# Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Culturally responsive teaching is a technique used to encourage and support cultural differences in the classroom in order to create a sense of equality that motivates students to succeed in their education no matter their demographic or culture. This student-centered technique has not always been a part of mainstream education but is now considered essential to the success of all students (Polly et al., 2014). Through culturally responsive teaching, teachers are able to implement an approach to elementary education that helps overcome cultural blindness and builds meaningful connections between the student's home life and education. The implementation of culturally responsive teaching is designed to make a lasting change in education for students of all cultural backgrounds and grant students the confidence and means to succeed in their education. In a world where cultural appropriation and discrimination are around every corner, the need for culturally responsive practices is growing.

## History of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Over the years, teachers and school districts have noticed a growing gap between students' education in relation to their culture and demographic. Rose (2014) noted that students who fall into a minority category are consistently behind their peers. There are many contributing factors as to why this happens, but the one that stood out the most was the lack of cultural responsiveness in classrooms. Teachers were not aggressively discriminating against students, but rather passively ignoring important differences (Cabiles 2021). When educators began to recognize that incorporating students' culture and identity in the classroom enables the students to take pride in their differences, things began to change (Cabiles 2021). This change led to the implementation of more culturally responsive techniques that lessened the gap, as Rose(2014) explained. Before culturally responsive teaching was created, culturally relevant teaching was the common expectation for teachers. Culturally relevant teaching came to fruition through analyzing teachers whose culturally diverse students succeeded (Will & Najarro, 2022). These teaching techniques focused on teachers incorporating diverse cultures. Over time this culturally relevant style changed into cultural responsiveness (Will & Najarro, 2022 ). The focus shifted from incorporating cultures to encouraging and enabling different cultures. In the past few years, the pedagogy of cultural responsiveness has made large strides and continues to improve as teachers start adapting their classrooms to fit this new mold of acceptance.

## What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Through culturally responsive teaching we acknowledge cultural differences in the classroom setting and encourage students to embrace those differences to enable them to succeed. Milner (2018) explained that it is essential that teachers are aware of the many cultures represented in their classrooms and are willing to incorporate those cultures into their teaching methods. Students and teachers work together to forge learning experiences that are more enriching by looking through a more diverse lens. Özüdogru (2018) noted that these experiences are often made by integrating cultural experiences into leadership and teamwork roles.

Culturally responsive teaching aims to enforce equality in education for all students. Acknowledging and representing diverse cultures through instruction and practice is a key concept of culturally responsive teaching (Rose, 2014). It is not enough for teachers to simply paint a picture of diversity, but they must teach the reality of difference found among students. Through diverse representation, students are instructed on a level playing field rather than having to compare themselves to a standard of normality created by a teacher. When implementing these techniques, Evans et. al (2020) have warned that teachers must be careful not to put on an act of incorporating culture but must actually dive in and create an accepting classroom environment. Illegitimate cultural responsiveness can be just as destructive as no cultural responsiveness. It is important teachers are genuine and aware when implementing these techniques to best serve their students and learning community.

Culturally responsive teaching requires an environment that welcomes diversity and encourages inclusion among students and teachers. In order for culturally responsive teaching to be effective, both students and teachers need to be held to a higher standard of learning where diversity and inclusion play a role in every conversation (Milner, 2018). Teachers can implement this by diversifying their course material to include underrepresented cultures, using different materials in order to relate to a wider variety of students, and consistently looking for ways to incorporate cultures that are not just their own.  Milner (2018) suggested that offering students and teachers multiple avenues to explore culture elevates learning and long-term success in education.

Culturally responsive teaching aims to diminish any cultural segregation and promote equal opportunities for all cultures and backgrounds. This style of teaching is more than just acknowledging differences—it is about encouraging them. Donahue-Keegan et al. (2023) explained that differences have a tendency to become categories students can fall into and culturally responsive teaching aims to get rid of the categories altogether.

