



Educator Brief

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Series
**IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE**

Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices for Immigrant-Origin Students

By Corinne Hébert

Immigrants and their children contribute to the cultural diversification of the countries, cities, towns, and neighborhoods they call home. They bring new languages, cultural models, social practices, and religious traditions into their communities, and as a result classrooms are becoming ever more diverse and complex.^{1, 2}

To best serve their students, educators should adapt their practices to reflect the cultural diversity of their classrooms. A culturally responsive lens provides an important framework as well as tangible practices with which to approach this work. This Immigration Initiative at Harvard *Educator Brief* outlines the importance and characteristics of culturally responsive practices and provides recommendations for classroom practice to help teachers in their day-to-day work with immigrant-origin students.



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WHY ARE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES IMPORTANT FOR IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS?

In the United States, immigrant-origin children make up the fastest-growing student population; 26% of all children have at least one immigrant parent.³ Similarly, in 11 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, over 25% of the student population comes from immigrant backgrounds.

In the United States, the largest influx of immigrant families come from Asia and Latin America² while in Europe⁴ they originate from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe. In Australia⁵ and Canada,⁶ immigrants typically come from Asia.

For several reasons, these immigrant-origin students may face difficulty navigating schooling and reaching their full potential. Educators may be unfamiliar with the cultural practices these students bring with them. Established school curricula and educational practices may be misaligned with what immigrant-origin students need.^{7,8} Culturally responsive teaching is a way to identify and address these gaps and misalignments.

WHAT IS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING?^{7,9}

Teachers who employ culturally responsive teaching actively tailor their practices to the cultural diversity of students in their classroom. In their culturally responsive teaching, they incorporate the linguistic, literary, and cultural practices of the cultures represented in their classroom, school, and wider community. Moreover, these

teachers use the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of their students and their students' families in the classroom. In doing so, they actively contribute to sustaining pluralism in schools and creating nurturing and engaging learning opportunities for all students.

Culturally responsive teaching centers the strengths of the linguistic and cultural practices of students in the classroom. Culturally responsive teachers do not foreground students' difficulties, but instead leverage their interests and differences (whether cultural or individual), to enhance learning. They recognize the value of the knowledge and practices of culturally diverse groups and actively incorporate these traditions into the classroom. Crucially, bringing cultural realities and expertise into the learning can encourage learners to engage more with the academic knowledge and skills also shared in the classroom, increasing their interest and understanding.

Understanding Culture Through a Lens of Cultural Humility⁷

Culture refers to the beliefs, values, and practices learned, shared, and exhibited within a group. Culture is rooted in the past and in tradition but is always adapting and changing across communities, individuals, and generations.

Cultural humility is a vital framework for working with culturally diverse students and families. It requires reflecting on implicit and explicit beliefs, values, and biases as well as avoiding assumptions about students based on cultural stereotypes. Rather than a static, rigid tool for classroom use, cultural humility is a stance of continuous learning and evolving understanding. Teachers who practice cultural humility examine how their own culture influences both their teaching and their relationships with students. They also are open to learning both about and from their students, respecting students' viewpoints and beliefs while also paying attention to power (im)balances in their relationships with students and their communities.

In short, culturally humble educators **avoid simplifications and static conceptions of culture**, make space for students' expertise, and are open to reshaping their ideas around cultures.



WHY ARE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES IMPORTANT?

Culture is central to learning. Culture shapes individuals' thinking, beliefs, behaviors, communication styles, learning approaches, and perceptions of the world.¹⁰ Culture also influences the way people teach. It is crucial that teachers understand how both their own culture and their students' culture can impact the learning process.

When teachers employ culturally responsive teaching, students from all backgrounds see an increase in their engagement and motivation towards school. They achieve higher levels of academic success and also cultivate critical judgment and cultural competencies.^{8,9} Teachers who adopt a more culturally responsive approach not only sustain enhanced cultural competence and attitudes in their students, but also develop their own cultural identity and the ability to consider students' cultural references.^{11,12,13} As a result, teachers' practices become more responsive and equitable, contributing to a more positive school climate.¹⁴

Culturally responsive teaching places the cultures of students at the center of the classroom, emphasizing their role in knowledge, learning, and interactions. It fosters equal opportunities for students from all backgrounds.^{7,9} ¹⁴ When immigrant-origin students experience culturally responsive teaching, they have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their own cultural heritage. They come to view their native language as a creative, innovative, and powerful tool to learn and use to navigate through society.¹¹

Utilizing culturally responsive teaching can become a catalyst for students from minority or marginalized groups to reclaim their history, language, and cultural symbols.⁷

Deficit Thinking and Cultural Wealth

Educators sometimes assume that when immigrant-origin students struggle in school, it is due to a lack of normative knowledge and skills or because their families do not value education. This deficit thinking may lead to low expectations that then undermine learning.

