**Good Teachers Embrace Their Students' Cultural Backgrounds**

As the public-school population grows increasingly diverse, creating a link between home and school becomes more and more important.

By Sophie Quinton

Arizona's attorney general [called the program](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/08/us/08ethnic.html?pagewanted=all) "propagandizing and brainwashing." An administrative law judge [ruled](https://www.azag.gov/sites/default/files/sites/all/docs/TUSD_Ethnic_Studies_Ruling.pdf) that it "promotes racial resentment against 'Whites,' and advocates ethnic solidarity of Latinos."

With that, the Tucson Unified School District's controversial Mexican-American studies courses shut down in 2011. Yet a [University of Arizona](http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/Mexican-American-Studies_11.14.12.pdf) study found that the mostly Latino students who took the courses were 46 percent to 150 percent more likely to graduate from high school than those who did not. The study also determined positive effects on math and reading test scores. An [independent audit](http://www.tucsonweekly.com/images/blogimages/2011/06/16/1308282079-az_masd_audit_final_1_.pdf)of the curriculum confirmed that taking the courses helped students succeed in school.

All good teachers build a bridge between what students know and what they need to learn. Yet teaching that embraces students' cultural backgrounds has largely been left out of current debates on what makes teachers effective. The drama in Tucson helps explain why: Culturally responsive teaching often requires confronting some of the most painful divides in American life.

"Basically, it's about effective teaching, but it takes into consideration the changing demographics of America's schools," says Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, professor emeritus of urban education at Atlanta's Emory University. Today, 63 percent of students in the Tucson Unified School District are Latino, up from 49 percent just a decade ago.

Demographic changes have made it increasingly likely that a teacher's experiences don't mirror those of her students. In 2007-08, 83 percent of public school teachers were white, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. During that [same year](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015.pdf), the demographic breakdown showed a different percentage for public school students: 56 percent white; 21 percent Hispanic; 17 percent African-American, 5 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American.

"If you don't know anything about the everyday lived experiences of your students—the cultural backgrounds, the dialects, the family, the home, the community—teachers tend to pull the examples for teaching from their own experiences," Irvine says. "And, hence, those connections are not made for students."

Culturally responsive *pedagogy*(methods of teaching) starts with the premise that race and class matter, and that some schools fail to send diverse students signals that they belong. To make sure all students feel valued, the theory goes, teachers need to be aware of their own biases, work deeply to understand their individual students, find ways to bring students' heritage and community into the classroom, and hold all students to a high academic standard.

It's a philosophy that makes intuitive sense, and that's backed [by a range of academic studies](http://www.edweek.org/media/crt_research.pdf). But it requires subtlety. Learning about students' cultural backgrounds is an ongoing process that lasts a teacher's entire career, beginning all over again each year with a new set of students. "It's really important to be really immersed in that local context to be able to culturally responsive. And I think that that's messy work, and it's really hard to quantify, but nevertheless vital," says Jason Irizarry, an associate education professor and director of urban education at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst).

Lack of cultural understanding can easily disrupt classroom learning. In [a 2009 article](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-36-fall-2009/feature/relevant-beyond-basics) for *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, Irvine gave the example of a student teacher leading a lesson on classifying objects in a mostly African-American elementary school in the South. Her students identified a photograph of kale as collard greens, and were stumped when shown a picture of broccoli. The teacher couldn't hide her shock, the children started misbehaving, and the teacher ended up so upset that she had to leave the room.

Culturally responsive teaching doesn't mean lowering standards, Irvine says. Take dialect, for example. Teachers need to help students speak and write in Standard English, but they'll be more successful in that effort if they begin by respecting the way a student and his family speak at home.

Creating a link between home and school can enrich all kinds of lessons. Teachers can ask their students to interview their communities and condense the information into a letter to the mayor. Parents can be invited into the classroom to talk about their work. Students can be asked to think critically about articles and texts, exploring them for signs of cultural bias.

New Mexican-American and African-American studies classes will return to TUSD high schools this fall, as a decades-old desegregation ruling mandates that the district offer ethnic-studies classes. They could be as controversial as the former program, [NPR reports](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/07/24/205058168/Tucson-Revives-Mexican-American-Studies-Program).

"Mica Pollack talks about being colormute—that we don't want to talk about race, we don't want to talk about culture, for a variety of reasons," Irizarry says, referring to a term coined by a professor at the University of California (San Diego). "And young people are saying, unequivocally, that they really think these things are important."