

Strategies for Building Cultural Competency

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In the following brief, Hanover Research provides an overview of literature related to building cultural competency at the district level. The report examines characteristics of culturally responsive schools and discusses strategies for fostering cultural competency among district staff.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Research has established the importance of cultural competency in improving students' academic and behavioral outcomes. As a result, educators are increasingly focused on identifying effective methods for growing culturally responsive practices in K-12 education. This report discusses specific areas of focus and key strategies for building cultural competency among district staff. The analysis addresses the issue at the levels of both institutional practice and individual professional development.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Culturally competent schools incorporate considerations of diversity into practice and policy at the institutional *and* individual levels.** Research emphasizes that districts characterized by a high level of cultural competency approach diversity as an asset to learning and use this mindset to inform policy development, classroom practices, and interactions with stakeholders. Above all, culturally competent schools strive to actively promote a culture of inclusiveness and acceptance.
- **Cultural considerations must be incorporated into institutional-level policies and practices in order to support diverse students and grow cultural competency at the classroom level.** School-wide cultural competency is premised on reforms in the following areas:
 - School culture;
 - School policies;
 - Professional development; and
 - Community involvement.
- **While approaches to staff development vary, research suggests that a multi-pronged approach is most effective.** Arlington Public Schools, for instance, facilitates the development of cultural competency among district staff through a Council for Cultural Competence. The Council develops strategic planning objectives related to cultural competence and provides resources and training for district staff. Success indicators associated with the district's Cultural Competence Initiative Plan reflect key foci in the literature, namely:¹
 - The promotion of diversity and equity in school- and district-level policies and practices;
 - Engagement with key stakeholders, through surveys and focus groups, to garner feedback on the district's cultural environment;
 - The promotion of hiring practices that reflect a commitment to diversity;

¹ See "Indicators of Success." Arlington Public Schools. <http://www.apsva.us/Page/2323>

- The provision of professional development opportunities and resource materials focused on core areas of diversity promotion – namely, “communication, cultural competence, and legal issues.”
 - An administrative commitment to supporting cultural competency development and diversity promotion;
 - Improved academic achievement for *all* students.
- **For cultural competency to have the strongest impact on student performance, it must be incorporated into individual-level teacher practices.** In order to become culturally responsive educators, teachers must be provided with instruction on how to assess their own cultural viewpoints and biases, engage with student culture, employ culturally responsive pedagogy, and effectively engage with diverse families and communities. A plan for developing cultural competency among district staff should incorporate a focus on these areas – for instance, by formalizing opportunities for teachers to participate in self-assessments and cultural learning.
 - **To foster the development of staff cultural competency, districts may benefit from conducting a cultural ‘audit.’** An audit may incorporate focus groups, surveys, or other stakeholder feedback, as well as a review of key policies and practices, to gauge the baseline state of cultural competency in a school or district. The results of an audit can help districts to identify key strengths and areas for improvement, and to develop strategic goals.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The movement toward incorporating culturally responsive practices into education has resulted in a significant body of work detailing strategies for reform. Much of the literature describes culturally responsive programs, policies, and practices; however, minimal research has been conducted to distinguish the most effective strategies and implementation methods for related professional development activities. Despite these limitations, the available body of research provides a useful overview of methods for incorporating cultural considerations into schools and classrooms. This section describes key characteristics of culturally competent schools and identifies institutional and individual-level approaches to developing cultural competency among district staff.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURALLY COMPETENT SCHOOLS

Before building a school- or district-wide plan for cultural competency, districts should clearly define core objectives. The literature is rife with qualitative descriptions of culturally competent schools, which serve as important resources for visualizing theory in practice. In their appraisal, Nelson et al. conclude that “a culturally competent and proficient school is essentially a school that promotes inclusiveness and appropriate responses to difference as reflected by its policies, programs, and practices.”² Lee expounds on these factors, noting that culturally responsive schools have a nuanced appreciation of cultural difference that recognizes diversity as an asset to learning. This appreciation is reflected in the curriculum, classroom practices, and a school’s interaction with parents and the community.³ Figure 1 shows the core characteristics of culturally responsive schools, as identified by Lee.