In contrast, a **cultural wealth**⁷ framework recognizes an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression.

This framework recognizes aspirational, navigational (i.e. in institutions), social (i.e. community bonds), linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Linguistic capital, for example, involves multi-language proficiency and communication skills including storytelling, visual art, music, poetry, or code-switching (the ability to adjust vocabulary and language register to different contexts).

When teachers leverage cultural wealth, they shift from assuming a White middle-class default of standard knowledge to centering immigrant-origin students' and other culturally diverse students' knowledge in their teaching.

HOW TO TAKE A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Develop A Culturally Diverse Knowledge Base^{15, 16}

An important first step of this work is to seek to understand the students we teach. Culturally responsive educators actively recognize and articulate the contributions of various ethnic groups within the subjects they teach. They possess an awareness of the cultural groups present in their classrooms, including their values, traditions, communication styles, learning



preferences, contributions to society, and relational patterns.^{16, 17} They also strive to understand how these characteristics influence their students' relationships with adults and peers, their motivation and engagement, as well as their ability to learn and perform in the classroom.

A few examples of practices

- Familiarize yourself with the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and communities of your students.
- Explore significant cultural practices shared by families/caregivers that could be integrated into classroom activities (such as learning how to make tamales or kimchi, the use of talking circles, learning Bollywood dances, or learning about tea ceremonies).
- Create opportunities for students to learn about the histories of their own cultures and those of their peers.
- Consider the role of individualistic and collaborative cultures and how these cultural frameworks may influence the learning preference of students for cooperative problem solving or more competitive tasks.

- Recognize the implications of gender role socialization when implementing equity initiatives in classroom instruction.
- Conduct research on alternative theories or diverse points of view related to the subject you are teaching. Identify experts and knowledge from various cultural backgrounds that can be shared with the class.

Implement Culturally Relevant Curricula^{9, 16}

Educators should assess the cultural relevance and diversity of the content in their curricula. They should analyze the quantity, accuracy, complexity, placement, purpose, variety, significance, and authenticity of narrative texts, visual illustrations, learning activities, role models, and authorial sources employed in instructional materials. They should strive to ensure that cultural diversity is appropriately represented in images, symbols, icons, mottos, awards, celebrations, and other artifacts utilized to teach knowledge, skills, morals, and values to students. In doing so, they provide opportunities for students to encounter positive and accurate examples of members and traditions from diverse



cultural groups. Teachers should also stand ready to engage in discussions and critiques with students about how various racial-ethnic groups are represented in the media as well as in the curricula. Addressing challenging subjects such as racism, power dynamics, poverty, and gender dynamics can provide opportunities for students to think critically.

A few examples of practices

- Diversify the identities of individuals used in images and written material (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, ethnicity).
- Ensure leadership in schools is distributed across a diverse range of groups.
- Use culturally representative and appropriate examples and avoid stereotypes, tokenism, essentialism, or any marginalizing representation.
- Engage students in discussions about the representation of marginalized groups in the media.
- Examine differences in how African, Asian, Latino, Native, and European Americans are portrayed in media.
- Explore the effects of these representations on different ethnic groups.
- Analyze what formal school curricula and instruction can do to counteract these influences.
- Conduct thorough cultural analyses of textbooks and other instructional

materials with students. Provide ample opportunities for guided practice of these skills.

- Support students in using their voices to raise awareness about oppressive systems and structures.
- Cultivate a critical awareness of the world, moving beyond damaging narratives and highlighting the joy and resilience of communities of color.

Demonstrating Care and Nurture Caring Learning Community^{9, 16, 17}

Educators who use culturally responsive practices (CRP) approach teaching with an ethic of care¹⁷ as both a pedagogical necessity as well as moral imperative.

They set high expectations for every student, signaling their belief in the potential of their students from diverse backgrounds. They ensure academic success through the application of diverse pedagogic strategies and evaluation methods that incorporate students' cultural and experiential references. They assume responsibility for the success of all students.

CRP educators foster a positive learning environment by cultivating a sense of community in the classroom, promoting mutual assistance and collaboration to create an environment where all students share responsibility for each other's success. CRP educators design activities that integrate personal, moral, social, political, cultural, and academic knowledge. Recognizing that the real world demands the simultaneous application of various skills, CRP educators prepare students accordingly.