In addition to promoting inclusion through acknowledging diversity, culturally responsive teaching aims to encourage students to think more critically. By recognizing differences with each other, students are better equipped to try and understand those around them (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2023). This style of teaching also allows students to question inequality and causes them to grow in their awareness of it. Through these strategies, students are provided skills to aid them in both education and life (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2023).

Culturally responsive teaching falls under a larger umbrella of teaching approaches called student-centered teaching. Student-centered approaches are teaching strategies in which knowledge is not simply passed from teacher to student, but the student has some degree of freedom and creativity in their learning which allows them to discover and master knowledge for themselves (Polly et al., 2014). This method of pedagogy involves teachers creating learning situations for their students that are meant to encourage critical thinking and engagement with the class material (Polly et al., 2014). This heightened engagement and freedom makes learning experiences more meaningful for children and increases their motivation. Culturally responsive teaching is a clear example of this teaching style. As stated previously, students are encouraged to create connections between their personal background and the classroom curriculum. In order to achieve these connections, the teaching methods are very personalized and customizable for each child. This aligns perfectly with the characteristics of a student-centered classroom, in which the students are actively driving the direction of their learning while the teacher takes on a facilitative role (Polly et al., 2014). A truly culturally responsive classroom is one in which the student lies at the center.

## Culturally Responsive Teaching in Literacy

In order to develop effective culturally responsive teaching strategies, teachers must first develop a relationship with each student and a deeper understanding of their culture. Teachers' efforts in this regard are most prevalent in literacy curricula. Kelly et al. (2022) found that teachers who were able to adequately adapt their literacy teaching strategies and lesson plans to be more culturally responsive first employed a variety of approaches to get to know their students on a more personal level. These efforts included home-centered methods, such as visiting the students in their homes and interviewing the family and students, as well as community-centered methods. Some teachers developed a broader understanding of the community by visiting community landmarks such as parks or church services. This is an essential first step because, as noted by Rose (2015), the cultural rift between teachers and their students is only growing larger by the year as the teacher population continues to be primarily made up of middle-class, caucasian females, whereas the student population is becoming continuously more diverse in terms of language, race, and religion. In order to truly provide culturally responsive teaching, teachers must employ purposeful and meaningful strategies to learn about their students.

Teachers can integrate culturally responsive practices in literacy by creating culturally relevant curriculum themes. Creating curriculum themes and overarching unit ideas goes beyond the well-intentioned endeavors of many teachers who strive to select literature with culturally relevant referents that appear to represent the student. As Hilaski (2020) noted, selecting books containing cultural referents—such as a book with a Hispanic character to represent a Hispanic student—is a step in the right direction, but true culturally responsive teaching in literacy focuses on what the student’s actual values and identity are rather than simply including books with characters that appear to be part of the same broad community. For example, Kelly et al. (2022) followed several teachers who utilized a parent survey of important cultural and home values to develop overarching themes under which they selected relevant books that embodied these values and culturally significant values. This practice leads to a curriculum based on important cultural themes rather than what appear to be matching referents. However, it is important to note that while cultural referents should not be the primary focus, it is absolutely appropriate and useful to teach with literature featuring a variety of referents to match the diversity of the classroom.

Other notable strategies for teaching literacy in a culturally responsive manner include teacher-created books and co-created books. Given a teacher has employed appropriate strategies to develop relationships with the families and students, it can be a very meaningful activity to create a simple book for an individual student (Hilaski, 2020). Since the book is a novel creation of the teacher, this allows for the book to reflect the student’s interests, home life, and community values in a very personal way that will allow for greater connection with the student. Co-authored books between the teacher and student or students can have a similar effect. In this model, the student can directly influence the plot, setting, and characters and draw upon familiar constructs from their community (Hilaski, 2020). Not only does this teaching method create a culturally responsive literacy exercise and literature product, but the writing process and final product deepen the teacher’s understanding of the child’s culture and allow them to further adapt future curriculum. As evident in the nature of the strategies provided, cultural responsiveness in literacy goes beyond selecting books that appear to include matching referents on the surface. By creating a curriculum with a foundation of culturally relevant themes and then developing related exercises, teachers create culturally responsive classroom practices in literacy that are effective and impactful.