² Nelson, J. et al. “The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist for School Counselors: An Exploratory Factor Analysis.” *Professional School Counseling*, 11:4, April 2008. p. 208. Retrieved from ProQuest.

³ Lee, C. “Culturally Responsive School Counselors and Programs: Addressing the Needs of All Students.” *Professional School Counseling*, 4:4, April 2001. p. 2. http://soe.unc.edu/academics/med_sch_counseling/docs/lee_article.pdf

Figure 1: Key Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Schools

	CHARACTERISTIC
1	The school has adopted a “salad bowl” as opposed to a “melting pot” philosophy of education.
2	The school has been able to forge a sense of community out of cultural diversity.
3	The school has been able to capitalize on cultural diversity and maintain academic standards (i.e., it has the same high academic expectations for all students).
4	The school has a curriculum that is neither Eurocentric nor Afrocentric nor Asian-centric, but rather is Centered (i.e., it has a curriculum that fairly and accurately reflects the contributions of many cultures).
5	The school goes “beyond Black History Month” (i.e., it infuses multiculturalism and diversity in a non-stereotypical manner <i>throughout</i> the curriculum and the school year).
6	The school provides students with forums outside of the classroom to communicate with and learn about their peers from diverse cultural backgrounds.
7	The school has mechanisms in place to deal with racial/cultural tensions.
8	The school has committed educators who engage in ongoing staff development and are not afraid to take risks or improvise when necessary.
9	The school actively attempts to recruit a diverse staff of educators.
10	The school has high levels of parental involvement and the educators consider language and cultural customs in their interactions with parents.
11	The school broadly defines cultural diversity to include people with disabilities, people with diverse sexual orientations, people with diverse religious traditions, and older people.

Source: Lee, C. “Culturally Responsive School Counselors and Programs: Addressing the Needs of All Students.”⁴

Beyond these specific attributes, there is a general consensus in the literature regarding the main components of a culturally competent school. These can be grouped into four broad skill areas, which apply to both schools and individual teachers:⁵

- **Valuing diversity** – Accepting and respecting different cultural backgrounds and customs, different ways of communicating, and different traditions and values.
- **Being culturally self-aware** – Understanding that educators’ own cultures—all of their experiences, background, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and interests—shape their sense of who they are, where they fit into their family, school, community, and society, and how they interact with students.
- **Understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions** – Knowing that there are many factors that can affect interactions across cultures, including historical cultural experiences and relationships between cultures in a local community.
- **Institutionalizing cultural knowledge and adapting to diversity** – Designing educational services based on an understanding of students’ cultures and institutionalizing that knowledge so that educators, and the learning environments they work in, can adapt to and better serve diverse populations.

The subsections that follow examine the implications these areas have for building cultural competency at the institutional and individual levels.

⁴ Figure contents quoted from Lee, Op. cit., p. 2.

⁵ Bullet points quoted from: “Promoting Educators’ Cultural Competence to Better Serve Culturally Diverse Students.” National Education Association, 2008. p. 1. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13_CulturalCompetence08.pdf

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Considerations of cultural competency should not be isolated to classroom teaching; experts note the vital importance of applying the concept to school- and district-wide reforms in order to achieve optimal results. Conducive school culture and policies provide the necessary infrastructure for culturally responsive instruction. In this vein, Brown asserts that:⁶

For real reform to occur in today's schools, a complete transformation must take place. It is not enough to have teachers change their teaching and classrooms to reflect their students' diversity; **the schools that they teach in must also become culturally competent** educational systems.

The mechanisms through which this transformation may occur include reforms in school culture, changes in school policies, the provision of professional development, and the promotion of meaningful community involvement.