A few examples of practices

- Incorporate teachings about students' cultural heritages and foster positive ethnic identity development within any subject (e.g., math, science, reading, critical thinking, and social activism).
- Integrate lessons on the heritages, cultures, and contributions of ethnic

groups into the curricula, including historical, cultural, and political content.

- Guide students in understanding that knowledge carries moral and political dimensions with consequences, compelling them to take social action to promote freedom, equality, and justice for everyone.
- Partner with, rather than merely involve, families, caregivers, and communities in classroom planning and goal setting.
- Use collaborative teaching practices, such as democratic teaching, that actively involve students in decision-making and foster mutual assistance in the classroom.

Understand an Array of Forms of Communication¹⁸

CRP educators cultivate a deep understanding that culture significantly shapes both verbal and non-verbal communication, with the effects encompassing contextual factors, cultural nuances, discourse features, logic and rhythm, delivery, vocabulary usage, role relationships of speakers and listeners, intonation, gestures, and body movements. With this awareness, CRP educators adapt their communication styles when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds, striving to develop an understanding of the students they serve. For example, some students come from cultures where it is disrespectful to look directly in the eye of an adult whereas in others, to not do so is viewed as problematic. Similarly, in some cultures animatedly speaking over one another is a natural discourse style whereas in others, pauses in conversation must be clear before anyone (particularly children) are permitted to interject. By becoming familiar with cultural patterns of communication, educators are better able to identify when students are motivated and engaged as well as to recognize signs of discomfort.

CRP educators enhance their assessment of students' work and abilities by recognizing how culture influences the organization and expression of ideas. They assist students in developing skills to code-switch and effectively communicate with individuals from an array of backgrounds.



A few examples of practices

- Demonstrate flexibility in the communication and participation styles valued in class.
- Acknowledge and value passive-receptive communication, where the teacher speaks, and students listen quietly or speak with permission.
- Acknowledge and value active-participatory communication, where the teacher talks, but also expects students to engage with them as they speak, such that roles between students and teachers are fluid and interchangeable, involving active feedback and real-time comments.
- Understand different ethnic groups' patterns of task engagement and organizing ideas.
- Value both the direct, precise, deductive, objective, and linear styles of communication as well as the non-linear, passionate, or narrative styles of communication.

Practice Cultural Congruity in Classroom Instruction ^{7, 9, 16}

CRP educators adapt their teaching methods and activities to the unique needs, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds of their students. By aligning pedagogy and curriculum with the backgrounds and experiences of students that are being served, educators move their practice towards cultural congruence. They take on the responsibility of bridging the experiences and knowledge of their students with the school culture and learning environment. Achieving this involves

using diverse examples, scenarios, and vignettes to demonstrate how information, principles, concepts, and skills operate in practice. Through the incorporation of various examples framed in different cultures, teachers establish connections between new information and the existing knowledge and realities of the students.

Though teaching methods will vary based on the content in the subject taught, the learning materials and resources utilized, the invitations and opportunities for student participation in the learning, the type of feedback and assessments provided, and the interactions between students and teachers, the methods should scaffold upon the cultural experiences and knowledge students already have. This both engages the students in the material to be learned and nurtures cultural congruity.

A few examples of practices

Employ a diverse array of teaching techniques informed by knowledge of different cultural groups and designed to accommodate varied learning styles, such as:

- Implementing cooperative group learning arrangements and peer coaching to resonate with the communal cultural systems of students from African, Asian, Latine, and Native American origins.
- Integrating autobiographical case studies and fiction to crystallize ethnic identity and affiliation across contextual boundaries (i.e., geographic, generational, temporal).
- Incorporating motion and movement, music, frequent variability in tasks and formats, novelty, and dramatic elements in teaching to enhance academic performance for African Americans, Indian-origin, and other cultural groups. For example, use Hip-Hop or Bollywood in activities.

Incorporate cultural objects as subjects in teaching activities:

- Integrating illustrations of ethnic architecture, fabric designs, and recipes to teach geometric principles, mathematical operations, and propositional thought.
- Using various samples of ethnic literature to teach the concept of genre and develop reading skills such as comprehension, inferential thinking, vocabulary building, and translation.

To Learn More

- **Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.**

Geneva Gay is the founder of culturally responsive teaching. Her book summarizes her work and thinking for all who want to be more culturally responsive.

- **Muñiz, J. (2020). *Culturally responsive teaching: a reflection guide*. New America.**

This reflection guide carries teachers through eight competencies to be a culturally responsive teacher and support them in their reflexive practices and learning.

- **New America. "Culturally Responsive Education Resources for Federal, State, and Local Stakeholders." *New America*, December 14, 2020. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/collections/culturally-responsive-education/>.**

A collection of succinct and useful blogs and resources.

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The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

