

A Journal of the International Christian Community for Teacher Education

Culturally Responsive Teaching: The Bible tells me so

Abstract

The US population is becoming more and more diverse. This is the reality. In light of this fact people in all walks of life – e.g. education, healthcare, religion – will inevitably interact in their day to day lives with others who are increasingly different from themselves. It follows that for these interactions to be effective, we need to become more culturally competent. We need to be aware of how culture shapes us and those around us. In order to cross boundaries that can arise from our difference we need to acknowledge and value those differences. For Christians, being culturally competent is not just a good idea, it is a Biblical mandate. This paper describes cultural responsiveness in teaching, discusses diversity in the Christian context and makes a case for cultural responsiveness as a Biblical mandate.

Introduction

In education today, many if not most teacher training programs include cultural competence as a requirement for their graduates. In the courses I teach one of the questions we address is “why become culturally competent.” There are many reasons why we should be culturally competent. One is the reality that our society is becoming more diverse. This is reflected in our schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) the percentage of White students enrolled in public schools in 2007 was down to 56% from 78% in 1972. During the same period the percentage of other racial and ethnic groups increased from 22% to 44%. The percentage of student speaking a language other than English increased from 9% to 20 % (NCES 2009). These students were taught primarily by White (87%) female (73%) teachers. These changes call for changes in schooling and curriculum. They

call for teachers to be culturally competent. This is evident in the requirements placed on teacher education programs. One of the six standards (Standard 4) on which NCATE (The National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education) examines teacher education programs is "Diversity."

For Christians there is another compelling reason to be culturally competent. It is required of us. Jesus commands us to love one another (John 13:34). It is a simple command but it requires effort on our part. This requires knowing the "other" and listening to one another. "Knowing the other" needs to be more than just listening to the stranger's story. It must also mean understanding and appreciating the differences between her/his story and our own. We need to have cultural competence to love across boundaries.

In this article, I would like to look at what Christianity teaches us about diversity and cultural competence. First I will briefly describe culturally responsive teaching then I will talk of the role of cultural competence in the Christian context. Finally, I will discuss how Christianity informs culturally responsive teaching. I expect that many readers of the article will already be familiar with the idea of culturally responsive teaching. It is my hope that the article will serve educators at the K-12 level as well as those teaching in teacher preparation programs as they consider how their faith informs the work they do with students from all walks of life.

What is culturally responsive teaching?

Sue and Sue (2003) describe cultural competence as including awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy. People who are culturally competent are aware of their own cultural heritage and the values associated with it. This helps to develop acceptance of and respect for differences. It takes a deliberate effort so that they are actively in the process of becoming aware of their own assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions about others. People who are culturally competent are comfortable with differences that exist in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other socio-demographic variables. Differences are not viewed in a negative light.

In addition to awareness, culturally competent people must possess specific knowledge and information about those with whom they interact. Multicultural knowledge leads to a deeper understanding of the worldview of culturally diverse populations. It includes a good understanding of the sociopolitical system and its impact on the various groups represented in society. Exploration and gaining such knowledge has to be an ongoing process as it would be difficult to reach a point where one has sufficient knowledge. While it is necessary, it is not enough to have the knowledge. It is essential to know when to apply it.

Multicultural skills involve the use of appropriate, relevant and sensitive strategies for working with the culturally diverse students, families, communities and colleagues inevitably encountered in this diverse society. Specific examples include communication skills, and relationship building. We need to have such skills if we are to effectively interact with those who differ from us. In addition to self-awareness, knowledge and skills, the fourth component is advocacy. This requires taking action. Action may take different forms such as speaking for those who may not be in a position to speak for themselves and presenting their perspective. It may mean educating colleagues, being a referral resource, being a role model or raising issues with co-workers and colleagues.

In the realm of education, a teacher who is culturally competent will be able to be culturally responsive to her students. The purpose of culturally responsive teaching goes beyond simply allowing students to feel comfortable. It aims to improve opportunities for academic success. This can be accomplished by using their strengths and interests as a bridge to new learning the school offers. When teachers are aware of students' strengths and resources they can set appropriately higher expectations for them.

The notion of culturally responsive teaching comes from concepts such as Banks' (1994) multicultural paradigms, Sleeter and Grant's (1993) approaches to multicultural education and others. Put simply, it is the notion that all children have a right to equal educational opportunity regardless of gender, social class, race, ethnicity or cultural background.