SCHOOL/DISTRICT CULTURE

There is significant consensus regarding the importance of school culture in facilitating successful cultural competence reforms. The extent to which a school or district recognizes and celebrates diversity often determines the level of success cultural competency initiatives achieve – and the amount of commitment faculty exhibit to these initiatives. Multiple studies highlight the importance of administrative support for curricula and instruction that take diverse perspectives into account.⁷ Without this support, teachers may have a difficult time introducing culturally responsive material into their classrooms.⁸ Therefore, according to Brown:⁹

... administrators must gain a better knowledge of [culturally responsive teaching] practices, recognize the benefits these practices have for all students, and support teachers in their efforts to transform their teaching, classrooms, and schools so that they will be more responsive to the students they serve.

SCHOOL POLICIES

To develop district-wide cultural competency, school- and district-level policies may need to be revised to incorporate culture-specific considerations and supports. In his 2005

⁶ Brown, M. "Educating All Students: Creating Culturally Responsive Teachers, Classrooms, and Schools." *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 43:1, September 2007. p. 61. Retrieved from ProQuest. Full text available at <https://www.bcps.org/offices/oea/pdf/educating-all.pdf>

⁷ Brown identifies several studies informing the seminal "knowledge bases" necessary for successful culturally-competent instruction. See, e.g., Brown, E.L. and Howard, B.R. III. 2005. "Becoming Culturally Responsive Teachers through Service Learning." *Multicultural Education*, 12(4), 2-8; Gay, G. 2000. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press; and Villegas, A.M. and Lucas, T. 2002. "Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers." *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1): 20-32.

⁸ Brown, Op. cit., p. 61.

⁹ Ibid.

assessment of approaches to cultural competence, Chamberlain notes that schools must “implement and encourage policies that view diversity as an asset.”¹⁰

Beyond this, policies must accurately reflect students’ cultures and provide support for bridging school-home cultural divides. For instance, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a college preparatory initiative for elementary through high school students, recognizes that many minority and low-income students do not have

Some districts have recently added cultural competency-related domains to educator evaluations.

the cultural capital necessary to effectively navigate the school system. The program teaches participants the “hidden curriculum” of school, namely “which courses to take, which teachers to seek out, the importance of tests, how to study, and so on.”¹¹ A similar approach may be implemented by schools to recognize and respond to the needs of their culturally diverse students. Similarly, several studies have found that reduced class sizes in first grade and an increased sense of classroom community may improve achievement gains for students of color.¹² A school or district with a high proportion of minority students may benefit from reducing class sizes during elementary school and emphasizing classroom community-building in instructor professional development.

In addition to culturally relevant support policies, **experts also suggest that districts include cultural competency as a component of teacher evaluations.** This step can help to reinforce an administration’s commitment to serving diverse learners. The Boulder Valley School District, for instance, has emphasized its commitment to diversity by including cultural competency as one of the five standards its teachers are evaluated on. The requirement states that “the teacher shall demonstrate competency in valuing and promoting understanding of diversity.”¹³ In order to assess educators’ ability to meet this standard, the district partnered with the University of Colorado at Denver to develop an observation tool focused on the inclusion of diversity in the classroom. In this assessment, the observer is asked to answer questions such as: “How is the teacher adapting the lesson for individual students (e.g. differentiating instruction regarding diversity factors across content, delivery, or evaluation)?” and “Describe specific instructional materials that illustrate valuing and promoting the understanding of diversity factors (e.g. multicultural

¹⁰ Chamberlain, S. “Recognizing and Responding to Cultural Differences in the Education of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners.” *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 40:4, March 2005. Retrieved from ProQuest.

¹¹ Bazron, B, D. Osher, and S. Fleischman. “Creating Culturally Responsive Schools.” *Education Leadership*, 63:1, 2005. p. 83. <http://inclusiveclassrooms.pressible.org/files/2010/04/CreatingCulturallyResponsiveSchools.pdf>

¹² Ibid., p. 83. Citing Finn, J.D. et al. “The Enduring Effect of Small Class Sizes.” 2001. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 145-183 & Solomon, D. et al. 2000. “A Six-District Study of Educational Change: Direct and Mediated Effects of the Child Development Project.” *Social Psychology of Education*, 4, 3-51.

