

[REL Mid-Atlantic Webinar](#)  
**Culturally Responsive Education: Diversity in Our Classrooms**  
**Frequently Asked Questions for Sandra Tomlinson-Clarke, Ph.D., and**  
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*This webinar focused on the concept of culturally responsive education. In addition to exploring the impact of a diverse student population on school achievement, the presenters suggested ways in which teachers can engage their students in meaningful learning experiences. The [webinar recording](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) are also available.*

**General Concept of Culturally Responsive Education**

**1. How is cultural responsiveness defined?**

According to Montgomery (2001), culturally responsive classrooms acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections with each other and with the subject matter and tasks teachers ask them to perform. Culturally responsive teaching includes acknowledging the presence of culturally diverse students in the classroom, helping students find connections among themselves and with the content area, and promoting relevant learning that engages students (Montgomery, 2001). It requires that teachers develop a philosophical and ideological framework for their practice that is committed to high expectations for all students, promoting social justice, and achieving equity in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching is more than just good teaching; it is a sociopolitical act (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**2. How do you create a culturally responsive school environment that responds to multiple cultures in one building or classroom?**

Culturally responsive school environments give students an opportunity to find and build connections to their learning. They can link their home and school experiences. Culturally responsive school environments recognize students and their diverse cultures and encourage them to find and develop these connections.

**3. What are your thoughts on culturally responsive versus culturally neutral classrooms?**

“Culturally neutral” classrooms do not exist because students, teachers, and all staff members have culture and bring it with them to the classrooms and schools. Even when a classroom is described as

“culturally neutral,” there is always an “invisible culture” which students pick up on. Students will know whether or not they are represented in the “invisible culture.”

**4. How does an educator determine the “culture” of the students?**

An educator should get to know his or her students and ask them about their learning styles and what they want to learn. An educator should build relationships with students and use his or her understanding of students’ culture and learning styles to plan classroom activities and to form student groups based on what they are learning.

**5. Is there a relationship between student achievement and culturally competent schools and classrooms?**

When educators engage in culturally responsive teaching, students are more likely to experience academic success (including being prepared for academic success and academic leadership), maintain cultural competence, and develop critical thinking skills. Students are more likely to attend school regularly if they feel welcome and comfortable and are in a classroom that meets them where they are. According to Gay (2002), academic success for students is more likely to be achieved “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experience and frames of reference of students...” (p. 106). The skills that students develop in a culturally responsive classroom are helpful for achieving success in an increasingly global society.

**6. How can you foster intercultural sensitivity?**

Educators can foster intercultural sensitivity by getting to know themselves and understanding their own backgrounds and experiences. Educators can think about what they present to their students and colleagues and include team-building in both classrooms and faculty meetings to better understand the backgrounds and experiences of others.

**Teacher Education/Professional Development and Culturally Responsive Education**

**7. How have teacher education programs met the challenge of preparing teachers for the diversity they will encounter in their classrooms and in practicing culturally responsive educational practices?**

Teacher education programs should include coursework and practicum experiences focused on multiculturalism and diversity. Aspiring teachers should also discuss learning styles and the importance of the relationships that teachers establish with their students. The curriculum should include culturally responsive education, and teachers in training should be encouraged to engage in conversations that chip away at these issues. Teachers in training should visit the communities where they will be teaching

and get to know the students, their families, and the communities where students and their families live.

**8. What are the most effective strategies for changing actual teacher practices? What kind of data or stories do you suggest I share with my teacher candidates?**

Schools and training programs can provide professional development and encourage their students to reflect on their own backgrounds and experiences and how that will affect their classrooms. Teachers should be encouraged to remember why they entered the profession. According to Jackson (2011), teachers should develop a pedagogy of confidence and demonstrate high expectations and support for all students to demonstrate high intellectual performance. Teachers should demonstrate that within all of us resides an untapped reservoir of potential to achieve at high levels. They should believe in the potential of their students and be able to elicit and guide the application of students' potential.

**9. Do you have any tips or tricks I can give to teachers who will very soon begin to teach in environments that are different from their own experiences?**

Teachers should get to know their students' cultures and understand what learning means to their students. Teachers should visit the communities where they will be teaching and ask community members to show them the different neighborhoods and the beautiful places and ask questions about where people like to go, what there is to do, where people spend their time, etc. Teachers should continue to build these connections with families, students, and communities.

**10. How can we encourage classroom teachers to incorporate culturally responsive education within their regular curriculums?**

Teachers can get to know their students, build relationships with them, and incorporate their students' communities and cultures throughout the curriculum.

**11. Do you have or have you used a tool/checklist for teachers and administrators that encourages culturally responsive classroom practices?**

Teachers and administrators can collect and use data to learn about culturally responsive classroom practices and how they can be used in schools. Teachers can conduct self-assessments to determine their knowledge of themselves and their students' cultures. Teachers and administrators can do walk-throughs in which the teachers look at other classrooms as well as their own and gauge their first impressions to determine if their classrooms are presenting what the teachers hope to present.

