

# CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELING: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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## **Abstract**

This work tries to assess the contributions made to educational counseling in recent years by theoretical and applied research and practical actions in the area of cross-cultural counseling. So, it offers a synthesis of the main contributions made from the theoretical and practical viewpoints within this specific scientific field.

**Key words:** Educational guidance; cross-cultural guidance; multiculturalism

## **Introduction**

The author's responsibility, in this type of articles, lies in deciding where to draw the limits of the scientific field to be reviewed and in selecting and organizing the knowledge thus obtained in a way that readers will find attractive and not tedious. At the risk of omitting matters that some people might consider of value, I have obviously prepared my work according to my own criteria and will keep it within the following framework.

Firstly, I shall give a brief historical background to the birth and evolution of cross-cultural counseling. I shall then go on to define multiculturalism and the main characteristics of the cross-cultural approach in counseling. Thirdly, I shall try to summarize the most relevant contributions made by research on this subject. Fourthly, I shall speak of some of the crucial problems for the cross-cultural competencies of counselors. The fifth and sixth sections will cover emerging topics for cross-cultural counseling such as the characteristics of cross-cultural educational centers and the challenges of this approach for academic, career and personal/social development. Finally, I shall close with some conclusions on the contributions of cross-cultural counseling to educational counseling.

## **Historical background to cross-cultural counseling.**

By cross-cultural counseling we refer to counseling for persons from different cultures. Although the terms multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication or cross-cultural action are new ones, the phenomenon they describe has existed throughout the history of man. In the Mediterranean civilizations of ancient Egypt or the Roman Empire, the difficulties arising from the cultural differences between the dominating and the

dominated peoples were a matter of concern, including the question of the cultural superiority of the ruling people.

Cross-cultural counseling arose, as did counseling, in the United States but in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not at its start. Its history is linked to that of the American Counseling Association (ACA) that was created in 1955 under the name of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA). However, as stated by Copeland (1983), the objective of counseling for minorities during the fifties was to assimilate them into the dominant North American culture rather than to emphasize the differences as in multicultural counseling. At that time, 'counseling for all' was considered to be a principle or an objective to be met (Robinson, 1953; Hoyt, 1967) but based on the mid-line white American culture. As stated by Aubrey (1977), it was only in the sixties that counselors began to feel more responsible for counseling different populations. The APGA convention in 1966 marked a turning-point when the first call was made for counseling for the culturally-disadvantaged (Hoyt, 1967). By the end of the decade, research had begun on how to counsel people who are culturally different, most of it done by black, Asian, Hispanic and native Americans.

According to Reynolds and Pope (1991), interest in cross-cultural counseling grew substantially during the seventies, with a number of studies being carried out into counseling for people from different cultures or the culturally-disadvantaged (Sue, 1971; Pedersen, Lonner & Draguns, 1976). An important landmark was the creation in 1972 of the Association for Non-White Concerns which was to be the basis for today's Association for MultiCultural Counseling and Development founded in 1985. During these years, the term 'multicultural counseling' referred to all minority groups, including people of different race or ethnic group, women, the handicapped or those subject to discrimination because of their differences.

During the eighties and nineties, multicultural counseling developed tremendously not only through research but also in practical applications. It has now been acknowledged that the theories, techniques, strategies and interventions learnt and used by counselors are unsuitable for working with diverse groups. The previous dominant approach, described by some as "Anglo-European", has given way to a pluralist approach which obliges us as researchers, teachers, students or collaborators in the counseling process to question the validity of the theories, techniques and strategies we have been implementing in our profession. We must therefore define what we mean by a 'multicultural approach' and identify its characteristics, while explaining the addition of the term 'cross-cultural'.

## **The multicultural / cross-cultural approach in counseling and in assistance professions**

In the counseling profession, it was Pedersen (1991) who first called multiculturalism *the fourth strength of counseling* and of assistance professions in general, although it would be more appropriate to describe it as *the fourth dimension* because all assistance takes place within a cultural context. Specialists in the subject consider that multiculturalism should include differences based on religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic factors, age, gender, physical handicaps and even levels of acculturation and assimilation (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996).

