” students makes a world of difference, as programs and policies now operate on the assumption that to speak another language is a deficit. One of the most distressing public displays of this sentiment occurred in 2007, when politician Newt Gingrich delivered a speech advocating for the elimination of bilingual education programs. He argued that students should learn “the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto.” As appalling as this statement may be, it reflects a widespread set of beliefs about people from different cultural backgrounds. This belief system entails the notion that English is the only legitimate language in this country, White middle-class norms and values are the only ones that are valid, and people who are “different” should strip themselves of their identities and assimilate into the dominant culture.

**Recommendations**

Moving forward, we must consider a different point of view when making decisions about bilingual education. The problem is not that students enter our schools lacking proficiency in English. The problem is that our school systems fail to recognize the value of being bilingual or multilingual, and do not make adequate efforts to learn about the cultures of our increasingly diverse student population. Implementing changes that will positively support linguistically diverse learners requires a true paradigm shift, in which languages other than English are viewed as an asset rather than a problem to be fixed. We can start by being intentional about the language we use to describe these students. Garcia et al. (2008) argue that the terms “English Language Learners (ELL)” and “limited English proficient (LEP)” are problematic and discriminatory. These
students shouldn’t be viewed as lacking a language. They already speak a language and possess a strong linguistic foundation on which to build the knowledge of other languages. This terminology contributes to the deficit view that causes bilingualism to be viewed as a handicap. Furthermore, it “devalues other languages and puts the English language in a sole position of legitimacy” (p. 7). A phrase that is both more accurate and more culturally aware is “emergent bilinguals.” If we put aside the goal of teaching English at the expense of the native language, we can begin to work towards the much more productive goal of nurturing successful bilingual students and future adults.

Knowing what it takes for students to truly become proficient in English, it becomes clear that many current bilingual education policies were built on misconceptions about language acquisition. When students’ native languages are viewed as a deficit rather than a source of strength to build on, and when schools lack the resources, training, and vision to provide native language supports, bilingual students are at a great disadvantage. On the other hand, it is crucial that students do not simply receive bilingual services at the cost of developmentally appropriate, academically challenging educational experiences. Students should not miss out on the content their peers are learning simply because they lack proficiency in the English language. While these may seem like competing goals, there is an approach that is capable of accomplishing the big picture. One solution to this dilemma is to provide bilingual children with dual language education, where both languages are developed simultaneously, along with academic skills and content knowledge. In dual language settings, both English-dominant students and students who speak another language
fluently can learn together in a bilingual environment, supporting each other and becoming prepared for success in today’s global economy.

The dual language immersion approach is effective because it builds on students’ prior knowledge base. Cummins (1999) explains that due to the linguistic concept of “interdependence,” or CUP (Common Underlying Proficiency), students are able to use what they already know in their native language to construct understandings in a new language. Rather than having their native language invalidated as a source of knowledge, students can make connections and transfer over skills and content to their new language. For instance, students who are literate in their native language have an awareness of concepts about print and have an assortment of reading strategies that they already know how to use. As they acquire the English language, they will automatically apply those previously learned literacy skills to books in their second language. The same rule applies for math and science concepts. The vocabulary will have to be learned in the new language. However, the knowledge and skill set is already there, and should be used as a tool.

Cummins (1999) argues that many models of bilingual education force us to focus on developing one language at the expense of another, which deeply shortchanges emergent bilingual children. Rather than sacrificing a language, he states that we should, “work for transfer of conceptual knowledge and language awareness across the student’s two languages (e.g. have grade 1 and 2 students write, illustrate and publish bilingual books). The languages enrich each other if taught appropriately (e.g. drawing students’ attention to cognates and examples of powerful language use in both oral and written modes). A bilingual program without a strong focus on providing intellectually challenging literacy activities in English is no more adequate than a bilingual program without a strong focus on providing intellectually
challenging literacy activities in Spanish. We need to focus on both-and rather than reduce ourselves to either-or.” (p. 6).

