CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM

Introduction

In response to nationwide protests against police violence and racial inequities, districts across the country are reevaluating curriculum materials and content for alignment with goals for diversity and multiculturalism and through the lens of confronting racial and historical biases.

To support this work, Hanover Research (Hanover) created this research brief and discussion guide to serve as a tool for establishing a common understanding of a culturally responsive curriculum and to facilitate conversations around the development of a culturally responsive curriculum.

Recommendations

Support teachers and instructional leaders in self-reflection and analysis of their curriculum to identify specific areas of growth in their ability to create a culturally responsive learning environment. This may be accomplished by building awareness and knowledge of racial and cultural issues; empowering teachers to understand and recognize their own identity and biases as well as the larger cultural forces involved; and creating a supportive professional environment that views culturally responsive teaching as a continuum of growth and an ongoing conversation.

Review current curriculum materials and content to determine areas of alignment and gaps in culturally responsive pedagogy. Key areas of comparison and review include representation of a diversity of perspectives, authors, and characters; a focus on social justice; and resources for customizing curriculum to meet students' unique needs.

Key Findings

- Over the past several decades, educational researchers established several related frameworks for understanding the importance and value of an educational environment that centers on students' cultural identities and personal experiences. Three foundational approaches are described below:

  - **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**, initially proposed and defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, suggests a three-part framework of (1) student academic success, (2) cultural competency, and (3) critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings further notes that culturally relevant teaching relies on how teachers conceptualize themselves and others, structure social relationships, and conceptualize knowledge.

  - **Culturally Responsive Teaching**, initially proposed and defined by Geneva Gay, is a similar approach that uses students' cultural experiences and backgrounds to increase engagement with instruction and learning. There is overlap between the approaches defined by Ladson-Billings and Gay, which results in interchanging use of terminology.

  - **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**, initially proposed and defined by Django Paris, builds on these prior approaches with a new focus on valuing and maintaining (sustaining) bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism.

- **Curriculum review is one component of a larger audit of a school or teacher's use of culturally responsive practices.** There are multiple tools and rubrics for evaluating how the principles of culturally responsive education are reflected in the curriculum. These tools typically seek to identify if and how a diversity of cultural identities and voices are represented in the curriculum materials (e.g., authors and characters) and the accuracy of these portrayals. Content related to social justice is also commonly included, such as opportunities to build students' abilities to recognize, understand, and critique inequities and to ask critical questions about the cultural status quo. Finally, curriculum reviews should also consider if and how all students are held to high expectations and offered differentiation to support unique learning styles.

Foundational Research

Culturally Relevant & Responsive Pedagogy

The concept of culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy (or teaching or education) is grounded in a history of research and literature from educational researchers and scholars seeking to build a case for the need, importance, and value of an educational environment that centers on students' cultural identities and personal experiences. While some use the terms culturally relevant and culturally responsive interchangeably, they stem from different, though related, approaches.

Seminal research from Gloria Ladson-Billings, established the core goals and characteristics of *culturally relevant pedagogy*.[1] While there are several variations and related frameworks, Ladson-Billing established and continues to use a three-part framework summarized below for defining culturally relevant pedagogy.[2]

Defining Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

	Student Academic Success *Culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely to make them "feel good."*
	Cultural Competence *Culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence. Culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning.*
	Critical Consciousness *Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities.*

Source: Ladson-Billings[3]

Culturally relevant pedagogy is not defined by specific curriculum content or instructional strategies. Rather, teachers that are culturally responsive are defined by "the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of their practice."[4] These underpinnings of cultural relevance relate to how teachers conceptualize themselves and others (e.g., all students are capable of academic success), how they structure social relationships (e.g., community of learners), and how they conceptualize knowledge (e.g., knowledge is not static, it is shared).[5]

Relatedly, *culturally responsive teaching* seeks to identify teaching practices that support this framework. Geneva Gay defines culturally responsive teaching as follows:[6]

> **Culturally Responsive Teaching uses…**
> *the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.*

