

The principles of culturally responsive teaching



School resources

Culture is the complex phenomenon that includes the changing worldviews, knowledge, values, traditions, beliefs, capabilities, and social and political relationships of a group of people that give meaning to and influence their life and actions. This means that culture goes beyond visible and tangible aspects, such as food or dress, to include more implicit behaviours to do with social roles, behaviours, communication, and beliefs. Culture is shared between and learnt in groups of people that are bound together by a common history, location, language, religion, or social class, yet it is multifaceted and dynamic, so that there are variations between individuals within cultural groups¹.

Why culture matters for educational achievement

Culture influences how we think, perceive, act, and communicate. Learning is mediated through culture. This means that the experiences of students in a classroom might be different, even where the teaching, resources, curriculum, and relationships are the same, because how we learn and what we experience is filtered through cultural perspectives as well as existing knowledge and experiences. Many schools and teachers struggle to engage students from cultural backgrounds that differ from the dominant culture represented in mainstream school. Disciplinary issues are also more prevalent in students from cultural backgrounds that differ from the mainstream culture of schools.

Most schools, teachers, curriculum documents, and texts reflect, transmit, and reproduce the discourse, knowledge, and values of the majority culture, and may exclude or even negate those of minority or diverse groups. When a student's home background is the same as or similar to the mainstream culture, school activities are generally familiar, and students can more easily build on their cultural understandings to learn school content. When the cultural knowledge and values of students from diverse backgrounds do not correspond or perhaps conflict with the expectations, values, and knowledge of school, students who find it difficult to participate in the dominant discourse may be marginalised and fail².

Cultural gaps between students and teachers, when left unaddressed, can lead to misunderstandings of teacher expectations on the part of the student, or of student behaviour on the part of the teacher³. Problems can occur when teachers are unaware of the different knowledge and experiences that diverse students can draw upon in their learning. Even if a teacher is from the same culture or race as their students, they will not automatically understand students' backgrounds, as cultural understandings and behaviours are nuanced and tend to vary within a particular cultural group. Teachers also might not understand different cultural cues.

Culturally responsive pedagogy can reduce the gaps between the highest and lowest achievers while at the same time raising overall levels of achievement⁴. Research shows that culturally responsive pedagogy raises student achievement for all cultural groups⁵, ensuring that all students are given the encouragement and support to realise their educational potential regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background, or their individual needs. It is important not to pretend that differences do not exist, or to treat students all the same regardless of culture⁶. Teachers need to move from cultural blindness to cultural responsiveness.

The importance of teachers' attitudes towards culturally diverse learners

The diverse languages, literacies, and cultural ways of knowing and being of students of minority cultures are sometimes perceived as deficiencies that need to be overcome in order for students to learn the dominant language, literacies, and cultural ways of school. From this point of view, students are seen as culturally deprived because they do not have sufficient experiences of the knowledge and values of the dominant culture, and are subject to low expectations for achievement and family involvement. This can lead to a sense of disconnection from the school for many students and families. When parents are aware that blame for students' underachievement is directed towards the home, they are likely to feel unwelcome at the school.

Focusing beliefs and discourses about culturally diverse students on deficits can also leave teachers feeling helpless, frustrated, or angry, because it implies that the only possibilities for change are outside of teachers' control. However, when teachers reject deficit thinking and adopt alternative discourses, they are empowered to be agents of change in their own classrooms⁷. Research shows that **the single biggest influence on student achievement is the quality of teaching**⁸. By adopting an agentic discourse, teachers can see themselves as capable of making change and taking responsibility for student outcomes. Quality teaching can offset many factors that commonly lead to poor educational outcomes.

What is culturally responsive teaching?

All students have cultural 'funds of knowledge', that is, bodies of knowledge and skills for individual functioning and wellbeing which they can utilise in formal classroom learning. Culturally responsive teaching **recognises and deeply values the richness of the cultural knowledge and skills that students bring to the classroom** as a resource for developing multiple perspectives and ways of knowing⁹. This means making what students know, and how they know it, the foundation of learning and teaching interactions and curriculum by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, life experiences, frames of reference, and communication styles and language^{10 11}.