In addition to providing emergent bilinguals with quality educational experiences, we must also protect them from biased assessment practices that put them at risk for being wrongfully diagnosed with disabilities. First and foremost, it is essential that students are assessed in their native language as well as in English. This is the only way to distinguish between a disability and challenges caused by limited academic English proficiency. Although this is currently not always possible because standardized testing materials are not available in all languages, at the very least, schools must make efforts to find interpreters who speak the child’s language and can translate the assessment for them.

One recommendation for unbiased assessment practices offered by Garcia et al. (2008) is to rely more heavily on performance-based assessments. This type of assessment allows emergent bilinguals to create a product, such as a portfolio, rather than doing something more linguistically difficult, such as a multiple-choice exam. One caveat to this suggestion, however, is that those professionals who score the performance-based assessments with rubrics should have an awareness of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students. Since rubric scores are subject to individual judgment, it is necessary to safeguard against biased grading.

Another way to fairly assess emergent bilinguals is to utilize a variety of informal assessments on a regular basis in the classroom. It is best to be clear about exactly what you are looking for when observing a particular activity. Colorin Colorado (2007) recommends setting no more than three items, or language skills, to assess at one time.
They also offer some examples of informal performance-based assessments. The list includes:

- Reading with partners
- Retelling stories
- Role playing
- Giving descriptions or instructions using visual or written prompts
- Oral reporting to the whole class
- Telling a story by using a sequence of three or more pictures
- Completing dialogue or conversation through written prompts
- Debating, either one-on-one or taking turns in small groups
- Brainstorming
- Completing incomplete stories
- Playing games

Another suggestion for implementing less biased assessment practices is to utilize curriculum-based measurement (CBM) rather than nationally standardized, norm-referenced tests (NRT) (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). The authors explain that NRT scores are not valid for bilingual students, as “the learner’s background experience is significantly different from that of the group on which the test was normed” (p. 1). This problem cannot be solved simply through the use of interpreters, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that some things lose their meaning or are difficult to convey in another language. The reason why curriculum-based measurement works as a more valid assessment is because it reflects student growth over time and measures progress in direct relation to the instruction the child is receiving in the classroom. In addition, “CBMs also provide direct measures of the academic skill of concern, allowing error analyses on samples of the student’s work to determine if linguistic or other factors may be affecting the student’s performance” (p. 5).
As time goes on, the population of the United States is growing more culturally and linguistically diverse. This obviously presents a number of challenges for the schools that serve these communities. In order to make the most of the linguistic funds of knowledge that students bring to the table, we must shed the “deficit view” of bilingualism and provide culturally competent instruction and assessment.

**Teacher-Student Cultural Mismatch**

While there are many contributing factors to the inequalities in educational experiences faced by students of color, one circumstance that needs to be addressed is the wide gap between the diversity of the student body versus the diversity of the teacher workforce. Approximately 85% of teachers in this country are White females. The student body may vary depending on location, but overall, more than half of the national student body consists of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Hansen, 2011). It is safe to assume that the majority of these teachers are well-qualified and do their jobs with the best intentions. However, there are problems caused by a cultural mismatch between students and teachers that can potentially have devastating effects for the student. Ford (2012) explains that cultural differences, specifically in “values, beliefs, attitudes, customs and traditions” lead to overreferral of students of color to special education. This situation arises out of low expectations, deficit thinking, cultural clashes and cultural misunderstandings (p. 392). Statistically, it is in fact true that the majority of special education referrals come from White, monolingual, middle class, general education teachers. Although not surprising that the majority of referrals come from White teachers given that this is who the majority of teachers are, period, this data nonetheless points to an issue that must be addressed.
Having an abundance of teachers of one racial group while having a scarcity of teachers from diverse backgrounds creates an unequal educational experience for students. White students have the advantage of attending schools that are designed around their cultural norms. The teachers share their cultural identities, providing these students with a sense of being understood and cared for. Students of color, on the other hand, are viewed through cultural values that do not apply to them. Their behaviors, learning styles and other aspects of their cultures are often misinterpreted in negative ways. Aside from the overreferral of students of color for special education, another way in which this situation manifests itself is in the overrepresentation of White students in gifted and talented programs. Being granted the advantage to work with teachers of their own race and/or culture allows for more White students to be identified as having giftedness. The opposite is true for diverse students. While there are of course many gifted children of all backgrounds, cultural perceptions of teachers along with deficit thinking results in the giftedness of these students going unnoticed.