¹³ Sobel, D., S. Taylor, and R. Anderson. “Shared Accountability: Encouraging Diversity-Responsive Teaching in Inclusive Contexts.” *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 35:6, July/August 2003. p. 47. Retrieved from ProQuest.

literature, manipulatives).”¹⁴ Teachers and principals have both responded favorably to the tool, recognizing its utility in concrete assessments of cultural competency.¹⁵

Another key consideration in culturally competent school policies is the formation of an equitable disciplinary policy, as cultural discrepancies between teachers and students may lead to misinterpretations of student behavior. As a result, schools should ensure that their disciplinary policies do not disproportionately target minority students and should set reasonable and culturally sensitive standards of behavior. More specifically, Cartledge and Kourea emphasize that schools should:¹⁶

...commit to creating more positive environments for all their students, especially [culturally and linguistically diverse] learners with or at risk for disabilities. Systems that affirm, nurture, and encourage these students are essential, and educators need to deemphasize punitive consequences.

Policies should also support a “centered” curriculum that draws on the cultural traditions of the school’s students. Experts concur that administrative support for inclusive curricula is an essential component of building school-wide cultural competency. Gay expounds on the importance of relaying course content in a culturally relevant way, noting:¹⁷

...when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters.

Gay goes on to cite “Designing Culturally Relevant Curricula” as one of five components of culturally responsive teaching.¹⁸ Similarly, in their guidelines for principals of culturally competent high schools, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) includes an explicit focus on curriculum design. NASP notes that schools should “offer a culturally inclusive curriculum that encourages cultural inquiry.”¹⁹

Some researchers propose **school- or district-wide cultural audits** for assessing adherence to cultural competency initiatives and for determining goals for improvement. The *School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC)* is a tool developed for guidance counselors to determine the level of cultural competence in their schools. The instrument

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51 – 52.

¹⁶ Cartledge, G. and L. Kourea. “Culturally Responsive Classrooms for Culturally Diverse Students With and At Risk for Disabilities.” *Exceptional Children*, 74:3, Spring 2008. p. 365.
Retrieved from ProQuest.

¹⁷ Gay, G. “Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching.” *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53:2, March/April 2002. p. 106. <http://www.sagepub.com/eis/Gay.pdf>

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 108 – 109.

¹⁹ Klotz, M. B. “Culturally Competent Schools: Guidelines for Secondary School Principals.” National Association of School Psychologists, March 2006. p. 13 – 14.
<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Culturally%20Competent%20Schools%20NASSP.pdf>

assesses competency by asking the counselor to gather information regarding the inclusion of cultural considerations within eight parameters.²⁰

- School Vision/Mission;
- Curriculum;
- Student Interaction and Leadership;
- Teachers;
- Teaching and Learning;
- Parents and Outer Community;
- Conflict Management; and
- Assessments.

Counselors collect data from various sources, including “interviews, surveys, observational checklists, and analysis of documents and preexisting data.”²¹ A 2008 study published in *Professional School Counseling* examined the reliability of the SCCOC in accurately reflecting school climate, determining that the tool was able to describe 72.1 percent of total variance.²² On the basis of these results, Nelson et al. recommend that schools create cultural audit teams of six to 10 diverse formal and informal school leaders (e.g., administrators, teachers, students, community members, parents). Each member conducts the audit individually; subsequently, the group compiles its results to identify areas for improvement. Nelson et al. suggest that each team develop action plans to address three areas of improvement by identifying short- and long-term goals for each.²³

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Culturally responsive schools should support teachers’ skill-building through professional development that reinforces culturally competent classroom practices. In her analysis of culturally competent practices, Brown calls on school administrators to institute “professional development efforts by mentoring, supporting, and evaluating teachers’ abilities to practice culturally responsive and differentiated instruction.”²⁴

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Chamberlain echoes this argument, suggesting that schools “provide staff development on best practices for teaching students with and without disabilities from

²⁰ Bustamante, R. and J. Nelson. “The School-Wide Cultural Competence Checklist.” 2007. http://cnx.org/content/m13691/latest/Culture_Audit.pdf

²¹ Nelson, J. et al. “The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist for School Counselors: An Exploratory Factor Analysis.” *Professional School Counseling*, 11:4, April 2008. p. 209. Retrieved from ProQuest.