Some researchers are beginning to use the term 'culturally sustaining pedagogies', reflecting an aim to foster and sustain linguistic and cultural diversity in schools, rather than merely respond to it. These researchers are cautious of approaches that use students' existing cultural knowledge to teach the majority culture's canon of acceptable knowledge and ways of being, in ways that work to overwrite existing cultural beliefs and knowledge. They suggest that teachers support students in sustaining their emerging cultural and linguistic competence while simultaneously offering access to competencies valued and practised in the dominant culture¹². Teacher reflection on the changing interplay of curriculum, content, and culture for each class or lesson is very important for culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally responsive pedagogies focus on **positive interpersonal relationships and effective, socially constructed, and dynamic forms for instruction and assessment**. They are entirely compatible with the [principles of effective teaching](#). They benefit all students, but are even more important when the differences between the world of the teacher and the world of the child are greater. Although what is experienced as good teaching will vary across cultural groups, there are some principles for culturally responsive teaching that research demonstrates can be very effective. The following actions can help you to develop or improve a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Reflect on your cultural knowledge and teaching assumptions related to culture

The kind of beliefs and attitudes that teachers hold are crucial to their ability to make a difference to diverse learners. Teaching practices, and the types and frequency of teachers' interactions with students, are determined by teachers' beliefs and assumptions about and [expectations](#) of the student¹³. In addition, students perceive themselves and their learning capabilities through the eyes of their teachers, and what teachers do and say impacts students' self-beliefs and [self-efficacy](#).

It is important that teachers evaluate their own teacher discourse and beliefs about culturally diverse learners, and perhaps to reposition themselves by drawing on alternative discourses that are more productive¹⁴. Teachers who are culturally responsive share a passion for social justice and for helping all students to achieve. They have the courage to question the knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy of the majority culture, as well as their beliefs and assumptions about culturally diverse students, families, and communities. They also are willing to go beyond established and familiar teaching practices to find new practices that may be more successful for all students.

It is also important to examine expectations for students. Teachers may not assume a deep capacity for achievement in all students, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds. Students who follow typical classroom practices tend to be seen as more highly motivated and as higher achievers than students who demonstrate different cultural ways of learning and behaving. When teachers have low or no expectations of certain students, and spend more time and attention on students they think will achieve, low achieving students tend to also give up on themselves¹⁵. Raising expectations seems to be fundamental for reducing disparities in achievement¹⁶, although **high expectations must be accompanied by effective teaching**. Help students set challenging but achievable goals, and follow through in terms of helping them to reach those goals. Challenging goals without support to achieve them is demotivating for students.

Learn about your students

Students' prior experiences provide them with unique preconceptions and knowledge bases that must be taken into account in order for teaching to be effective. With this knowledge, teachers can engage students and **activate their frames of reference, life experiences, and cultural values as a basis for building meaningful learning**. Take time to learn about students' lives and cultures. Find out about students' home life, family, language, cultural values and expectations, socioeconomic background, previous experience with school and achievement, self-esteem, attitudes, religion, and community experiences and practices¹⁷. Do not overlook these important parts of a student's identity in order to assume a 'colour-blind' perspective and treat all students the same.

Teachers can have conversations with students, ask them to write about themselves, their families or family traditions, or complete a personal questionnaire about hobbies, interests, music preferences and aspirations. Students might share artefacts from their home or be assigned to research different aspects of their culture. Teachers might also ask parents to fill out a similar questionnaire about their children, and also about their background and connections. Find out how students spend their free time, and perhaps attend sporting or music events in which students are involved.

It is also essential to avoid stereotypes, which do not see students as individuals and interfere with teachers' ability to understand each student's perspective. While it is important to have some general knowledge of a cultural group and norms for behaviour, etiquette, communication and learning, try to **move beyond surface level understandings of cultures**, such as food, music or festivals, and try to gain an understanding of the variance within a cultural group. Many diverse students also develop an

understanding of the negative views of their race, often emphasised in the wider culture, and actually come to internalise them. Teachers need to interrupt these discourses by validating and endorsing what they learn about students and affirming their culture.