One way in which we can attempt to close the “achievement gap” between White students and students of color is to diversify the teacher workforce. Having more teachers of color would provide students with a “cultural ally” who understands them, a liaison to support families with being more connected to schools, and role models for children to aspire to. However, research suggests that there are barriers to recruiting and retaining teachers of color. One of the main risk factors is the fact that teachers of color often work in inner-city schools with less than ideal conditions. While they tend to last longer in these settings than most White teachers, the burnout rate is very high. There are numerous reasons why teachers of any race choose to leave the field, but for teachers of
color, one of the main reasons is “a feeling of powerlessness over both school direction and classroom instruction” (Burns, 2010). It is highly likely that the same pervasiveness of White privilege that negatively impacts students also results in a shortage of teachers of color in the workforce. Increasing cultural competence in schools is therefore not only necessary for the benefit of students, but for teachers from diverse backgrounds as well.

**Defining Cultural Competence**

It is quite clear that failing to understand or acknowledge students’ cultures is detrimental to their academic and lifelong success. In order to provide students with culturally competent educational experiences, we must first be clear about what that actually means. Ford and Kea (2009) offer a comprehensive definition of the term. Culturally competent teaching involves “responding proactively and empathetically,” being “student-centered,” “breaking down barriers to learning,” and working “proactively and assertively to understand, respect, and meet the needs of students from cultural backgrounds that are different from their own” (p. 1). This approach is a necessity to overcome the racial inequalities faced by students of color. However, it is also extremely beneficial to all students to be provided with an education that is rich in diversity, rather than Eurocentric or ethnocentric. Schools that truly reflect the multicultural society we live in will prepare students for life in the "real world" where we are surrounded by diversity.

For educators, two of the most important elements of culturally competent teaching are ongoing self-reflection and developing an awareness of one's own culture and how that shapes our perceptions of the world. While typically considered a taboo subject, we must be frank about the existence of White privilege and how that manifests
itself in our educational settings. This is especially important given the prevalence of White teachers in the field. Without acknowledging how privileged status in this race-based society affects perceptions of and interactions with students, the "deficit view" of students of color will be perpetuated and we will be unable to truly understand the cultures of our students in a positive way. Diana Dunn, of the racial justice organization People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, explains the mindset that must be adopted by White people who are committed to creating racial equality:

“We have to recognize first that there is a white mainstream normative culture and how that culture keeps us from developing authentic relationships with people of color. It’s one of the hardest things for us to see as whites because one of the most important values in white culture is individualism. It’s hard to view ourselves as a collective. Until we view ourselves as a collective, we can’t begin to change that collective.” (Hitchcock, 2002, p.15)

Becoming aware of the distinction between the overall experiences of White people and people of color in this country requires paying close attention to even the most mundane details of everyday life. McIntosh (1988) offers a list of identifiable effects of White privilege experienced in day-to-day situations. Being mindful of these circumstances is a powerful first step to becoming a culturally competent educator.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.

3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

6. When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.

10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

12. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

18. I can be sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will be facing a person of my race.

19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can
be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

21. I can go home from most meetings or organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.

23. I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.

25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color that more or less matches my skin.


Some of the items on this list may seem insignificant or irrelevant to educators. However, the main point to remember is that in order to have compassion for and understanding of culturally diverse students, we must be willing to acknowledge their experiences. Living in a society that views them as inferior and grants superiority to their White peers is something that deeply impacts students of color. Having culturally competent and responsive educators, however, is a powerful tool to support them in overcoming these hurdles.

Even with the best intentions, the question remains: what does culturally competent teaching actually look like? It is important to raise our standards of what we consider to be “cultural integration.” It is not enough to simply hold a multicultural
celebration event in isolation, or talk about Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once a year.