Those who defend the multicultural paradigm suggest that it complements the psychodynamic, conductivist and humanistic paradigm because these refer mainly to the intra-psychic factors that affect human development, and they leave the study of cultural influences to sociologists and anthropologists. The multicultural movement implies the existence of many approaches. It is close to social constructionism in which the approaches and meanings of reality are developed through social interaction and to constructivism, that is, to how personal realities are formed. The assumptions on which it is based should be identified and their characteristics defined. In line with a post-modern philosophy of science, the following five assumptions can be identified in multiculturalism:

1. Multiculturalism accepts the existence of many points of view, none of which are considered good or bad, correct or incorrect.
2. It involves social constructionism, in that people construct their worlds through social processes (historical, cultural and social experiences) which contain cultural symbols and metaphors.
3. It is contextualistic in that conduct can only be understood within the context in which it takes place. This challenges the psychological and counseling theories that arise out of a specific cultural context.
4. It offers different approaches to the world because each perspective captures a different, valid approach.
5. It defends a relational sense for language rather than just a representational one, because language has a high correlation with culture and the perception of reality. The relational approach allows truths and realities to be seen beyond western scientific traditions.

According to Sue and co-workers (1998), the following ten characteristics can be identified in multiculturalism:

- It values cultural pluralism, teaching the value of diversity.
- It is a matter of social justice, cultural democracy and equity.
- It helps people to acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are necessary for functioning efficiently in a democratic, pluralistic society and for inter-acting, negotiating and communicating with people from different backgrounds.
- It is more than just race, class, gender and ethnicity, and includes diversity of religion, national origin, sexual orientation, skills and handicaps, age, geographic origin, etc.
- It welcomes the contributions and achievements of our culture and that of others.
- It is an essential component of analytical thought.
- It respects and values other approaches, but is not neutral to values, thus implying a commitment towards changing social conditions.
- It brings change on an individual, organizational and social level.
- It implies tension, dissatisfaction and a will to face matters with honesty.
- It means positive individual, community and social attainments because it values inclusion, cooperation and movement towards the attainment of objectives.

What does the term 'cross-cultural' add to 'multicultural'? From the traditional *anthropological approach*, the key concepts of culture, group, ethnic group, sub-culture, minority or marginality are accepted but dynamic approaches involving interaction are added, emphasizing the interactive processes amongst cultures.

The *sociological approach* is taken into account in its contributions to the formation of cultural, social and individual identity and the models which describe social relations amongst groups. But an attempt is made to get over the dichotomy between conflict and socio-psychological models by using the structural/functional model based on the notion of a system as a set of inter-related parts.

With regard to the *psychological approach*, emphasis is placed not only on the role of culture in the formation and development of students' psychic processes through the interiorization of cultural instruments but also by the action of teachers and students in activities that are significant for the latter.

What is included from the *pedagogical approach* is that the characteristics of individuals and groups are the result of dynamic selection and not fixed traits used for classifying students. Students' difficulties are not only justified by their socio-cultural handicaps. It is necessary to include the context and to value inter-action between the teacher and students from different cultures.

Cross-cultural counseling can therefore be defined as psychopedagogical intervention based on a metatheory which: a) recognizes that all counseling approaches and theories are developed in a specific inter-active context; b) refers to inter-action in which two or more participants come from different cultures; c) includes any combination of the techniques involved in a culture; d) is characterized by professional assistance with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are culturally appropriate; e) recognizes the use of western and non-western approaches in assistance; f) the changes involve not only the introduction of cross-cultural counseling programs but also the inclusion of this approach in the curriculum and in all dimensions of the educational system such as teaching techniques, motivation, grouping, student assessment and teacher training.

Now that I have described the cross-cultural approach of counseling, I shall move on to the most important contributions made by research in this field.

### **The most relevant contributions of research to cross-cultural counseling**

A review of the research carried out between 1970 and 2000 supports the recommendations made by both Sue and Zane (1987) and the American Psychology Association with regard to the advantages of the multicultural approach for counseling. After analysis of the literature published between 1970 and 1980, Sue and Zane (1987) conclude that the researchers agree that, in order to improve the relationship between therapists and their clients from ethnic minorities, they should adopt the following recommendations: a) “in the field of mental health, there should be greater recruitment of ethnic therapists who can be expected to be bilingual or familiar with ethnic values”; b) “therapists and students should acquire knowledge of the communities and cultures of different ethnic groups”; and c) “the traditional methods of treatment should be changed because they address the majority of Americans (and not the minorities)” (pp. 37-38).