²² Ibid., p. 211.

²³ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁴ Brown, Op. cit., p. 61.

[culturally and linguistically diverse] backgrounds” and “provide teachers with ongoing opportunities to collaboratively explore best practices in culturally responsive pedagogy.”²⁵

While professional development initiatives can take a variety of forms, several core competencies are important to address. The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) highlights six “principles of professional learning to prepare culturally responsive teachers,” informed by research by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), McLaughlin and Talbert, and the National Staff Development Council.²⁶ The principles emphasize the continuous nature of professional development, stressing that learning should not be confined to formal workshops, but should be “a facet of daily living.” The principles also highlight the importance of *group learning* – more specifically, the fact that educators should work together in professional development so that they are exposed to diverse perspectives and teaching styles.

Figure 2: Principles of Professional Learning to Prepare Culturally Responsive Teachers

PRINCIPLE
Professional Learning is focused on improving learning within a diverse, multicultural community. The outcomes, content, and activities of any professional learning activity must be grounded in the multicultural context that characterizes most contemporary urban communities.
Professional Learning engages educators in joint, productive activity through discourse, inquiry, and public professional practice. Effective professional learning is reached by continuous, collaborative interaction with colleagues through discussion, knowledge development and understanding, and directed inquiry around professional practice.
Professional Learning is a facet of daily living, not a compartmentalized activity. Since professional learning is embedded within practice, it becomes part of daily discourse, shared discussions about student learning and student products, as well as more formalized mentoring and coaching, meetings, study groups, and examination of evidence from inquiry cycles.
Professional Learning results in improved learning for students who have been marginalized from the academic and social curricula of the U. S. public school system. Professional learning provides opportunities for teachers to explore and understand the influence of individual cultural identity and values on individual and systems practices, as well as expand their professional knowledge of the sociocultural dimensions of learning, and its impact assessed through student involvement and performance in academic and social curricula.
Professional Learning influences decisions about what is taught and why. Since professional learning is generative, educators’ knowledge will expand and become more complex as it develops. It is expected that professional learning will result in the use of a cultural perspective in the examination and improvements to the content and process of instruction for all learners.
Professional Learning focuses on the diffusion of professional knowledge to build sustainable educational communities focused on improving learning outcomes for all students and their families, particularly those students who are members of cultural and linguistic minorities. As educators gain knowledge, they also have the responsibility for sharing and mentoring others, both in the practice of professional learning and in the expanded knowledge that come from such activity.

Source: National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems²⁷

²⁵ Chamberlain, Op. cit.

²⁶ King, K., A. Artiles, and E. Kozleski. “Professional Learning for Culturally Responsive Teaching.” National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems. p. 5 – 6.
http://www.nccrest.org/Briefs/NEW_professional%20learning%20for%20culturally%20responsive%20teaching_v1.pdf

²⁷ Figure contents quoted from: Ibid., pp. 6 – 7.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Culturally responsive districts reach out to diverse parents and community members and ensure that the school environment is welcoming and accessible. This outreach is essential for creating an atmosphere of inclusion in schools. Involvement efforts encompass an array of activities, from programs to help parents gain “cultural capital” – the skills necessary to successfully navigate the school system – to inviting community members to speak to students and staff. Klotz notes, for instance, that Fayette County (GA) Public Schools addressed language divides between the community and its schools by providing Spanish language classes to school staff. This allowed for more effective communication and made parents feel welcome in the schools.²⁸ Klump and McNeir highlight the success of hiring a bilingual parent coordinator in parental involvement efforts at Tigard High School (OR). The coordinator works with teachers, ELL students, and families to ensure students’ academic success and to boost family engagement in the education process.²⁹ Klotz identifies “community and parent involvement” as an essential characteristic of culturally competent schools. She offers a summary of engagement initiatives, suggesting that schools:³⁰