Foundational research on culturally relevant and responsive education resonate throughout more recent research to support implementation. For example, New America outlines eight competencies for culturally responsive teaching, shown below, which reflect frameworks established by Ladson-Billings and Gay.[7]

Competencies for Culturally Responsive Teaching

	Recognize and redress bias in the system
	Draw on students' culture to shape curriculum and instruction
	Bring real-world issues into the classroom
	Model high expectations for all students
	Promote respect for student differences
	Collaborate with families and the local community
	Communicate in linguistically and culturally responsive ways
	Reflect on one's cultural lens

Source: New America[8]

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Building on earlier literature, researchers and advocates are adding nuance and context to how culturally responsive education is implemented in schools and classrooms. One such evolution is the concept of a culturally sustaining pedagogy. In 2012, Django Paris suggested culturally sustaining as an extension of and alternative to culturally relevant or responsive education. Culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for new focus on valuing and maintaining (sustaining) bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is:[9]
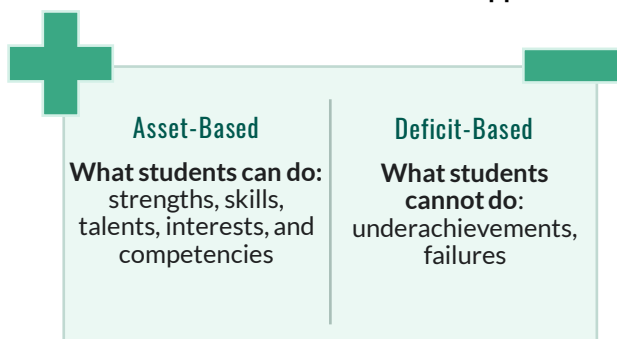
> **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is…**
> *more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.*

Some states and districts incorporate the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy into their work. For example, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) created its Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework to ensure that schools use a student-centered approach to learning that supports and affirms students' experiences and identities.[10]

Asset-Based Approach

All of the previously discussed approaches may be categorized as asset-based. While this is not a new concept, it is worth reflecting on as a bedrock for developing a culturally responsive curriculum. An asset-based approach, most simply defined, "focuses on strengths…[and] views diversity of thought, culture, and traits as positive assets."[11]

Focus of Asset-Based v. Deficit-Based Approaches

Asset-Based	Deficit-Based
What students can do: strengths, skills, talents, interests, and competencies	**What students cannot do:** underachievements, failures

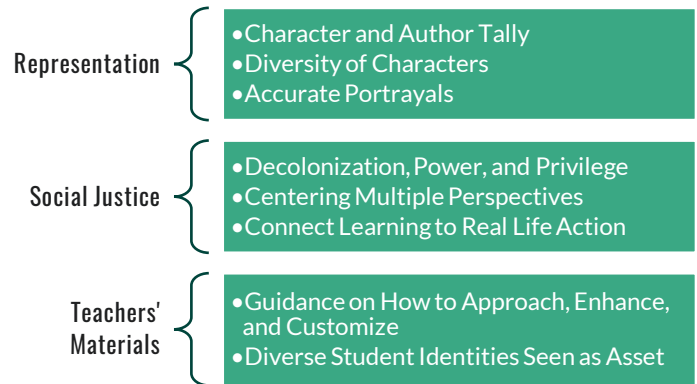Source: Renkly and Bertolini[12]

Curriculum Review

As discussed in the previous section, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education relates to all aspects of instruction, from relationships to expectations to instructional strategies to content. However, this section will focus on how curriculum and content can support the implementation of culturally responsive education.

Several researchers and organizations have developed frameworks, tools, and rubrics for understanding and evaluating how the principles of culturally responsive education may be reflected in a curriculum or other course materials. These tools can be used to support a larger review of a school or classroom's use of culturally responsive practices. A specific curriculum audit may be one component of this larger review.

Common elements in curriculum review resources include representation of a diversity of perspectives, authors, and characters; a focus on social justice; and resources for customizing curriculum to meet students' unique needs. Two such resources are summarized to the right, with links to full details.

Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard
(Link to Full Resource)

Representation	•Character and Author Tally •Diversity of Characters •Accurate Portrayals
Social Justice	•Decolonization, Power, and Privilege •Centering Multiple Perspectives •Connect Learning to Real Life Action
Teachers' Materials	•Guidance on How to Approach, Enhance, and Customize •Diverse Student Identities Seen as Asset

Source: Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples[13]

Key Elements of A Culturally Responsive Curriculum
(Link to Full Resource)

Reflects a Diversity of Voice	All Cultural Identities Represented
Supportive of a Wide Variety of Learning Styles	Open to Difficult Dialogues

Source: Portland State University[14]

Key features of a *culturally sustaining pedagogy* are similar to those described above, but with an additional emphasis on valuing and sustaining students' cultural and linguistic practices. The figure below summarizes Paris and collaborator H. Samy Alim's characteristics of a culturally sustaining learning environment.

Key Features of a Culturally Sustaining Education

Feature	What it Looks Like
Valuing community languages, practices, and ways of being	Students' languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being are centered meaningfully and consistently in classroom learning instead of being considered as "add-ons."
Schools are accountable to the community	Educators and schools are in conversation with communities about what they desire and want to sustain through schooling.
Curriculum that connects to cultural and linguistic histories	Educators connect present learning to the histories of racial, ethnic, and linguistic communities both locally and nationally.
Sustaining cultural and linguistic practices, while providing access to the dominant culture.	Educators value and sustain the cultural and linguistic practices of the community while providing access to the dominant culture (white, middle class, and standard English speaking).

Source: California Department of Education[15]

In addition to scorecards and checklists (examples linked), teachers and school leaders can also use tools for self-reflection, recognizing that culturally responsive teaching represents an opportunity for growth over time. In the example linked below, curriculum materials and content are used, in part, to provide evidence of a teacher's level of incorporation.

Level of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Incorporated into Teaching Practices

(Link to Full Resource)

Level 0

o No culturally or linguistically relevant materials were included in my class

Level 1 / Contributions Approach

o Heros, holidays, historical events, & discrete cultural elements are incorporated into class lessons

Level 2 / Additive Approach

o Multicultural content, concepts, themes are incorporated to the lesson from multi-cultural students' perspectives

Level 3 / Transformation Approach

o The structure of the curriculum enables students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural groups

Level 4 / Social Action Approach

o Students make decisions on important social issues and take action to help solve them

Source: Reimagine Migration/UCLA[16]

Curriculum Effectiveness

There is emerging, though limited, research on the impact and effectiveness of culturally responsive curricula to inform design and implementation considerations.[17] Researchers in Alaska found that use of a culturally responsive Grade 2 math curriculum designed in collaboration with Yup'ik Native Alaskan community members resulted in significant improvement in students' math performance in comparison to a control group (effect sizes of 0.82 and 0.39 for two different curriculum modules).[18] The curriculum incorporated daily activities of the Yup'ik community as well as elements of their 20-base numerical system.[19] Information on the current version of this curriculum – Math in a Cultural Context – can be viewed here.

Other studies have found positive impacts from culturally responsive curricula in the form of high school ethnic studies courses, targeted achievement programs, and courses that seek to build students' self-identity.[20]

Considerations for Online Instruction

While some argue that online learning is inherently "bias-free" due to the lack of visual or physical interaction between students and teachers, others note that this mentality fails to meet the criteria set out in a culturally relevant pedagogical framework. Just as in face-to-face learning, online curricula should be designed to consider students' cultural experiences and identities. Educators can use the following recommendations to develop an online curricula that incorporates a culturally relevant pedagogy:[21]

▪ **Create Culturally Responsive Learning Environments** - Analyze and redesign curricula to ensure it is inclusive of diverse thought and perspective; adopt textbooks that promote ethnic and cultural diversity; and ensure representation of diverse ethnicities and cultures in the selection and use of images, videos, and anecdotes.