The American Psychology Association (APA, 1993) expresses the same ideas and states, amongst other things, that those who provide psychological services “need knowledge and skills for evaluation and intervention” (p.45); “must recognize that ethnicity and culture are significant parameters for understanding psychological processes” (p.46); “should consider, when taking action, not only the results of differential diagnoses but also the beliefs and values of the client and of his or her community” (p.46), and “should familiarize themselves with the native practices and beliefs and respect them” (p. 47 ).

The research carried out by Atkinson and Lowe (1995) also stresses the role of ethnicity, cultural knowledge and the techniques of multicultural counseling.

I shall now go on to review some of the studies that support ethnic similarity between counselors and their clients and the need for them to acquire knowledge of their cultures, and others that recommend changing conventional types of action.

Concerning research in favor of counselors being of the same ethnic group as their clients, this can be classified in two groups according to whether it focuses on the counseling process or on its outcome. With regard to research which refers to the same ethnic group throughout the process, the results of three studies suggest that the preferences of African Americans depend on the development of the racial identity of the Negro (Helms & Carter, 1991; Morten & Atkinson, 1983 and Red, 1988.). The comprehensive review carried out by López, López and Fong (1991) into research with Mexican Americans showed their preference for counselors from a similar ethnic background. Atkinson (1985) also gives favorable results concerning the marked preference of native American university students for counselors who are also native Americans. However, according to Korsgaard (1990), Asian Americans prefer Asian counselors if the problem is relevant for oriental culture, but if it is relevant for western culture, they choose a counselor of Caucasian origin.

There is little research supporting a similar ethnic group according to the outcome of the action, and what there is confusing (Atkinson, 1983 and 1985). The greatest support for the positive effect of ethnic similarity between counselor and customer comes from three studies in mental health centers carried out by Flaskerud (1986 and 1991) and by Sue, Fujimo, Hu, Takeuchi and Zane (1991), and ethnic equality is a predictive factor for the length of treatment with Asian, African, Mexican and Caucasian Americans, with better results with Asian and Mexican Americans.

Little support has been given by research into the acquisition of knowledge of clients' ethnic cultures by counselors because, although the training of counselors in the ethnic cultures of communities is attractive, it may have negative effects because there is a risk that minority clients may be stereotyped (Sue and Zane, 1987). More research is also required into the efficiency of training in multicultural competencies, in line with that carried out by Wade and Bernstein (1991).

Finally, there are three types of study that defend changing conventional treatments. The first type is characterized by comparisons of the effectiveness of conventional counseling techniques with a specific group, assuming that counselors should change their usual techniques to make them more appropriate for the minority population they are dealing with. The second examines the effectiveness of adapting to the cultural

content with a view to establishing a rapport with minority customers, assuming that what the counselor needs to change is the content, not the strategies. The third type of study suggests that the beliefs and strategies of the various cultural groups should be used to strengthen the process and the results of counseling..

In summary, although some research supports changing conventional treatments and gives data in support of this recommendation, it cannot be said to be conclusive (Akutsu and co-workers, 1990). Further research is required into the use of such techniques with minority ethnic groups, including customer variables such as acculturation and cultural commitment as measures within groups and with more complex research designs.

### **Cross-cultural counseling competencies**

Concern about the multicultural competencies of counselors began with the publication of the document by Sue and co-workers in 1982 entitled *Cross-cultural Counseling Competencies* and subsequent amendments made by the Association for Multicultural Development and Counseling (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992.)

In counseling, 'cross-cultural' competency is understood as being the capacity to understand the cultural dynamics of customers and to react to each of these cultural aspects in a way that facilitates its development (Sue, p.37). The three dimensions for work and which are referred to when we talk of multicultural competencies are the subject's attitudes and beliefs, knowledge and skills (Carney & Kahn, 1984; Sue et al, 1982; 1992).