- Ensure that communications from the school are available in languages other than English, as appropriate;
- Have childcare available at parent meetings;
- Help students develop a sense of civic responsibility toward their immediate community, the nation, and the world; and
- Collaborate with parents and other community members and invite them to share their home cultures with the school.

INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Cultural competency is most directly impactful in the classroom, where teachers employ their skills to effectively communicate with diverse students. In addition to relying on school-provided supports, such as professional development and curriculum design assistance, teachers may develop cultural competency through a number of techniques. Figure 3 presents several frameworks for defining educators’ cultural responsiveness. These tend to emphasize cultural awareness, utilization of relevant course material and teaching techniques, and the creation of an inclusive classroom community.

²⁸ Klotz, Op. cit., p. 13.

²⁹ Klump, J. and G. McNeir. “Culturally Responsive Practices for Student Success: A Regional Sampler.” Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005. p. 50 – 51.
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/opportunities/grants/saelp/culturallynwrel.pdf>

³⁰ Bullet points quoted from Klotz, Op. cit., p. 14.

Figure 3: Frameworks for Culturally Responsive Teachers

FRAMEWORK	CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS ...
Ladson-Billings (2001) identified three propositions relevant to culturally responsive teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on individual students' academic achievement (e.g. clear goals, multiple forms of assessment); • Have attained cultural competence and help in developing students' cultural competence; and • Develop a sense of sociopolitical consciousness.
Gay (2002) identified five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a cultural diversity knowledge base; • Design culturally relevant curricula; • Demonstrate cultural caring and build a learning community; • Establish cross-cultural communications; and • Establish congruity in classroom instruction.
Villegas and Lucas (2002) identified six characteristics that define culturally responsive teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are socio-culturally conscious, that is, recognize that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one's location in the social order; • Have affirming views of students from CLD [culturally and linguistically diverse] backgrounds, seeing resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to overcome; • See themselves as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools responsive to all students; • Understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction; • Know about the lives of their students; and • Use their knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar.
Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) cited four motivational conditions that students and teachers continuously create.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish inclusion, creating learning atmospheres in which students and teachers feel respected by and connected to one another; • Develop attitude, creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice; • Enhance meaning, creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include student perspectives and values; and • Engender competence, creating an understanding that students are effective in learning something they value.

Source: Brown, M. "Educating All Students: Creating Culturally Responsive Teachers, Classrooms, and Schools."³¹

The following subsection examines the predominant areas that teachers must address to develop their own cultural competency and to implement culturally responsive practices in the classroom. Briefly, these areas are:

- Conducting self-assessments;
- Learning about students' cultures;
- Employing culturally responsive pedagogy;
- Fostering respect in the classroom; and
- Involving families and communities.

³¹ Figure reproduced from Brown, Op. cit., p. 59 (associated citations for specific frameworks, pp. 61-62).

TEACHER SELF-ASSESSMENT

The first step toward employing culturally responsive teaching is for educators to appraise their own cultural perspectives and biases. In a NCCRESt practitioner brief, Richards, Brown, and Forde point out that “by honestly examining their attitudes and beliefs about themselves and others, teachers begin to discover why they are who they are, and can confront biases that have influenced their value systems.”³² This is essential to developing cultural competence, as research indicates that higher levels of multicultural awareness are associated with greater cultural competence, non-racist behavior, and knowledge about other cultures.³³ The NCCRESt practitioner brief provides several techniques for self-reflection that teachers may employ to attain higher levels of cultural competency.³⁴

- Engage in reflective thinking and writing;
- Explore personal and family histories;
- Acknowledge membership in different groups;
- Visit or read about successful teachers in diverse settings; and
- Develop an appreciation of diversity.