Use students' cultural knowledge, perspectives and skills as a resource for teaching

When students' culture and experience is central to their learning, they can build on their prior cultural experiences and understandings. What students already know forms the starting point for exploring unfamiliar knowledge and experiences¹⁸, so view the diversity of cultures within a class as a strength from which all students benefit¹⁹. Gather and use students' background knowledge and prior experience when planning curricular content, selecting teaching strategies, and designing the classroom environment. Ensure that programmes reflects an appreciation for and understanding of diverse ways of knowing and being.

It is beneficial to **acquire some basic knowledge of the languages that students speak**, and find ways to use this language as a bridge for new ideas and concepts. This demonstrates cultural respect and shows students that their language is legitimate and valued. Teachers can also ensure that classroom displays and the arrangement of furniture reflect students' cultures throughout the year and not just on certain days or months of the year. Include significant and more comprehensive information about different cultures and their contributions to the curriculum, such as important explorers, scientists, and artists. Critically evaluate the materials used for teaching – what images do students encounter, are these culturally diverse, and can students see themselves and their culture reflected in the classroom context?

Teachers can also teach 'to and through' students' frames of reference by beginning lessons by eliciting student experiences, and building on these to develop and understand new concepts. Find out what students know and what they want to know. Use questionnaires or discussion at the introduction of a new topic, which helps students connect their community and home-based knowledge to classroom learning. It also helps **make the culture of students visible and present in the curriculum**. Follow up with another discussion for students to reflect on what they have learned at the end of the lesson. All this dialogue helps teachers understand students' prior experience and how they have used this to construct their present understanding.

Present a safe and supportive environment and build strong relationships

A supportive environment that is favourable for learning is critical to culturally responsive teaching. The best way to create a supportive environment is through relationships with students. Research reports that for culturally diverse students, the main influence on their educational achievement is the quality of their relationships with teachers²⁰. Longer term and continuous relationships, such as with a form teacher, are particularly important, as they help students and their families to feel known and understood by their teachers.

Teachers can build strong relationships by demonstrating that they **care for and value students, their lives, their culture, and their academic success**. Be warm, sensitive, encouraging, consistent, and authoritative. Show interest and a determination to help students succeed by supporting them with personal problems, listening to their ideas, giving personal time, supporting them in co-curricular activities, and marking and returning their work quickly. This is particularly important for students who feel school is not for them. Remember that students will interpret what is caring from their cultural perspective, which will not necessarily be the same as the teacher's. This includes demonstrating care for students as culturally located individuals²¹, that is, as members of a cultural group, and not outside

of their cultural identity. Show a genuine interest in students' cultures. Where possible, attend events outside of school in which students are involved, such as extracurricular activities. Find out about important events in the students' lives, such as sports and drama, or even TV programmes.

When the environment is welcoming and safe, students feel more comfortable to take risks, especially when learning is particularly unfamiliar for students because of cultural differences, or when using English as a second language. Poorly managed classrooms do not provide a safe environment for student learning. Ensure that **classroom discipline is maintained**, as both the inability or reluctance to do so are perceived by students as a lack of care. Consider collaborating with students in order to develop shared expectations for acceptable classroom behaviour, as involving students in establishing a safe learning environment makes them much more invested in helping to maintain it.

Another way to build strong relationships with culturally diverse students is to **help them work through their goals**. Students report that they enjoy talking with teachers about their aspirations and how to achieve them, as well as receiving support in relation to their goals. Students perceive teachers' high expectations as evidence of their positive attitude towards them as students²². **Give feedback carefully to culturally diverse students**, as there is the possibility of mistrust about the motivation for the feedback. This is less of an issue if students trust their teacher. Ensure that your feedback is motivated by high expectations of all students, offer reassurance that each student is capable of reaching those expectations, and ensure that feedback is focused on classroom work. Be careful not to use vernacular phrases, humour or sarcasm in ways that might be misunderstood. Avoid confrontational or humiliating communication styles which indicate to students that they are not liked or valued as students. Students are likely to have negative perceptions of their teachers when teachers do not listen to them, do not pay them attention or give assistance, or show discrimination. These negative perceptions affect students' motivation and ability to engage in learning.

Encourage discursive curriculum and enable student self-determination

A discursive curriculum enables students' knowledge, experiences, concerns, questions and sense-making processes to be shared, valued, and incorporated into curriculum. It involves interaction patterns in which all students are included and in which culturally diverse students can participate successfully²³. Curriculum and pedagogy become culturally comprehensive rather than monocultural, no longer solely reflecting the knowledge, values, and purposes of those in power.