The first dimension relates to the attitudes of counselors and beliefs concerning race, culture, ethnic groups, gender and sexual orientations; the need to assess prejudices and stereotypes and to develop counseling that is positive towards multiculturalism, and the way in which the values and thoughts of counselors can affect the counseling and therapy. The second dimension relates to the capacity of the counselor to know his or her own approach to the world and to become an expert on different cultures. That is, he or she should not only possess knowledge and specific information on the cultures of the people receiving counseling but should also understand socio-political influences. The last dimension relates to the specific skills and capacities (techniques for intervention and strategies) that are needed for working with groups in different cultures. This dimension includes the competencies of individuals and those of institutions and organizations.

The following are some of these competencies, according to Sue and co-workers (1998; p. 35):

- Knowing one's own theories, values and prejudices.
- Understanding clients' cultural differences.
- Developing strategies for intervention and appropriate techniques.
- Being able to define an organization that is efficient from a multicultural point of view.
- Understanding how organizations and institutions can intensify or reject the development of multicultural competencies.
- Being able to define the most important characteristics of organizations for integration having multicultural competencies, such as:
  - A multicultural commitment amongst the highest ranks of the organization.
  - An operational policy in this area.
  - A plan of action for multiculturalism and diversity.
  - Active, periodic enquiries concerning the impressions and experiences of employees.
  - Promotion of a climate of responsibility towards multiculturalism within the system.
  - Inclusion of multicultural competencies in criteria for assessment.
  - Facilitation of human and material resources (mentors, technical assistance, etc.) for employees belonging to a minority group.
  - Encouragement of links and cohesion amongst minorities and women.
  - Responsibility and a systematic, lasting commitment towards equal education for all workers.
  - Recognition and vision of the organization as a reflection of society.

These are some of the competencies that counselors should have in order to carry out intervention of a cross-cultural type and that organizations can use to facilitate interaction amongst workers from different cultures and ethnic groups. I shall now go on to present the prospects offered by the cross-cultural approach for career development.

### **Emerging topics: characteristics of cross-cultural educational centers**

Several authors outline the characteristics of centers having cross-cultural dimensions. I shall present the model drawn up by Banks and Lynch (1986), which was adapted by Aguado (1998) and the characteristics which, according to Lee (2001), define a culturally responsible school.



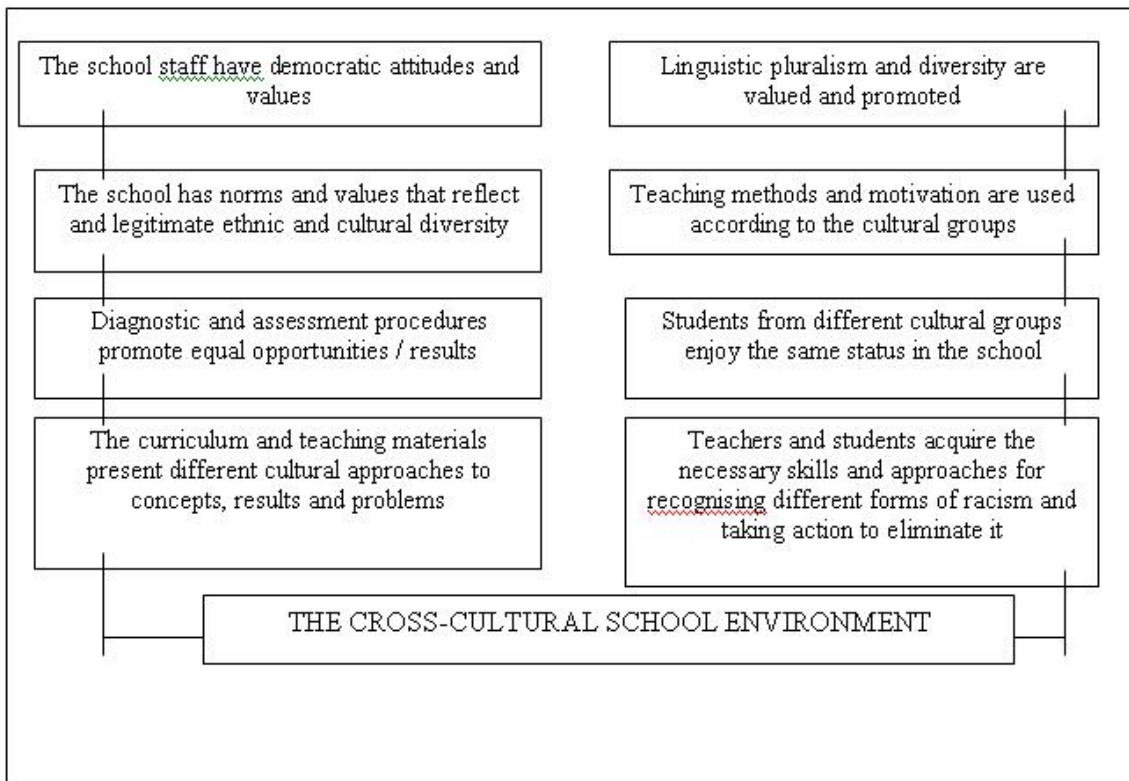
Aguado states that a cross-cultural school environment is one which “takes on the objectives of cross-cultural education and meets the challenge of educating different groups, making schooling equal and comparable for all and taking into account the differential characteristics of students – ethnocultural group, class, gender, handicap, etc.” (p. 42).