Once teachers develop this knowledge about themselves, they will be better situated to recognize cultural biases in their teaching and adjust their practices accordingly. They will also be more open to diversity and thus better able to serve their students.³⁵ School- and district-level policies regarding the use of self-assessments are varied. Arlington Public Schools (APS), in Virginia – which operates a Council for Cultural Competence geared toward diversity training – highlights the importance of self-assessment in its planning documents, which draw on the Virginia Department of Education’s “Resource Manual for Developing Cultural Competence.”³⁶ Associated activities include the **Diversity Awareness Profile**, which uses Likert-scale questions about the frequency of specific behaviors to “identify ways in which ... participants discriminate against others” and “generate strategies for changing behavior.”³⁷

APS’s cultural competency initiative also incorporated a cultural audit, conducted in 2006, which helped the district to develop a strategic plan and identify associated benchmarks for success.³⁸ APS provides cultural competency training to district staff, with professional

³² Richards, H., A. Brown, and T. Forde. “Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.” National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems, 2006. p. 5. http://www.nccrest.org/Briefs/Diversity_Brief.pdf

³³ McCallister, G. and J. Irvine. “Cross Cultural Competency and Multicultural Teacher Education.” *Review of Educational Research*, 70:1, Spring 2000. p. 19. Retrieved from ProQuest.

³⁴ Bullets quoted with some modifications from Richards, Brown, and Forde, Op. cit., p. 6 – 7.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁶ “For Cultural Competence ... A Resource Manual for Developing Cultural Competence.” 2007. Virginia Department of Education.

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/tech_asst_prof_dev/self_assessment/disproportionality/cultural_competence_manual.pdf; see also “Cultural Competence.” Arlington Public Schools. <http://www.apsva.us/Page/2318>

³⁷ Ibid (VA DOE), p. 121.

³⁸ “Indicators of Success,” Op. cit.

development based on National Multicultural Institute recommendations, which stipulate that districts should:³⁹

- Provide numerous opportunities for **skill-based training**, with specific focus on effective communication skills and cultural considerations within the classroom and outside the classroom.
- Ensure that the training addresses the needs of the constituency base in [the district] and ensure that the training exercises are relevant and specific to the community being trained.
- Explore the **intersections between ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture and race** as dimensions of diversity.
- Explore managing **unconscious bias** and assumptions harbored by [district] community members.
- Provide **training on communication styles** and the delivery of effective feedback when responding to prejudicial or culturally incompetent remarks.
- Strategize ways for [the district] to **cultivate diversity allies**, forging partnerships and building relationships across cultures internally and externally.
- **Explore issues of ‘unearned privilege’** in the workplace and its effect upon the strength of workplace relationships.
- Provide training on **‘cultural cues’** and issues of respect in the workplace.
- **Provide management training for administrators** and supervisors to assist with managing the attitudes of employees.

LEARNING ABOUT STUDENTS’ CULTURES

Teachers must strive to learn about their students’ cultures in order to provide effective instruction, as the social dynamics, learning styles, and life experiences of students often vary according to cultural background. Therefore, in order to teach effectively, educators must be aware of these frames of reference. Put explicitly:⁴⁰

To appropriately assess their students, teachers need to learn about their students’ origins, education, relationship styles, family discipline strategies, views of time and space (e.g. punctuality), religion, food, health and hygiene, history, and traditions. To better understand and interpret student behaviors, teachers can make conscious efforts to get to know their students through such activities as scheduling lunch for informal conversations or having students bring in family pictures or albums to share with them.