▪ **Develop Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Practices** – Use storytelling exercises and activities to create the opportunity to deconstruct stock stories of the dominate culture and to share counter-narratives; create collaborative learning spaces to promote student engagement and foster student success in online environments.

Discussion Guide

Teachers and school leaders can use this discussion guide to facilitate conversation and reflection on their current curriculum, lessons, and other instructional materials through a culturally responsive lens. Questions were sourced and adapted from guides and toolkits from Portland State University and New York University as well as from Hanover Research.[22] Questions are grouped into broad categories, reflecting the three-part framework for culturally relevant pedagogy established by Ladson-Billings, but also considering other frameworks and approaches discussed in this research brief.

Academic Success for All Students

How does your curriculum ensure that all students have access to and are held to high academic standards?

Does your curriculum allow for differentiation based on individual student needs and learning styles?

Do curriculum materials reflect an asset-based approach to learning?

How does your curriculum support students' multiculturalism and multilingualism?

Additional Resources

The following resources relate to themes in the questions above and include opportunities for self-assessment and information related to implementation of strategies within a culturally responsive framework.

High Expectations Self-Assessment & Checklist

A checklist and self-assessment tool for teachers to reflect on the frequency of teaching practices that support high expectations for all students.

Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instructional Strategies

Resource describing the intersection of instructional differentiation and a culturally responsive approach.

Online Professional Development Module

Online professional development on culturally sustaining pedagogy and assset-based approaches, among other key themes.

Cultural Competence

How does your process for selecting instructional materials consider representation of diverse perspectives and experiences?

How do your instructional materials reflect your current students and those that you hope to serve?

How do you ensure that portrayals of diverse people and cultures are multidimensional and non-stereotypical?

How do your instructional materials acknowledge various perspectives and/or voids within the subject area?

Representation Tally

NYU's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard includes a worksheet for tallying representation in characters and authors, which can be used to understand where there may be gaps and imbalances in the curriculum. This worksheet is reproduced below, or can be accessed through this link*.*

	Girl/Woman	Boy/Man	Non-Binary	Total
Middle Eastern				
Asian/Pacific Islander				
Black/African				
Latinx				
Native American				
White				
Racially Ambiguous				
Multiracial				
People with Disabilities				
Animals				

Source: Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples

Critical Consciousness & Social Justice

Does the curriculum include content to support students' abilities to recognize, understand, and critique inequities?

Does the curriculum offer opportunities for students to raise and discuss critical questions about the cultural status quo?

How does the curriculum encourage and support students to take on social justice issues within their own community?

Additional Resources

Use the following resources to identify strategies and opportunities for incorporating social justice and critical consciousness theory into your curriculum.

Social Justice Toolkit	Using Critical Consciousness to Challenge Inequity	Resources for Teaching Social Justice
Includes general and subject area specific ideas for incorporating social justice. Most relevant for secondary students.	*Strategies for developing students' understanding and skills with graphic organizers for lesson planning and grade and content specific examples.*	*Recommendations and links to specific resources and content for teaching social justice in the classroom.*

Caveat

The publisher and authors have used their best efforts in preparing this brief. The publisher and authors make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this brief and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of fitness for a particular purpose. There are no warranties that extend beyond the descriptions contained in this paragraph. No warranty may be created or extended by representatives of Hanover Research or its marketing materials. The accuracy and completeness of the information provided herein and the opinions stated herein are not guaranteed or warranted to produce any particular results, and the advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for every client. Neither the publisher nor the authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. Moreover, Hanover Research is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional services. Clients requiring such services are advised to consult an appropriate professional.