According to Lee (2001), there are 11 relevant aspects that characterize a culturally responsible school. These are as follows:

1. The school has adopted a philosophy for education in which everything finds a place.
2. It is capable of creating a sense of community outside cultural diversity.
3. It maintains the same academic standards.
4. The curriculum is the result of contributions from many cultures.
5. ‘Multicultural infusion’ takes place beyond stereotyped thinking.
6. Students are provided with fora for learning from each other’s knowledge and experience gained in other cultures.
7. The staff is occasionally updated to receive contributions from other educators.
8. The school has mechanisms for dealing with cultural and racial tension.
9. It has qualified educators.
10. Interactions between the school and family are based on the culture and language of the latter.
11. Cultural diversity at school includes people with handicaps, different sexual orientation, different religious traditions and adults.

**Figure 1:** Characteristics of a cross-cultural school environment.

Adapted from Banks and Lynch (1986)



The features suggested by the two authors are very similar. The only difference is that Lee adds that the role of counselors in these centers is unique for promoting development, facilitating change and increasing the cross-cultural characteristics of schools.

An additional effort is clearly required from schools so that programs can be drawn up reflecting the needs and realities of all students and taking into account their different backgrounds. They can thus become agents for change with the necessary knowledge and competencies to convert cultural awareness into constructive action. Such action should be present not only in schools but also in families and the community.

### **Prospects for counseling with cross-cultural intervention**

If the study of the academic, vocational and personal conduct of minority groups is relatively recent, more recent still is the establishment of cross-cultural counseling intervention. Such intervention is based on two premises. Firstly, all young people can learn and want to learn. Secondly, cultural differences are real and cannot be ignored. A basic aspect of any cross-cultural action is therefore understanding of the cultural realities of students and of their importance for academic, career and personal/social development.

Although the results of research suggest that some general theories on cognitive development such as the Sternberg (1982) theory or those on career development such as that devised by Holland (1985) are valid for persons who belong to ethnic minorities (Fouad & Dancer, 1992; Swanson, 1992), there are several reasons suggesting why a cross-cultural approach is needed. The following are some of these. The first function of a cross-cultural counselor is to achieve academic development. Super and Harkness stated in 1980 that cognitive development takes place in a specific 'cultural niche' so should be evaluated in terms of the degree to which it adapts to the requirements of its context. In fact, changes usually take place because of interaction between the subject and his or her context. In the same way, Bruner (1980) questions a single model for cognitive development for acquiring and using knowledge, and Sternberg (1980) distinguishes between competency and cognitive execution, giving priority to the cultural factor that affects production of an item of knowledge in a cultural environment. The same can be said for the career or personal and social development of minority groups.

But the problems increase if we refer to tools for assessment and diagnosis that are applied to students. Several authors deal with this subject but I shall mention only the concerns expressed by Reynolds and Kaiser (1990) which refer to the following:

- Content tests are inappropriate. Most of them include items and procedures that reflect the values of the white middle class.
- Standard samples are unsuitable because minority groups are poorly represented in them.
- Lack of familiarity in language between minority groups and the examiner.
- The consequences of social inequality can be seen in the disadvantage for academic and professional attainment.
- Measurement of different attributes when used with subjects from different cultures.
- The differential, predictive value of tests with minority groups is questioned.
- Differences in the habit of doing tests among such groups.