Crucially, this understanding of student cultural norms must *move beyond mere awareness* and into specific practices that reflect the learning needs of diverse students. In this vein, Brown states that “teachers must develop a knowledge base for [culturally responsive teaching] by acquiring detailed, factual information about the cultural particularities of

³⁹ Bullet points quoted from: “Recommendations for Diversity Training.” Arlington Public Schools.
<http://www.apsva.us/Page/2327>

⁴⁰ Cartledge and Kourea, Op. cit., p. 353.

specific ethnic groups.”⁴¹ This information has direct implications for how and what students in diverse classrooms should be taught.

EMPLOYING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

When teaching, educators should use culturally relevant instructional materials and practices to communicate effectively with a diverse student body. Culturally responsive teaching is predicated on the assumption that students learn best when course content relates to their own experiences and points of reference, and when teaching styles reflect students’ cultural behavioral norms.⁴² Therefore, culturally competent educators use “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them.”⁴³ Bazron, Osher, and Fleishman offer several research-based techniques for culturally responsive teaching:⁴⁴

- Match classroom instruction to cultural norms for social interaction to enhance students’ social skills development and problem-solving ability.
- When asking questions or giving directions, adjust wait time for students from different cultures to enhance classroom participation and the development of critical thinking skills.
- Be sensitive to the cultural shifts that immigrant students, or other students with minority family and community cultures, must make as they move between school and home.

Similarly, experts advocate using culturally representative texts in classroom instruction, discussing negative stereotypes in texts, and pointing out historical contributions from culturally diverse figures to make course content more reflective of student diversity.⁴⁵

FOSTERING RESPECT IN CLASSROOMS

In order to achieve equity in education, teachers must build a culture of respect and a sense of community within their classrooms. Diverse students should feel that their backgrounds are accepted and that they are treated fairly by teachers and fellow students alike. Therefore “teachers need to establish and maintain standards of behavior that require respectful treatment of all in the classroom.”⁴⁶ One strategy for fostering respectful environments is to build a strong classroom community in which students focus on “helping others as well as themselves.”⁴⁷ Research suggests that, not only do collective classrooms

⁴¹ Brown, Op. cit., p. 59 – 60.

⁴² Gay, Op. cit., p. 106.

⁴³ Bazron, Osher, and Fleishman, Op. cit., p. 83 – 84. Citing Kalyanpur, M. 2003. “A Challenge to Professionals: Developing Cultural Reciprocity with Culturally Diverse Families.” *Focal Point*, 17(1), 1-6.

⁴⁴ Bullets quoted with some modifications from: Ibid., p. 84.

⁴⁵ Richards, Brown, and Forde, Op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁷ Cartledge and Kourea, Op. cit., p. 360.

positively impact social outcomes for students, but they also benefit academic achievement.⁴⁸

INVOLVING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Significant research has been conducted linking parental and community involvement in education to improved learning outcomes for students. As the point of contact for both students and parents, teachers are strategically placed to bolster external engagement in education. Richards, Brown, and Forde summarize:⁴⁹

Students' performance in school will likely be affected by the ability of the teacher to negotiate this home-community-school relationship effectively. When teachers tap into the resources of the community by inviting parents and other community members into the classroom as respected partners in the teaching-learning process, this interrelationship is positively reinforced.

There is a rich discourse surrounding the best strategies for engaging families and community members in education, but Ladson-Billings describes one particularly innovative approach. In her analysis of cultural competence in the classroom, the author recalls a teacher who invited parents into the classroom to lead seminars, which the teacher then built lesson plans around. For instance, one parent, famous in the community for her sweet potato pies, taught the class to bake. The teacher asked students to research the career path for bakers, design a marketing strategy for selling the pies, and submit reports on George Washington Carver's sweet potato research.⁵⁰ Lessons such as these demonstrate respect for students' cultures, place value in the knowledge of local communities, and help engage parents in the learning process.

⁴⁸ Gay, Op. cit., p. 110.

⁴⁹ Richards, Brown, and Forde, Op. cit., p. 9 – 10.

⁵⁰ Ladson-Billings, G. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *Theory Into Practice*, 34:3, Summer 1995. p. 287. http://nationalequityproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/ladson-billings_1995.pdf

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