

Culturally Responsive Education: A Primer For Policy And Practice



by

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Metropolitan Center for Research on
Equity and the Transformation of Schools

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The terms culturally relevant teaching (alternatively culturally responsive education or culturally responsive pedagogy, appearing as “CRE” throughout this brief) constitute a significant intellectual contribution to the field of education and educational literature. With roots extending at least as far back as the 1930s with Carter G. Woodson’s *The Miseducation of the Negro*, the concept has become fertile soil for the ongoing critique and advancement of theories of teaching and learning in areas ranging from curriculum and instruction to program design and disciplinary practices. However, even the most extensive reviews of its multiplicity of uses has had difficulty discerning or outlining the applications at the level of district or state policy. The purpose of this brief is to outline the extensive history and development of CRE in order to determine its most immediate practical applications. As suggested by gaps and inconsistencies in both the theoretical and empirical literature, this brief points out potential next steps and future directions for CRE that sit at the intersections of research, policy, and practice.



ABSTRACT



“Culturally responsive pedagogies and practices examine instructional philosophy and practice critically, both acknowledging and searching for the presence of historical forms of oppression embedded in curriculum, instruction, and approaches to teacher - student relationships.”



The terms culturally relevant teaching (alternatively culturally responsive education or culturally responsive pedagogy, and hereafter “CRE”) constitute a significant intellectual contribution to the field of education and educational literature. With roots extending at least as far back as the 1930s with Carter G. Woodson’s *The Miseducation of the Negro*, the concept has become fertile soil for the ongoing critique and advancement of theories of teaching and learning in areas ranging from curriculum and instruction to program design and disciplinary practices. However, even the most extensive reviews of its multiplicity of uses has had difficulty discerning or outlining the applications at the level of district or state policy. What is known is that culturally responsive pedagogies and practices examine instructional philosophy and practice critically, both acknowledging and searching for the presence of historical forms of oppression embedded in curriculum, instruction, and approaches to teacher-student relationships.

When districts embark upon the necessary but arduous work of culturally responsive education, the challenge is how to solidify the theory of cultural responsiveness into concrete policies and practices that can support learning for all students. To this extent, its critical lens has been applied to curriculum, classroom design, instruction, home-school relationships, disciplinary policies, and school-wide initiatives to promote equity, social justice, community outreach, improvements to school climate, and academic achievement. The practices that CRE recommends, thus the framework of CRE, must also extend into all these arenas. The purpose of this brief is to outline the extensive history and development of the research and literature on culturally responsive education in order to determine its most immediate practical applications and point out some of the next steps and directions suggested by gaps and inconsistencies remaining in the empirical literature on CRE.





Framing Culturally Responsive Education

PART I

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The origins of CRE can be traced to ancient Egyptian philosophies on education, which realized the rootedness of learning in one’s experience and culture as useful to the concerns of one’s life (cf. Asante, 2009). By 1933, Carter G. Woodson put forward his own formulation of the concept in his foundational text *The Miseducation of the Negro*, which argued, among other points, for a program of “re-education” where learning begins with constructs that not only affirm but build the self (as fundamentally based in the self). Some have argued that the pan-Africanist message of Garvey; the Black nationalists thinkers such as Malcolm X; the decolonial philosophies of the Rastafari, Fanon, and Diop; the educational principles driving the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, *El Movimiento*; among other historical social rights struggles that have played out over centuries, had a proto-form of CRE as elemental to their driving logics. The point here is that CRE had long grafted itself as an educational philosophy, and particularly among the vulnerable, perhaps for millennia.

Notwithstanding, modern derivations of CRE particularly as tied to pedagogies that embrace and solidify diversity and its value in classrooms, curriculum, and communities come from a set of foundational writings that reflected on changes to educational policy and the composition of schools in the 1960s and 70s and in the backdrop of school desegregation efforts (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Efforts to define what teaching to diverse populations was or consisted of included the coining of such terms as “cultural appropriateness” (Au & Jordan, 1981), “cultural congruence” (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), “culturally responsive,” (Cazden & Leggett, 1981), “culturally compatible,” (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987), and “mitigating cultural discontinuity” (Macias, 1987).

Much of this literature, which emerged from the field of anthropology of education, attempted to distill the pedagogical roots and strategies

employed by teachers to develop and implement instruction that was more in tune with students' lived experiences and everyday lives (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Sleeter, 2012). Ladson-Billings (1990; 1992) coined and defined a term she felt more accurately reflected the pedagogical focus of such instruction: "culturally relevant teaching" (carried forward from King & Wilson, 1987).

