



Equity Dispatch

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Learning Environments

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"When instructional methods privilege cultural and language practices, knowledge, and abilities of dominant groups, they become barriers for students' learning and participation, and tools for assimilation to dominant school cultures."

- Waitoller & Thorius, 2015



Did You Know

Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Practices Create Safe, Inclusive, & Engaging Environments

Teaching and learning is a culturally mediated process (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007).

Educators and students bring their identities and heritage practices (Paris, 2012) to the learning environment; moreover, there are cultural values and norms that exist in the learning environment itself (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Opportunities for a new culture of learning emerge when the identities of educators and students are negotiated together and within the cultural norms of school (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Cultural mismatch (Skiba, 2014), unconscious bias, stereotypes and disharmony between all of these cultural identities, beliefs, and practices can lead to problematic outcomes for students (Paris, 2012; Waitoller & Thorius, 2015) if there is not an intentional and overt effort to value, appreciate, and leverage difference as an asset (Warren, personal communication).

Classroom practices are often rooted in and privilege dominant cultural practices and ways of knowing. Students who have identities, cultural practices, and beliefs that depart from the dominant culture are often viewed as deficient (Valencia, 2010) and do not enjoy the benefits of our education system. This in turn not only ignores the myriad of assets and skills that each student has to contribute to the creation of safe, inclusive and engaging learning environments (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), but it is grounded in meritocracy, individualism and deficit thinking (Waitoller & Thorius, 2015).

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Why It Matters

All Students Should Feel Welcomed, Valued, and Experience Success in School

Viewing students from historically marginalized groups as deficient (Valencia, 2010) leads to lowered expectations, exclusion from the learning environment, and unequal opportunities for success for many students. It is our responsibility as practitioners to respond to and build on students' lived experiences to provide relevant, effective and engaging learning experiences – situating students' identities as ever evolving assets, rather than as “deficiencies to be overcome” (Wright, 2015, p. 20). This approach can be actualized via culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies.

Cultivating culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments involves a complete shift in praxis. All aspects of the learning environment must be revolutionized including, educators' personal beliefs and attitudes about difference, school and classroom policies, as well as instructional practices and

materials (Banks, 1993; Gay, 2002; & Ladson-Billings, 2014). This process begins with the educator's use of critical self-reflection to examine the ways one's actions create unjust imbalances in opportunity, access, participation and success for particular groups of students (GLEC, 2012). Then, from these realizations practices that are responsive, inclusive, and supportive for all students (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Trainor, 2010).

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Implement Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Practices in Your Classroom

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices encompass many different domains. Three important areas where educators can begin to make positive changes are: understanding teaching and learning as a cultural practice; engaging in critical reflection; and reshaping parent/caregiver and family interactions.

Cultural Nature of Teaching and Learning

Culturally responsive and sustaining educators understand teaching and learning is a culturally mediated process; specifically they:

- Understand that their cultural identity, attitudes, and beliefs influence and shape their practice (NCCRESt, 2006)
- Understand that students bring valuable knowledge, skills, and understandings from their communities and homes to the classroom, i.e., [funds of knowledge](#) (Moll, 2015)
- Acknowledge, value, support, and respond to the cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns of all students in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2014)
- Share control and leadership of the learning environment with students (NCCRESt, 2006)
- Value and encourage students to share their lived experiences (Paris, 2012)

Engaging in Critical Reflection

When educators examine the extent to which their practice privileges some students while simultaneously disadvantaging others, they are becoming critical. The following prompts support educators in reflecting on the extent to which their practice reflects culturally responsive and sustaining principles:

- Do I understand my own cultural identity, and its implications for my practice? (Gray, 2012)
- Do I have an affirming attitude towards all students? (NCCREST, 2006)
- Do I develop constructive ways of engaging my students' practical knowledge? (Gray, 2012)
- Do I appreciate multiple and diverse perspectives in my classroom? (Gray, 2012)
- Am I committed to getting to know my students well? (Gray, S. (2012)
- Do I build on my students' life experiences in every subject matter? (Gray, 2012).
- Do I create a safe and inclusive classroom [learning community](#)? (Gray, 2012)
- Do I hold and communicate high expectations for all of my students? (Gray, 2012)
- Do I acquire accurate information about the cultural particularities of ethnic groups that do not reinforce stereotypes? (NCCREST, 2006)

Parents/ Caregivers and Families as Partners

Traditional roles of parent/caregiver and family interactions in schools often position them as passive participants in the educational process. Culturally responsive and sustaining educators understand that it is only by [cultivating authentic partnerships](#) with their students' families that shared expectations for success can be conveyed and understood. The following strategies support developing authentic family partnerships:

- Co-construct with parents/ caregivers what partnerships look like based on their preferences, values, and cultural practices
- Find opportunities to engage with parents/caregivers in their communities outside of the school building
- Use multiple modes of communication with parent/caregivers, and translate into families' heritage languages different from English
- Communications with parents/ caregivers should be accessible and free of educational jargon
- Incorporate parent/caregiver suggestions into the learning environment
- Identify where there may be misalignment in cultural values between yourself and families, discuss, and work to redress, i.e., cultural reciprocity
- Invite parents/ caregivers to be part of the review of existing and development of new policies and procedures

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Meet the Authors

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