Endnotes

[1] [1] Bryan-Gooden, J., M. Hester, and L.Q. Peoples. "Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard." NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2019, p. 4. https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/atn293/ejroc/CRE-Rubric-2018-190211.pdf [2] Muñiz, J. "Culturally Responsive Teaching." New America, 2019. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/culturally-responsive-teaching/

[2] [1] Ladson-Billings, G. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *Theory into Practice*, 34:3, 1995, p. 160-163. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/245591801_But_That%27s_Just_Good_Teaching_The_Case_for_Culturally_Relevant_Pedagogy [2] Fay, L. "Researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings on Culturally Relevant Teaching, the Role of Teachers in Trump's America & Lessons From Her Two Decades in Education Research." The 74, August 7, 2019. https://www.the74million.org/article/74-interview-researcher-gloria-ladson-billings-on-culturally-relevant-teaching-the-role-of-teachers-in-trumps-america-lessons-from-her-two-decades-in-education-research/

[3] Excerpts in italic text quoted from: Ladson-Billings, G. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," Op. cit., p 160-163.

[4] Ibid., p. 162.

[5] [1] Ibid., p. 162-163. [2] Ladson-Billings, G. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal*, 32:3, 1995, p. 478. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254074787_Toward_a_Theory_of_Culturally_Relevant_Pedagogy

[6] Muñiz, J. "Culturally Responsive Teaching," Op. cit., p. 9 [Citing Gay, G. Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice. Teachers College Press, 2010]

[7] Muñiz, J. "Culturally Responsive Teaching," Op. cit., p. 12.

[8] Figure text taken verbatim from: Ibid.

[9] Paris, D. "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice." *Educational Researcher*, 41:93, 2012, p. 95. https://web.stanford.edu/class/linguist159/restricted/readings/Paris2012.pdf

[10] "Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education." New York State Education Department. http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf

[11] "An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What it is and Why it Matters." New York University, August 3, 2020. https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/an-asset-based-approach-to-education-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/

[12] Figure text taken verbatim with slight modification from: Renkly, S. and K. Bertolini. "Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Oriented Schools to Asset Based Models: Why Leaders Need to Promote an Asset Orientation in our Schools." *Empowering Research for Educators*, 2:1, 2018, p. 24. https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=ere

[13] Figure text taken with slight modifications from: Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples. "Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard," Op. cit., p. 6-7.

[14] Figure text taken verbatim from: "Culturally Responsive & Inclusive Resources: Creating Culturally Responsive Curriculum." Portland State University. https://guides.library.pdx.edu/c.php?g=527355&p=3605354

[15] Figure taken verbatim from: "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy." California Department of Education. https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ee/culturallysustainingped.asp (Citing: Ferlazzo, L. "Author Interview: 'Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies'" *Education Week*, July, 6, 2017. https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2017/07/author_interview_culturally_sustaining_pedagogies.html)

[16] "Culturally Responsive Teaching Checklist." Re-imagining Migration/UCLA, 2019. https://reimaginingmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Culturally-Responsive-Teaching-Checklist_Re-Imagining-Migration.pdf

[17] Hill, H.C. "Culturally Responsive Teaching is Promising. But There's a Pressing Need for More Research." *Education Week*, March 9, 2020. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/09/culturally-responsive-teaching-is-promising-but-theres.html

[18] Kisker, E. E., et. al. "The Potential of a Culturally Based Supplemental Mathematics Curriculum to Improve Mathematics Performance of Alaska Native and Other Students." *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 43:1, 2012. Abstract accessed via ProQuest

[19] Hill, H.C. "Culturally Responsive Teaching is Promising. But There's a Pressing Need for More Research," Op. cit.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Bullet points adapted from slight modifications from: Woodley, X.M., G. Mucundanyi, and M. Lockard. "Designing Counter-Narratives: Constructing Culturally Responsive Curriculum Online." *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design*, 7:1, 2017, p. 47-51. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311995843_Designing_Counter-Narratives_Constructing_Culturally_Responsive_Curriculum_Online

[22] [1] "Culturally Responsive & Inclusive Resources: Creating Culturally Responsive Curriculum." Portland State University, Op. cit. [2] "Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Toolkit." NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools. https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/atn293/ejroc/Culturally-Responsive-Curriculum-Scorecard-Toolkit.pdf