Teachers can make learning a participatory and active endeavour by employing an interactive teaching style and assisting students to use discussion to make personal meaning of new ideas. Knowledge that has been personally organised and integrated into existing conceptual structures is more easily applied to new situations. **Inquiry, active learning, problem-solving, and dialogue** facilitate culturally responsive teaching as these approaches enable students to bring diverse cultural perspectives to the task. Plan to support students to be actively involved in sharing and disseminating knowledge.

Sharing power in decisions about curriculum planning in terms of the curriculum content and the directions learning will take shows students that their teachers trust them to make good decisions and value their opinions, and moves away from a deficit model. Create a culture in which all students are individually accountable both for the knowledge they acquire and for helping each other to learn and demonstrate concepts and skills. Part of a teacher's role should be facilitative, helping students to plan, implement, and manage their own decisions..

Use cooperative learning strategies, which research overwhelmingly supports as an optimal strategy for all cultural groups²⁴. [Cooperative learning](#) is not simply groupwork, but involves groups working

together in coming to agree on an answer to a problem or developing a product that reflects their work. Focus on the principles of the sharing of expertise and the sharing of responsibility. The work should invite students to consider different approaches to the task, which can be an opportunity to strengthen and reflect upon thinking skills and strategies. Diverse opinions, reasons, and negotiations should be encouraged. The aim is to encourage students to work as caring, inclusive and deeply interconnected learning communities, which has been identified as a component of quality teaching for diverse students.

Connect with families

The relationships between school and home are a significant factor in student achievement²⁵. Culturally diverse students and families often report a sense of disconnection from schools which they perceive as due to a lack of ongoing and personalised relationships with the teachers or school. When relationships with families are enduring, commitment and collective responsibility are evident.

Students and parents from diverse cultures enjoy discussing learning when discussions are data-based, focused on achievement and on constructive plans for next steps, so give parents **access to information and opportunities for collaboration focused on student learning**. This can help families to understand what their child needs to do to succeed in their learning and how to support them. Parental expectations and aspirations for their children's learning have a strong correlation with students' achievement. In particular, the impact on student achievement is greater when parents are helped to understand how to help their child while at the same time respecting their dignity and cultural values. But be cautious of seeking a one way relationship of support, by, for example, expecting parents to support school activity without taking on board parent perspectives and aspirations. The aim is for partnership, and not a one-way flow of information aimed at imposing school values on families. It is as important for the school to support the family and community culture of the student as it is for families and communities to support the school.

Teachers can develop positive interactions with families by calling or emailing each student's family with positive information, and regularly seeking and acting upon parental perspectives. Use various methods of communication and following up with parents, as not all families have the capacity to access school reporting. Students perceive teacher contact with their family as a positive sign of the teacher caring for the student. Most appreciate home-school collaborations, although be aware that some students can thwart communication attempts, sometimes to protect parents from embarrassment or themselves from parental disappointment. Consider how to plan and conduct parent-teacher interviews, as research shows that many parents find these meetings unsatisfactory due to the brevity of the appointment, miscommunication, and a conflict of agendas. Families from diverse cultures appreciate face-to-face communication for a longer period which makes it easier for parents to communicate in a culturally appropriate manner. There is little research, however, which explores the impact of parent-teacher interviews on student achievement.

Connect with communities

The active participation of the community is important in designing a culturally responsive programme. Effective teachers extend their classroom into and draw from the wider community. Listening to students, families and the community helps you to adapt your teaching for diverse students. Learn about the school's local community, the people that live and work there, and the potential expertise and resources that are present by spending time in the neighbourhood in which students live, talking to people in that community, and visiting shops and landmarks. Look for **opportunities to involve the community in classroom programmes**, perhaps by designing projects that draw upon community members' expertise, or that learn about the communities that impact upon student lives. There might be members of the

community who will speak to the students on various subjects, teach a lesson, or give a demonstration. The aim is for community projects focused on authentic, genuine experiences. Consider making use of venues outside of the classroom as an opportunity for community connections.

Endnotes

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