

## Chapter 6

# Using Postmodernism to Effectively Teach in Diverse Settings

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### ABSTRACT

*The challenges brought to classrooms are often exacerbated by a mismatch between teachers' cultural backgrounds and those of their students. This incongruity can be overcome through the use of culturally responsive teaching practices and the integration of culturally relevant curriculum. This chapter suggests the adoption of a postmodern mindset can also aid teachers in meeting the needs of all their students, particularly those with differing life experiences from their own. The author uses a postmodern framework for education that is adopted from Finland and aligns this with the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and also suggests the framework's alignment to culturally relevant curriculum.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many teachers in today's schools are challenged by a growing diversity in their classrooms, but these can be effectively vanquished, and even turned into ways to further their practice, if they use the correct strategies and mindsets. These challenges can be summarized by an *incongruity in beliefs, values, and behaviors* as the backgrounds of most teachers do not reflect those of the students they serve (Nieto & Bode, 2016). This chapter intends to show how the commonly misunderstood concept of postmodernism can help teachers address the challenges

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that diversity may bring to their work. Postmodernism is, in its original intent, meant to contextualize (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984), not hyper-individualize as it is so-often misrepresented today (Boboc & Nordgren, 2014; Slattery, 2013). Contextualization is a crucial aspect in teaching, especially in an environment where there is a mismatch between the teacher's and students' backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2017), allowing the teacher to better understand how to best serve her students while still fostering a collective and collaborative classroom culture (Kincheloe, 1993). The postmodern framework shown in this chapter was established by Boboc and Nordgren (2014) based on the works of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars in both education and philosophy and, specifically, to Sahlberg's (2012) work from Finland. This framework will be shown to effectually align with the tenets of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as established by Murrell (2002) and Gay (2012). The chapter ends with a brief section on how to align postmodernism and CRT to the content through the introduction of the concept of Culturally Relevant Curriculum.

## **Modernism in the Schools**

When trying to make sense of their practice, particularly when addressing cultural incongruencies, teachers may wonder why their schools and, by extension, their classrooms are structured as they are—especially when teachers are frustrated by the challenges of diversity (Nieto & Bode, 2016; Nordgren, 2015). The typical school structure dates back over a century to when teaching *en masse* was deemed necessary to serve the growing number of students reaching the schools due to an increase in child labor laws and mass immigration (Spring, 2016). The structuring reflected those used in response to changing, and soon to be hegemonic, economic system (Tienken & Orlich, 2013); that is, the Industrial Age, a time that brought massification of many institutions from workplaces to schools (Northouse, 2016). Many agree this structure is not effective in meeting the needs of today's society, one that consists of a diverse population (e.g., McGee-Banks, 2016; Zhao, 2018).

As a reaction to the Industrial Age, commencing in Great Britain late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the U.S. in the early 19<sup>th</sup>, philosophers and social critics recognized a dehumanization of the workplace (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984). Most notably, these included Marx and Engels but also more mainstream scholars including John Dewey (1916; 1938) who warned against treating people like cogs in a machine, a critique shared by many others (e.g., Goodlad, 2004; Morgan, 2005; Slattery, 2013; Zhao, 2018). The crux of their critiques was the loss of individual worth, that workers and, by extension, all of society were becoming mechanized, valued merely as widgets laboring within human-eating machines. A vivid example of this is provided by Charlie Chaplin in his Depression-era film *Modern Times* (Paramount Pictures, 1936) where the Little Tramp character is frantically adjusting nuts on some

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