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CREATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOMS

Part 1: Understanding Culturally Responsive Teaching



Cultural Responsiveness

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) has become one of the more recent approaches talked about in the education world, especially over the past year, amidst the pandemic and BLM movement to name a few, here in the U.S and everything that it aligns itself to - racism, inequity, injustice and more.

Over the past few decades, students, their experiences, upbringings, and backgrounds have changed. Today, classrooms are much more diverse and reflect student populations of varying races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses. As a result, the way teachers educate these students must change, too, says Cherese Childers-McKee, assistant teaching professor in [Northeastern University's College of Professional Studies](#).

According to the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems ([NCCREST](#)), "cultural responsiveness is the ability to learn from and relate respectfully with people of your own culture as well as those from other cultures."

WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING?

"At the heart to every culturally responsive teacher, lies the mindset that we must embrace every student's identity, culture, experiences and abilities and connect it to their learning and the world around them."

(Jaime Perris, CEO & Founder at *Minds Beyond Measure*)

I write this article in the hope that

it will shed some light for those hoping to learn more about what CRT actually is and embed it into their teaching practice. After many months of research and development of nine Culturally Responsive competencies (which I will unveil in upcoming articles), I discovered that many of us already have the mindset of a culturally responsive teacher and have begun implementing practices to support this approach.

When I ask teachers what they think CRT means, here are some responses I get:



CRT focuses on students' prior knowledge, their past experiences, and finding a "hook and anchor", to spark their interest levels and help draw them into the content and connect to their learning experience.

Once we help create these connections for students, then are we truly able to help them to cultivate a mindset and deeper appreciation for learning, their peers, their community and the wider world around them.

Being culturally responsive means going beyond our classroom walls.

We need to integrate culturally responsive practices not only into **curriculum** (the content you teach), but also our **pedagogy** (the way in which you teach it). We need to adopt a culturally responsive lens when looking at our teaching and learning practices, and consider the **totality of student experiences** that occur in the educational process.

CRT is a pedagogical approach that recognizes the importance of including students' individual and cultural experiences in all aspects of learning.

As Childers-McKee says, our instruction "needs to build on individual and cultural experiences and their prior knowledge. It needs to be justice-oriented and reflect the social context we're in now. That's what we mean when we talk about culturally responsive teaching."

Making Distinctions

Keep in mind that culturally responsive teaching is different from culturally relevant teaching, multicultural education and social justice education. I recommend you explore these differences, as they each offer something uniquely different. A good place to start is by looking at Zaretta Hammond's distinctions of equity:

DISTINCTIONS OF EQUITY

It is important to distinguish between three key areas when engaged in equity work. We often confuse their particular purposes. As a result, we use them interchangeably when they are not. Below is a simple chart to help you understand the distinctions between them. Remember, it is NOT a continuum. You cannot begin with multicultural education and believe it will lead to culturally responsive instruction. Why? CRT is focused on the cognitive development of under-served students. Multicultural and social justice education have more of a social supporting role.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION	SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION	CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION
Focuses on celebrating diversity.	Focuses on exposing the social political context that students experience.	Focuses on improving the learning capacity of diverse students who have been marginalized educationally.
Centers around creating positive social interactions across difference. Diversity and inclusion efforts live here.	Centers around raising students' consciousness about inequity in everyday social, environmental, economic, and political situations. Anti-racist efforts live here.	Centers around the affective & cognitive aspects of teaching and learning. Efforts to accelerate learning live here.
Concerns itself with exposing privileged students to multiple perspectives, and other cultures. For students of color, the focus is on seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum. Social Harmony	Concerns itself with creating a lens to recognize and interrupt inequitable patterns and practices in society. Critical Consciousness	Concerns itself with building cognitive capacity and academic mindset by pushing back on dominant narratives about people of color. Independent Learning for Agency



Get to Know Your Students

I will be spending the next few months unveiling layer by layer, what **culturally responsive pedagogy** looks like.

Culturally responsive teaching focuses heavily on providing equity in our instruction, and by taking the time to know our learners, we open a pathway into their worlds.

I will delve deeper into this in future articles, but here are a few strategies with resources to get you started:

- **Student questionnaires** ([Grades 6-12](#), [Grades K-5](#))
- **Prior knowledge templates**
- **Family questionnaires** to get to know your learners background ([English](#), [Spanish](#))
- **Identity activities** - a great article to elicit a deep discussion amongst students and '[Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question](#)' is a great poem to engage students in beginning a discussion on the essential question: How do different parts of our identities combine to make us who we are?



Culturally responsive approach also entails providing students with the tools, skills and strategies to research, identify, inquire and explore multiple perspectives and different interpretations, and then relating it to their lives and what it means to them.



Another foundational element in CRT is to help students see themselves in their learning journey (e.g. through what they're reading or watching). We mustn't only provide students with a narrowly focused lens that comes from, say, a stereotypical "white" or "western world" perspective, but rather, a broader lens that considers multiple perspectives.

We must engage students in experiential learning, where we must ignite their curiosity to become explorers and inquirers and provide them with ample opportunities for reflection on their experience and learning.

Positive Outcomes of Using a Culturally Responsive Approach

When integrated into classroom instruction, culturally responsive strategies can have important benefits such as:

- Enhances students social and emotional learning
- Improving student academic performance
- Strengthening students' sense of identity and belonging
- Promoting equity and inclusivity in the classroom
- Engaging students in the content
- Supporting critical thinking

Stay Tuned

For our continued journey in this series of 'Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms', where we will next explore our **implicit biases**.

What's Next?

Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom series

Part 1: Understanding CRT?

Part 2: Exploring our biases

Part 3: Creating a CR Environment

Part 4: A closer look at our curriculum

Sources

- Gay, G. (2018) *Culturally Responsive Teaching*
- Burnham, K (2020) *5 Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies*
- LearningForJustice.org
- NCCREST (2020) *Module 5: Culturally Responsive Literacy*
- Understood.org

A Call to Action

It wouldn't be complete without me challenging you to a 'call to action'. Spend a few moments reflecting on these key questions: How well do I know each of my students? What are two strategies or activities that I can use to better know my students? Does this statement ring true in me and my teaching practice?: At the heart to every culturally responsive teacher, lies the mindset that we must embrace every student's identity, culture, experiences and abilities and connect it to their learning and the world around them.



About Me...

A lot of my work, ideologies and pedagogical practices stem from a combination of:



Jaime Perris

1. **My global life experiences:** Living in multiple countries* where I did the following: teaching for around 15 years, coaching teachers, designing curriculum, providing professional development, cultural experiences from my background and upbringing - I come from an immigrant family (Greek/Maltese) and was born and raised in Australia.

*The Bahamas, Myanmar, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, New York, Miami, Washington D.C and my native country - Australia

2. **Inspiration and attribution of my research** to two credible authors renowned in Culturally Responsive Teaching: Zaretta Hammond, Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings renowned in *Culturally Relevant Teaching*.

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