## Culturally Responsive versus Culturally Blind

Culturally responsive teaching actively recognizes and encourages all cultures and backgrounds, whereas culturally blind methods aim to ignore culture altogether (Cabiles, 2021). Rose (2014) explained that cultural blindness is ineffective and destructive for both students individually as well as classrooms as a whole. Many teachers may claim that choosing not to see differences in color or culture is beneficial to all students and equals the playing field (Cabiles, 2021). While their intentions are good, their tactics are not. Teachers and researchers have learned time and time again that it is only by recognizing and embracing differences that students can succeed.

Teachers play a crucial role when implementing culturally responsive techniques because students look to the teacher to set the example. When a teacher feels uncomfortable about addressing or incorporating culture, the students perceive this and act accordingly (Cabiles, 2021). This perception causes students to feel less accepted and affects both their social and academic success in school. While many teachers do not intend to create a culturally blind environment, their lack of cultural knowledge creates it. It is vital that teachers take the initiative to learn more about culture and culturally responsive techniques. Özüdogru (2018) noted that there are many resources available through each individual school district to help teachers integrate these methods seamlessly into their classrooms.

## Student Outcomes of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The major benefit following culturally responsive pedagogy is the child’s ability to construct connections between their home life and education. As found by Hilaski (2020), schools traditionally focus primarily on creating a school environment and culture that is entirely separate and distinct from a student’s home and community life. The danger here is losing the value a child’s culture can contribute to the learning environment as well as the value it brings to the individual’s education by having the ability to connect meaning between lived experiences and learned principles. When a child feels that the classroom is a safe place where they are welcomed and encouraged to draw upon their personal knowledge and experiences, they are more inclined and motivated to participate in learning activities (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). This connection and participation are results of culturally responsive practices because these practices communicate to a child that their identity and experiences outside of school are valuable and relevant to the classroom conversation. When students can recognize families, situations, and values that reflect their own in the literature shared in class, they are able to use that same narrative framework to share their own stories with their peers (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Teachers’ culturally responsive strategies, especially in literacy teaching, provide students with the models they need to learn how to share a story or experience concerning one’s culture and open the door for them to forge a link between their home life and classroom life.

In addition to supporting the child’s ability to share outwardly, culturally responsive pedagogy also strengthens the child’s identity inwardly. Children are still developing their cultural identity. Teachers and their methods have a crucial role in a child’s ability to comprehend and begin to articulate their sense of self. Providing them with exposure to ideas, values, and situations in which they can recognize themselves gives the child opportunities to build on their understanding of their own cultural identity (Kelly, 2022). This empowers children in every aspect of their lives, whether outside or inside the classroom. It is clear that the outcomes surrounding cultural responsiveness—namely, creating connections between the classroom and home life and developing self-identity—are well worth the effort and are a fundamental element of quality student-centered teaching practices.

## Conclusion

Culturally responsive teaching is crucial to the success of every child in the education system. The continually growing numbers of culturally diverse students must be recognized and teaching techniques must be adapted to best support our ever-changing classroom demographics. Rather than choosing not to see differences, we must celebrate them as an integral part of modern pedagogy strategies. By implementing this student-centered approach, teachers can create an environment of equality and one where students feel encouraged to explore diversity. This is especially evident in the teaching of literacy. By first developing a relationship with the child and cultivating a more accurate understanding of their culture, teachers can then employ various teaching methods to create relevant curriculum themes. The student-centered outcomes that result from these practices include a stronger connection between a student’s home life and education, the validation of the student’s lived experiences and cultural knowledge, and an increased ability for the student to build upon their cultural identity. For these many reasons, it is clear that culturally responsive pedagogy is key to creating classrooms where every child has the potential to succeed.

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