In the past decade there has been increasing demand for teachers to address the rise in ethnic and cultural diversity in the schools. Studies have pointed out the cultural mismatch between the teachers and the student body (Bennett, 1995; Gomez, 1996). This cultural mismatch has been apportioned some of the blame for the achievement gap. There is an assumption that the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds will be enhanced if teachers become more responsive to the students' home culture. Consequently, educators and researchers have become increasingly interested in developing educational strategies to promote the academic achievement of culturally and linguistically subordinated student populations.

The idea of culturally responsive teaching has been put forward as a possible remedy for the achievement gap. A case is made that teachers should know the cultural resources that students bring to the class, and be skilled enough to tap into those resources in the teaching-learning process. Such cultural responsiveness is viewed as a powerful tool in closing the achievement gap and advancing the goals of NCLB (No Child Left Behind).

Culturally responsive teaching does not necessarily refer to steps that teachers can follow to effectively teach their students. Rather, it refers to the disposition that teachers have towards their students and thus the first step is a self-reflective analysis of one's attitudes and beliefs about teaching culturally different children (Phuntsog, 1998). Culturally responsive teaching is a holistic approach to curriculum and instruction. It can be conceptualized in terms of four conditions: (1) establishing inclusion; (2) enhancing positive attitude; (3) enhancing meaning; and (4) engendering competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). This approach creates a sense of community that fosters a feeling of belonging for every child. A culturally responsive teacher uses students' prior knowledge in learning events to make them more relevant to the learner. She validates and affirms students by teaching to and through students' strengths. Such an approach is not limited to the formal education setting. We encounter differences in a variety of contexts beyond our schools.

The Christian context

We are all cultural beings. Every person has cultural lenses through which he or she views the world. What we, as Americans, have in common is interculturality. We all relate together in mutual interdependence. Much like the authors of the New Testament, in order to understand one another we must take into account language, ethnic identity, religious background, cultural experience, economic situation, geographic location, local interest and so on. Churches in the US share the cultural diversity of the country. Quite often, "religious expressions.... are also at the same time cultural expressions"

(Rhoads, 1996, p.5). There is a common concept of God, however, variety in cultures make the concept appear different (Spencer & Spencer, 1998). There is certainly an intertwining of culture and religion. However, “when we become followers of Christ all cultures are suspect...and we must examine them in light of God’s Word” (Woodley, 1956, p.53). Christians need to recognize the truth from other traditions while separating it from errors those traditions may have picked up. The church’s purpose is to “exemplify the person and teaching of Christ in a manner that can be clearly perceived across all culture” (Breckenridge & Breckenridge, 1997, p.118). The church, in fact, is to be the steward of the Gospel (1 Thess. 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:2).

If we are to develop attitudes and actions that are necessary to live as authentic Christians in a complex and diverse world, we will need to effectively interact across differences. Following from Banks’ (2007) definition of multicultural education, we need to be liberated from our own lenses and perspectives so that we can see those people around us as God sees them. Breckenridge and Breckenridge (1997) state that the purpose of the Church is to “exemplify the person and teaching of Christ in a manner that can be clearly perceived across all culture” (p. 118).

Although we cannot escape our cultural lenses, we cannot let them blind us. One way we can start to liberate ourselves is to encounter the “other”. Vanier (2005) tells us that “when we encounter, we come to know. When we come to know, we are able to understand. When we understand, healing and peace can really grow” (p.7). In that encounter we need to shift our thinking from a view that we are “taking God to a godless world” to the view that we are following God into a world in which God is already redemptively present” (Brueggemann & Stroup, 1998, p.8). Peace can be described as crossing over barriers when we are not always understood or respected.

This idea of encounter is supported in the Gospels. In Luke we see that the invitation to the banquet was issued to ‘the other’ rather than just friends or family (Luke 14:12-14). Having a meal together is not just a sign of hospitality. It symbolizes entering into a relationship. This was, in fact, an invitation to enter into relationship. Vanier (2005) summarizes the message of the Gospel as: we each have a gift to give and we each need to be loved and to belong.

Often fear keeps us from appreciating those who are different from us. It gets in the way of such encounters that invite a relationship. Fear can lead us to hide behind groups, behind culture and even behind religion. When we gain a deeper sense of the humanity of the “other” all fear begins to dissipate. This moves us from a belonging that closes us up and prevents us from opening up to others to one that is more inclusive. Christ calls his followers to the celebration of creation’s diversity and pluralism (Rhoads, 1996).