**12. How would you address those practitioners who are culturally responsive in their teaching practices but lack cultural responsiveness in discipline? How do culturally responsive teaching practices impact discipline?**

Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) found that teachers operationalized culturally relevant pedagogy by maintaining high academic and behavior expectations for all of their students. This includes explicit classroom rules, clear communication to students of expectations for behavior and structured routines, enforcement of consequences after violations of rules, parental notification of classroom rule violations, not permitting excuses, and a classroom focused on learning. Parents can be involved in creating the discipline code and should be engaged in deciding how students are disciplined at school. By ensuring that parents are part of the discipline code and that students are aware that parents are part of it, the home and school connection can be established. Sometimes students' behavior can be misinterpreted; perceived misbehavior could mean that students cannot access material or activities.

**13. How can state education agencies (SEAs) address this topic?**

SEAs can provide grant opportunities for districts to work on addressing culturally responsive education. SEAs can also work to understand their learners and support their teachers in reaching an understanding of their students.

**Culturally Responsive Education at the Classroom Level**

**14. What specific behaviors or techniques do you see from a teacher who is culturally responsive?**

Culturally responsive teachers recognize their own ethnocentrism; understand their students' cultural backgrounds; understand the broader social, economic, and political context; are willing to use culturally appropriate management strategies; and are committed to building caring classrooms (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Culturally responsive teachers show investment and interest in their students and in all students in the school. They are present at extracurricular activities and demonstrate a sincere interest in the student as a person, not simply as a student.

**15. How can we promote access to culturally responsive literature in classroom libraries?**

Educators can include culturally responsive literature in their classroom libraries, read it to students, and vary the type of literature they include. Educators should ask themselves challenging questions in determining what literature to introduce in their classrooms and ensure that they introduce culturally responsive literature across content areas. Schools might undertake a literary initiative, such as having the whole school read the same book.

**16. How can educators deal with their own cultural bias when working in diverse classrooms?**

Educators should know, recognize, and figure out how to address their own cultural biases. They should be aware that there is no such thing as a culturally neutral classroom and that an "invisible culture" will always be present in the classroom.

**17. What strategies and resources do you suggest for teachers who do not share their students' backgrounds?**

Teachers should get to know their students and ask questions about the communities where they teach, such as what places are important and where their students spend time in the community outside of school.

**18. Can you address differentiating in the classroom within the topic of culturally responsive education?**

Educators should know their students' learning styles and create small groups based on these learning styles.

**19. How is culturally responsive classroom management different from regular classroom management?**

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that students' behavior is sometimes misunderstood, and that it is crucial for educators to recognize their students' cultures and understand why students may act differently. Culturally responsive classroom management is focused on cooperation and self-regulation rather than discipline.

**20. How can we support learners who have accents in developing their speaking skills?**

Educators can give students with accents the opportunity to do short presentations in their new language in comfortable situations. Language is closely linked with identity; affirming someone's language and speech can be part of affirming their identity.

**21. How do learning styles relate to cultural competencies?**

Educators should recognize their students' cultures and understand that students might learn differently and respond to skills and activities in different ways.

**Culturally Responsive Education at the School Level**

**22. How do you build systemic, cross-functional, culturally responsive practices in schools?**

To build systemic, cross-functional, culturally responsive practices in schools, administrators and educators should build caring communities. According to Gay (2002), culturally caring learning communities translate into high-level learning and success; create a cooperative, holistic, and integrated learning environment; are morally imperative; are a social responsibility; create "educators as partners" in success for all students; and use student cultures and experiences to increase motivation and academic achievement.

**23. How do you begin to talk to school leaders about the importance of focusing on cultural relevance as it pertains to closing the achievement gap?**

There is a strong relationship between the school culture and student learning, so it is important for school leaders to emphasize this relationship and demonstrate the importance of recognizing student cultures.

**24. What are some ways to introduce culturally responsive education to colleagues without it becoming a threatening issue?**

School leaders can present the data and explain why culturally responsive education matters and how building culturally responsive classrooms will support student learning. School leaders can provide examples of the ways in which culturally responsive education works.

**25. How do you develop culturally responsive environments at a time when sometimes the very environment is not responsive to educators in general? What tips can you give?**

School leaders should create professional development opportunities that explain the importance of culturally responsive environments and give educators the opportunity to work together to develop these environments.

**26. How can we change the mindset of seasoned teachers to include culturally responsive education?**

School leaders should provide professional development opportunities for their teachers and present data showing why culturally responsive education matters and how to be inclusive of all students in their classrooms. Leaders can talk with seasoned teachers about why they chose to become teachers in the first place and remind them that they have a responsibility to all children in their classroom.

### **Culturally Responsive Education and English Language Learners**

**27. How should we address English language learners continuing to use their native languages in primarily English-speaking classrooms?**

Educators should affirm their students' identities and integrate languages as part of learning. The goal is not to assimilate students, which often results in a loss of language and loss of cultural identity. Oral and written language proficiency are difficult skills to master. Students will often communicate in the language in which they feel most proficient. Educators should recognize that having other languages in the classroom is a strength and enriches daily learning activities.

## **Assessing Culturally Responsive Education**

### **28. How do you measure cultural competence?**

Cultural competence can be observed through school walk-throughs both individually and at faculty meetings. School leaders can ask open-ended questions and lead ice breakers with their staff members. School leaders can talk about how a community or current issue is represented throughout the school.

## References

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