

Cultural Responsivity

What Do We Mean By Cultural Responsivity Anyway?

We view the world through the lens of culture; a system of beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors that is filtered through our own individuality and experiences. Cultural responsivity is grounded in an awareness of cultural context and the strengths that students bring with them to school.¹ Culturally responsive practice or pedagogy, which may also be referred to as cultural competence, means having the capacity to function effectively in cultural contexts which differ from your own.

Becoming culturally responsive is a developmental process which includes engaging in conversations about race and equity, reflecting on one's own culture and beliefs, and gaining awareness of other cultures.² Cultural responsivity permeates every aspect of education: curriculum and instruction, data-based decision making, assessment, family and community engagement and policy decisions, and necessitates developing the skills, tools, and knowledge, along with the experience to apply them, in cross-cultural settings.

In a culturally responsive setting, curriculum and instruction incorporate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and give recognition to the "funds of knowledge" students bring with them to school.³ Teachers bridge the gap of what a student needs to know by building on their students' cultural understandings and using cooperative groups and other strategies to actively engage the students.⁴

Characteristics of cultural responsivity include:

- Being aware of how one's own cultural views and values influence practice
- Acknowledging students' differences as well as their commonalities
- Validating students' cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials
- Including multiple perspectives in decision making
- Assessing student's ability and achievement validity
- Engaging with families in ways which are culturally meaningful

Some questions to consider when assessing cultural responsivity:

- Do our methods of instruction and the content of our curriculum draw from the experience of our students and the communities they come from?
- Do our teaching styles relate to the multiplicity of ways in which our students learn?
- Are we using data in the most effective ways possible to understand our students, our school, our challenges, and our successes?
- Are we promoting a just and equitable system which consistently increases the access to opportunities for all our students?

How does this connect to policy and practice?

The relevance of cultural responsivity has become central as we grapple with how to create opportunities that create access to success for all our students. The continuing conversation on the achievement gap has helped to focus attention on issues of educational equity at the local, state, and national levels.⁵ Federal legislation mandates schools to address the ongoing issues of achievement, discrepancies in discipline and graduation rates, as well as disproportionality in special education. Indiana's school improvement plan, PL221, includes a mandate for schools to incorporate cultural responsivity through culturally appropriate strategies, disaggregated data analysis, and professional development necessary to improve cultural competence. A position statement on Response to Intervention from the *National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems* states the importance of culturally responsive practices in providing adequate opportunity to learn, such as culturally meaningful task criteria, participation, frameworks, and teacher-student understanding.⁶

What are some steps I can take?

- Build a culture of inquiry, reflection, and action research which could take the form of teacher teams, study groups, or professional learning communities exploring research-based strategies.
- Know the community and families in order to best utilize resources and respond to needs.
- Encourage cultural self-awareness: what values and expectations do we have? In what ways are they similar or different from our students?
- Use text-based discussions to move the conversation forward. Choose a book or an article and dedicate part of each staff, grade-level, or team meeting to responding to critical questions.

Footnotes

1. Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
2. Villegas, A.M., & Lucas, T. (2007). The culturally responsive teacher. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 28-33.
3. Delpit, L. (2002). *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom*. NY: New Press.
4. Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116.
5. Johnson, R.S. (2002). *Using data to close the achievement gap*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
6. The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (<http://www.nccrest.org>)

Resources

- Lee, E., Menkart, D., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (Eds.) (2002). *Beyond heroes and holidays*. Washington, DC: Teaching For Change.
- Nieto, S. (1996). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of education*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Singleton, G., & Linton, C. (2005). *Courageous conversations about race*. Thousand Oaks, CA :Corwin Press.
- Tatum, B.D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. NY: Basic Books.
- Teaching Tolerance (<http://teachingtolerance.org>)
- The Equity Project (<http://www.indiana.edu/equity/>)

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www.indiana.edu/~equity

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