Rhoads (1996) speaks of God as the reality that unites us. It follows then that by respecting and embracing the differences among people we are on a path to discover and embrace the full measure of God’s unity. Diversity allows Christians to meet the needs of many different people. In fact Christian belief stands against intolerance of others. The paradoxical conclusion is that diversity and unity belong together. Rhoads views diversity as fundamental to biblical witness. The different perspectives in the Gospels should therefore be a reason to rejoice rather than a concern. The New Testament is a collection of writings from different authors at a particular time and place and for a particular audience. For instance, Mark writes from the perspective of a peasant in rural Palestine; Matthew writes from the perspective of an educated Jewish scribal community in urban Antioch of Syria; Luke writes from the perspective of commitment to the poor among the Gentile elites in Asia Minor; and John from the perspective of the marginalized Jewish groups in Ephesus. Paul wrote to diverse social locations across the Mediterranean world. Each of these perspectives presents the same unity to different audiences.

Diversity is really a great strength of the church and should not be viewed as fragmentation. One of the reasons the Church has thrived through the centuries and has been adopted all over the world is because of diversity. From the beginning there were different Gentile nations and Christianity was to cut through all those social and cultural differences. The long list of nations in Jerusalem for Pentecost makes the point (Acts 2:5-11). The Gospel is proclaimed in languages understood by each distinct cultural context addressed so that we see inclusivity and unity of message while preserving the particularity and distinctiveness of the different cultural groups. We can follow such an example in our daily lives so we can appreciate our unity while recognizing our differences.

Crossing boundaries

Diversity is indispensable. God created diversity. He delights in it and works through it. The first church at Antioch (Acts 13:1) was a collective body of people from various backgrounds – Simeon (Niger); Lucius of Cyrene (now Libya); Manaen (brought up with Herod) and Saul of Tarsus. Discomfort with difference and the unknown leads us to prefer those like us but if we are to get renewal from diversity we should first preserve it rather than cover it up or ignore it. Rhoads (1996) goes as far as to say that “to fail to preserve diversity...is in a sense to risk idolatry” (p.138). It makes us less faithful to the Bible and less aware of the complexities of life.

We might even say reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience. It requires looking into a different time and different culture and we should expect to be surprised. We need to read it with the expectation to be changed and to have our assumptions challenged. The way to get renewal from a passage is to read it until it is different from what we think it will be (Rhoads, 1996). Accepting diversity does not mean choosing one view or another but rather it means an openness to interpretations that go beyond our own. It is not easy and requires respect and genuine interest.

To gain a better understanding, we need to consider a number of views. The goal of cultural competence is not to replace one reality with another but rather it is to become increasingly bicultural. For example, Moses (Egyptian Jew); Esther (Persian Jew) & Paul (Greek Jew) were positioned to be used for God’s purposes due to being part of different cultures. Being bicultural was an asset. For Daniel (Daniel 1:3-7) interpreting the writing on the wall required reading signs in the cultural context and at a level deeper than surface level. Given the position he was in, this also required courage. Bold and courageous encounters rather than timid acquiescence can lead one to become a visionary.

The diversity in the Bible makes it possible for all people to find life and hope. In a similar fashion, if we take diversity into account in our teaching we make it possible for all students to find success and hope. Just as reading the Bible with others allows us to notice different things and broadens and deepens our understanding, learning from multiple perspectives allows students to grow in their understanding. Banks (1996) speaks of the transformative approach to education. This is where students are presented information from multiple perspectives in an effort to get a more complete picture and deeper understanding. This is not something to be feared even when applied to faith. Placher (1998) discusses a central belief in Christianity that Jesus’ death “put us right” with God (p.155). Theories of how that came to be are not so central. The point is the church has lived with a plurality of ‘theories’ even on this very central belief.

When addressing diversity it is important to avoid oversimplification. By itself, and by definition every perspective is limited. We all need to do all we can to avoid the “mental trap” of seeing only one legitimate way of doing things. Diversity and unity are not polar opposites. Unity is based on what people agree on. However, what we agree on can be narrow thus limiting our understanding of the whole. We should refrain from defining belonging as sameness.

