



Putting the Student's Self in Schoolwork

Culturally responsive teaching engages students by making their experiences meaningful

BY JENNY MUÑIZ

After two years of school closures and disrupted learning, educators are wondering how to ensure every student feels safe, affirmed, and deeply engaged in learning every day.

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices can help this goal. This model of teaching—also known as culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive education—involves bringing students' backgrounds, interests, and everyday experiences to bear in all aspects of schooling, from educator beliefs to choice of curriculum.

New America's culturally responsive teaching competencies (bit.ly/3dVVR9fc) outline a set of knowledge and skills that can help educators bring engaging and personally meaningful education to life.

Two of these competencies are of striking importance today, because they challenge educators to tie academic concepts to students' backgrounds and lived experiences in ways that make school relevant in their daily lives.

The first competency of interest asks educators to draw on students' culture as a bridge to academic concepts. It calls for curriculum and instruction that reflect what students already know from their families, communities, and lived experiences, as well as what they don't know about other cultures and groups. As literacy scholar Rudine Sims Bishop put it, all students need "mirrors" to see their own worlds and "windows" into the experiences of others to become fully immersed learners.

The second competency of interest addresses the "so what" question, challenging educators to help students see how academic concepts are valuable to their lives, families, and the community. Culturally responsive and sustaining educators continually ask: "What does this material have to do with your lives?"; "Does this knowledge connect to an issue you care about?"; and "How can you use this information to take action?" They regularly assign activities, projects, and assessments that require learners to explore and propose solutions to complex topics, including newsworthy issues of the day.

Age-Appropriate Applications

Both competencies can be applied across subjects and grades. Elementary school students might explore environmental science topics through project-based experiences such as joining a local river cleanup. Middle school students might use mathematical inquiry to uncover racial disparities in their hometown's traffic stop data. High school students reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* might explore its central theme by sharing personal experiences with injustice in a Socratic seminar.

Figure 1 | Eight Competencies for Culturally Responsive Teaching



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By connecting academics to students' lives and interests, educators can help students learn to respect one another and take academic risks. By giving students opportunities to explore complex issues from various angles and perspectives, teachers also ensure that students develop critical thinking skills, engage in civil debate, and formulate their own conclusions based on credible evidence.

Most teachers understand that learning doesn't happen if schooling is impersonal and inauthentic. Learning begins when instruction piques students' interests. In fact, research shows that understanding how their education connects to purposes bigger than themselves helps students remain motivated and focused on academic tasks.

In other words, culturally responsive and sustaining practices can be defended not only as a strategy for creating safe and inclusive spaces, but also as an imperative for learning.

Leading Cultural Change

Still, these practices have recently come under scrutiny. Politicians are passing laws that squelch classroom discussions of timely issues—and even historical facts. This deprives students of opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in school and beyond. The good news is that school leaders can play an important role in preserving and strengthening culturally responsive and sustaining practices.

Now more than ever, educators need guidance and support in implementing these practices, especially in states where vague censorship laws have sowed fear and confusion about what can and can't be taught. Beyond this, educators need practical help identifying lessons that might be the target of misinformation.

There is also a need to restore faith in schools' ability to cultivate critical thinkers. School leaders can reiterate to parents, families, and the broader community that school is a place of open inquiry, where students learn how to navigate information and ideas, make connections and ask questions, and ultimately develop the skills they need to be informed participants in a democratic society.

The tenets of culturally responsive and sustaining education are synonymous with what we know all students need: challenging instruction that's relevant to students' experiences at home and in their community. There is no better time for school leaders to affirm this fact. ●

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