Cultural competence is something that must be meaningful and integrated into the overall atmosphere of the school. It is a value that must be upheld across the board, guiding policies regarding instruction, assessment, discipline, and relationships with students and families. Just as we expect our students to construct deeper understandings of academic content and engage in higher level thinking, so too must we raise the bar for our abilities to manage multicultural learning environments effectively.

Providing culturally competent learning environments for students is a multifaceted issue, involving teachers, school administrators, assessment and discipline policies, families, and the physical school environment itself. Although complex changes are called for at all levels, teachers can begin by following the guidelines presented below. These are the fundamental characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, as presented by Ford and Kea (2009):

1. **Sociocultural consciousness:** Teachers understand that one’s way of thinking, behaving, and being are influenced by race, socioeconomic status, and language. Therefore, teachers must continuously engage in critical self-analysis and reflective thinking to examine their own sociocultural identity and the inequalities in schools.

2. **An affirming attitude toward students from culturally different backgrounds:** Teachers inspect and confront negative attitudes they might have toward culturally different students and groups.

3. **Commitment and skills to act as agents of change:** Teachers understand the change process and obstacles to change, and they have skills for collaboration and ways of dealing effectively with issues and problems with a basis in cultural differences.

4. **Constructivist views of learning:** Teachers believe that all students are capable of learning and provide scaffolds for what students already know.
through their experiences. Constructivist teaching promotes critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and the recognition of multiple perspectives.

5. **Learning about students:** Teachers take the time to learn about their students, their experiences, home, and community. They recognize that this rich information will help build relationships, and they use these experiences in the context of teaching, learning, and assessment.

6. **Culturally responsive teaching strategies:** Teachers support the constructivist view of knowledge, teaching, and learning. As teachers help students to construct knowledge, they build on students’ personal and cultural strengths and create inclusive environments where every student feels a sense of empowerment, value, and membership.


**Conclusion**

One of the most honorable characteristics of educators is our commitment to being lifelong learners. In our ever-changing society, we are constantly forced to challenge our beliefs, explore new ideas, and ultimately adapt and grow to reach an even higher level of performance. As beautifully diverse as our nation is, we must realize that it is not sufficient to simply apply a colorblind approach to our students and hope for the best. Our cultures are an enormous part of what makes each of us who we are. We cannot really be effective educators without getting to know our students, and we cannot deeply get to know our students without an understanding of their cultural backgrounds. Far from being just a “good idea,” cultural competence is now an essential survival skill for educators.

A valid concern that often comes up in this type of conversation is the fact that racial oppression is systemic in nature. If the problem is so much bigger than individuals,
how can we really make an impact in the struggle for equality? Furthermore, why does this responsibility fall so heavily on schools? As educators, we need to remain aware of the power we have to make a difference in the lives of our students. Surely, the effects of centuries of complicated race relations in this country cannot be undone overnight. However, each one of us has the ability to take on this challenge in our own communities and watch the ripple effects spread. Making a commitment to becoming culturally competent and responsive is a huge first step that makes so much more possible for our future. When we provide spaces for students to be who they are and learn the way that is appropriate for them, rather than waiting for an array of cultural values and practices to be whittled down to fit one narrow lens, we begin to create an educational system where all students can be successful.

The problem of racial inequality in education is truly a grave one, and will likely take a long time to overcome. Understandably, many of us feel powerless and overwhelmed by this challenge and would rather ignore it and hope that it just goes away. The truth is, it isn’t going away unless we take action. It requires a great deal of bravery to confront such a massive dilemma, but our commitment to our students who entrust us with their futures is more than enough to ignite that courage.
“When confronting the reality of racism we become sad, angry, overwhelmed, confused, numb, lonely, tired, bored, anxious and passive. When faced with the need to intervene, speak up, or take action against racism, we become tentative and uncertain, filled with questions and concerns, waiting for someone more qualified to step up.

There is no one who can take our place or do our part…

It is easy to become overwhelmed by our feelings, by how much there is to do, and by how confusing and risky it seems. We need to concentrate on what it is we can do, how we can make a difference.

Whenever I become overwhelmed thinking about how much there is to do, I remind myself of a saying by Rabbi Tarfon…

‘It is not upon you to finish the work. Neither are you free to desist from it.’”

References