There are times when we do not acknowledge the diversity amongst us or we choose to ignore it. While there is comfort in having a unifying theme, it can be misleading. This can be likened to viewing the New Testament as a unified book rather than a collection of writings. This approach misses the distinctiveness of each piece of writing and reduces it to the lowest common denominator, such as “Jesus saves” or “Jesus is Lord” or “forgiveness of sin”. While these statements are true, and such limited perspectives may be convenient, they can also be misleading in instances where the same concept is understood differently. For example, while each of the Gospels speaks of sin, the views on the condition of sin differ. Matthew’s main view is that hypocrisy is the sin (e.g. 5:24-30), Mark seems to see sin as a fearful self concern (e.g. 12:41-45) while Luke’s perspective has a stronger view of social injustice (e.g. 4:18-19).

Culturally competent Christian teachers

In teaching students from various backgrounds, we should follow Jesus’ consistent example of meeting people at their point of need and not on the sidelines (e.g. Mark 6:40-42; John 4:13-14). Being culturally responsive in our teaching does not necessarily mean replacing one approach with another. Rather, it means including those that have been excluded. Teaching and learning has always been an endeavor that is partly cultural. The issue is in our schools we have typically focused on one culture. Culturally responsive teaching calls us to consider more than one culture since our students come from varied cultural backgrounds.

It is said that during the time when Arthur Ashe was fighting against the background of racial misunderstanding and prejudice, every Sunday at church he would look up at a picture of Christ with blond hair and blue eyes and wonder if God was on his side. When we claim ‘not to see color’ preferring to see all people as the same however noble the claim, we miss the distinctiveness that makes each person unique. This focus on sameness and denial of difference can be alienating.

Multiculturalists speak of the seven biases in textbooks. One of these biases is termed ‘invisibility’ where certain groups are omitted from the text. Students do not see themselves in the text and are hard pressed to see how what they read relates to their lives. This failure to relate can be a hindrance in a child’s learning. Of course, teachers do not always have control of the texts used in their classrooms. They can, however examine texts and address any biases found therein. *The Multicultural Review*, a journal which provides a critique of literature currently available, is a useful tool in that examination process. Teachers are also free to provide supplemental material to present a more complete picture of what they are teaching. Presenting material in multiple formats allows students to grow in their understanding of it much in the same way the plurality of God is a means to deepen our understanding of Him.

Amos 9:7 speaks to the plurality of God. Bruggemann (1998) asserts that you cannot answer “yes” to the first question posed in that verse and “no” to the second. God’s mighty deeds are not limited to one place, but rather, are in many places. This plurality of God provides a stance from which to re-envision

him in a more faithful and realistic way. "Trying to remake society in our own image would mean that society could not reflect God's image, for His image is reflected in the unity of our being like Him while at the same time being unique in ourselves" (Woodley, 1956, p. 21).

We should value the differences students bring to our classrooms rather than attempt to make them all the same. Often success in school is defined in one specific way so that those students that don't fit the mold are deemed unsuccessful. To be culturally responsive we are required to broaden our conception of success and how one achieves it. We can hold all students to the same standards while recognizing that they may need different means to meet those standards.

We should view diversity as a blessing. God has always intended a single and unified purpose for everything that exists. As Woodley (1956) put it "God's new song cannot be sung solo" (p.35). Even as we respect each other's culture, we need to guard against burdening ourselves with cultural nonessentials in matters of faith to the extent that our differences become borders that keep us separate. As Paul's letters suggest, we can all worship without having the same cultural rules. He spoke against "Judaizers." Worshipping God in one's own cultural ways allows the freedom to express devotion. Concepts in each cultural expression of faith that are true should reflect Jesus in some way since Jesus is the Truth. God shows up in different ways in different cultures. If there are marks of Jesus in every culture we are better served by engaging with and learning about cultures other than our own.

There is an example of people in Ghana who joyfully received the Gospel. In keeping with their tradition they included drums in their worship. Missionaries brought them a pipe organ which they viewed as a more appropriate instrument for worship. The Ghanaians hated it but they were told this is what they had to play (Breckenridge & Breckenridge, 1997). This is an example of imposition from one's own culture not scripture. In interaction with those who may be different from us, we need to examine our hidden assumptions and cultural biases.

In the classroom too, students express themselves in different ways. Heath's (1983) studies indicate cultural differences in communication styles. A teacher who is culturally competent will be aware of these differences and strive to provide students with opportunities to express themselves. This may mean varying assessments so that students have a variety of ways to demonstrate what they have learned. Teachers should guard against rigidity in their teaching simply because it is more comfortable for them.