Most research into the differences in academic attainment of such groups has been done in the United States. According to Axelson (1993), the educational attainments of black Americans, in terms of both marks in tests and qualifications, are below the national average, although they have improved considerably since 1960. The academic attainments of Hispanic Americans are lower, with 44% dropping out of high school. Research into bilingual education for these students does not seem to indicate a difference with improved attainment. Although the educational attainment of Asian

Americans is higher than that of the other two groups, their marks in verbal tests are lower than the national average in the first, second and even third generation (Hsia, 1988) and in written English, with variations amongst the different Asian groups. For example, in 1980, the average for Asian Indians who graduated was 70%, whereas for Vietnamese it was only 18%.

The second function of cross-cultural counseling is to facilitate career development for students who belong to minority groups, that is, the process of exploration, decision-making and career choice. For many students, the question of interests, values and professional choice is one of the most complex and challenging (Herring, 1998).

On the one hand, in most cases career development theories are based on a Eurocentric cosmivision which may be different to that of minority groups, taking an individualistic and self-development approach with regard to the matter of careers, while some members of minority groups have a more collectivistic approach. On the other, tools for career assessment are developed and standardized for Euro-Caucasians rather than for other cultures.

Most career development theories emphasize the degree of control that subjects have over the decision-making process and over the psychological aspects that contribute to success and professional satisfaction. However, subjects who belong to minority groups face a number of structural, institutional and social barriers that hinder this degree of attainment and control of their career development. Such barriers are the result of discrimination against such minority groups or of the socio-economic disadvantages that go with them. Without going into the divergencies in career development for the different minority groups, it is of interest to present here a model for intervention in the career development of such groups from a cross-cultural approach. For such subjects, career development matters involve economic, cultural or personal problems amongst others so it is advisable to use a holistic approach and, moreover, the counselor should have been trained in the corresponding multicultural competencies.

With regard to personal and social development, one of the main objectives of cross-cultural counseling is the promotion of a positive concept of self and of self-esteem, as well as the development of inter-personal relationships and mutual respect amongst students from different backgrounds.

The following is a proposal for cross-cultural counseling for academic, career and personal development that involves three types of intervention.

**Figure 2:** Proposal for intervention

	<b>Academic development</b>	<b>Career development</b>	<b>Personal development</b>
<b>Consultation</b>	1	2	3
<b>Program</b>	4	5	6
<b>Advice</b>	7	8	9

The three models for intervention are personal advice, programs and consultation, while the three areas are those relating to the educational, professional and personal worlds.

The model of counseling in the form of *advice* is the most traditional in the multicultural literature and is used for educational, personal and professional attainments. This is undoubtedly the model with which it is possible to deal in most depth and in an individual way with all the personal problems and variables arising within the culture and ethnic group in question.

With regard to *programs*, these are difficult to design and to apply unless they include the three following components – first, many human aspects of a universal nature; second, factors that are specific to the cosmovisions of the various cultures and, third, specific components for each individual. A comprehensive program with minority students is more desirable and efficient for creating an affirmative, accepting atmosphere in the school than isolated programs. It is necessary for programs to re-define barriers and the areas of cultural insensitivity within the system in order to achieve educational equality and to use initiatives to get round these (Lee, 1995), and special intervention should take place with parents and the community, encouraging their involvement in the educational process.

Finally, *consultations* can exist on three levels – the systemic level within the educational center, consultation with the family or with the community. In the three areas, the aim is to modify the environments for the minority groups in such a way that obstacles to their personal, professional or educational development can be overcome. When working to promote change in social and organizational systems, counselors should work with other agents of change. For example, in systemic intervention, counselors can assist teachers and administrators to make them more aware of the special problems of minority groups with regard to their academic achievements, careers or self-concept, promoting their levels of aspiration and planning the application of strategies to strengthen personal development.

The counseling group model is the most widely-used within the cross-cultural approach, although certain authors question its efficiency with minority groups (Dunn & Veltman, 1989). Some people may find it difficult to open up in the group because of cultural inhibitions. It is therefore better to use the format of structured groups, trying to ensure that groups are made up of subjects from similar backgrounds with similar cultural beliefs in order to facilitate individual learning.

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