Moreover, teachers should not ask students to give up who they are to be successful in school. That is, they should not ask students to change to fit the school designed from one perspective. Rather the school should change to effectively teach all students that walk through the schoolhouse door. While holding the same goals and objectives, teachers can be flexible in how they help students achieve those goals.

Cultural competence requires self-awareness. According to Banks (1994) multicultural education should help individuals gain greater self-understanding by viewing themselves through other cultural lenses. It is important for a teacher to know herself or himself well in addition to knowing the subject. Rhoads talks about a denomination in the same way. He states that when a denomination knows itself well it can have greater flexibility which allows it to incorporate other biblical models and other ways to be Christian in its life. Of course we can't agree on everything, but there can be commonalities of belief including a common commitment to diversity. We can be in the struggle together. We should not fear our differences or demonize that which is not familiar.

We tend to label the “other” with names like ‘pagan’ simply based on their culture. It should be noted that the term pagan has more to do with relationship with God and less to do with culture. Furthermore, “minority” culture is not an identity. It does not refer to cultural experience but to power position. Breckenridge & Breckenridge (1997) state religion is not a “portable commodity” to be conveyed to “backward groups” even if, in our view, they are ignorant to the benefit. In a similar fashion, we need to disabuse ourselves from a pathological view of students. We must not view them as people needing to be ‘fixed’ in some way and recognize the strengths they bring to the classroom. They are not simply to be saved. If we value what they bring, we can use that to advance their learning in a way that is meaningful and relevant. There are some who feel that a focus on diversity may disunite the nation. By saying “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17), Jesus seems to suggest that we can follow the law of the land without compromising who we are as God’s children. In the same way, loyalty to country and cultural identity are not mutually exclusive.

We each can be who we are and still be a full member of a community (Galatians 3:28). Teachers need to go beyond tolerance of differences in their students to recognition and respect for ethnic & cultural commitments. In John 1:9 the Christian faith is described as “the true light which enlightens *everyone*” (italics added). This is inclusive language. Education should be viewed in a similar fashion – inclusive.

Conclusion

The value of multiple perspectives is evident in the Bible. Quite often metaphors are used to describe complex concepts. Each metaphor points to some feature or characteristic. It is not complete in itself but it extends our insight. An example is the discussion of the Kingdom of heaven. It is described in the stories of treasure in a hidden field, mustard seed, father with two sons and others. We are not presented with one image. Furthermore one image does not exclude the others.

God wants us to “seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with Him” (Micah 6:8). We can’t separate God’s love from His righteousness. This means we have to accept the “other” and seek social harmony. There are laws to encourage this but we need more than law. We cannot legislate morality. Righteousness involves the reconciliation of broken relationships, healing injustice and serving the good of many (1Cor 4:2; 11:13). The challenges we face, such as racism and prejudice are spiritual challenges (Breckenridge & Breckenridge, 1997). Mere reliance on laws to address these issues is an overburden of human capacity to create righteousness.

To reiterate, as Christians we are required to be stewards of the gospel. This requires cultural competence. We cannot communicate the gospel to others if we do not understand what their culture is about (Coleman, 1998). Without understanding the signs and images of a particular culture we can’t communicate about what we consider significant. Altering worship customs of any group is not consistent with multicultural sensitivity. Similarly, using a one size fits all approach to teaching does not effectively meet the needs of our students. Each group brings unique contributions to the Lord’s Table and we can learn from each other. When we look at those different from us through uninformed assumptions it is like looking at an image through a broken mirror. The reflection is distorted even though the image itself is valid. As Breckenridge & Breckenridge, (1997) put it “to cross into other cultures is the expected norm for God’s people, not the exception” (p.77). By preserving rather than

covering up or ignoring diversity we are being more faithful to the Bible and the complexities of life (Rhoads, 1996). Diversity should be constructive rather than the oppression of those with whom we don't agree. It should not lead to an attitude of superiority and intolerance.

Diane Ravitch says the common culture that we share is multicultural. We need to rid ourselves of the perception that what is different is necessarily strange or wrong. Remember the story of the bird and the owl. Each claimed the same tree as its home. Eventually they reached a compromise. The bird would claim the tree during the day since the owl slept during that period. The bird said "You sleep during the day? How strange!" And the owl replied, "Not strange, just different."

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