It is important to note that the historical emergence of the awareness of "culture" in education was not organic, but a byproduct of multiple court cases calling for recognition of the linguistic diversity of students. However, as pointed out in the scholarship that would follow, this awareness of cultural diversity was not initially intended as foundational to a means of better educating diverse populations of students but rather to facilitate their assimilation by dominant systems and ideologies which centered Anglo-European-Christian-Judeo-cis-hetero-male whiteness as the normative reference point to which all other cultures and categories were expected to conform to meet the standards for "normalcy."



Culturally responsive education theories challenge this doxa by centering the assets and knowledge of students who were not members of this orthodoxy (Paris & Alim, 2017). What the earliest of these writings did achieve was connect some of the earliest studies on cultural and linguistic diversity in education (Cuban, 1972; Gay, 1975; Kleinfeld, 1975) with scholarship on the purpose of education. They dovetail with work that positioned schools as transmitters of the social order (Mehan, 1978) and silencers of particular voices (Fine, 1987; Shulman, 1987).

These two functions—transmission of various privileges and the silencing of the underrepresented—were both largely antithetical to the more Deweyan (1910) narrative of the purposes of education in the United States. They also positioned schools as not only collaborating sites of repeated historical forms of domination but also gatekeepers of access to the benefits of schooling for full and equal inclusion in a pluralistic, democratic society. This cycle of denied access reinforces social, economic, racial, linguistic, ability, and gender disparities while reinforcing oppression of the wisdom, knowledge, literacies, and "ways of knowing" of disempowered, non-centered groups (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & Simon, 1989).

The identification of this problem at the intersection of education and culture led scholars such as Ladson-Billings to seek the answer to the question of exclusion: Whose voices were still excluded from the practice of education, despite the illusion of integration and given the presumed goal of "assimilation," and what was lost by failing to connect culture and education? Delpit (1988) identified within schools and classrooms a "culture of power" governed by rules of access defined by those in power and obscured to those who are not explicitly told these informal rules.

These investigations into quality instruction were situated within the early 1990s efforts for educational reform following “A Nation at Risk” (Gardner, 1983), under which education reform became centered on standards, standardization, and accountability.

In light of this tectonic shift in the landscape of education, assimilation to the norm became seen as more important than ever. The failure of education to connect to the differentiated learning styles and needs of the full student population while attempting to indoctrinate and absorb them into a standardized, singular culture disconnected from many students’ lives left underlying inequalities unaddressed and unexamined (Villegas, 1988; Irvine, 1990). The result, from an instructional standpoint, appeared to construct low-income minority students as “others” who, according to Delpit (2006/1995), were seen as damaged, dangerous, vulnerable, and impressionable. The mission of the teacher became clearly not to connect to these diverse groups of disengaged, disconnected students on a cultural or empathetic level, but to instruct them in standardized ways and judge their value by normatively biased standards.

When the home cultural values of students and their families elevate the status of teacher and place emphasis on not questioning authority, “pedagogies of poverty” (Haberman, 1991) take hold and characterize the relationships between instructors and students. Teachers assume unquestioned authority in classrooms filled with students they do not fully understand, causing them to frequently misinterpret and miscategorize student actions and misinterpret a family’s hesitance to engage in solutions (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). At the same time, students recognize their feelings of being treated differently on either a conscious or unconscious

level, students internalize their identities within schools as “other,” which can cause students to disengage from education and appear to develop “an oppositional social identity” in school (Tatum, 1997/1999/2003) which even leads to discouraging participation in the act of learning by ascribing to it the pejorative, “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

This facet of cultural disconnect between teachers and students can be exacerbated by cultural differences in communication style. As Pasteur & Toldson (1982) observe, African-American children enter school coming from cultures in which frank and direct communication is valued and preferred, whereas in Eurocentric white cultures that dominate the classroom and student-teacher norms, deference and indirect communication are preferred. This disconnect results in what can still be seen today as misinterpretation by teachers of certain communication patterns as “defiant” or “confrontational,” and the labeling of Black children as having behavioral problems, often ascribed to poverty and labeled as deficit rather than forthrightness (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).





In schools in which culture is assigned non-essential or even irrelevant status, students are still capable of succeeding, but they often must sacrifice their cultural identities or attachments to do so (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Curriculum that does not directly perpetuate Euro-American-centric history and values but overlooks the significance of teaching to and about diverse cultures and identities fails to meet the learning needs of students from those diverse backgrounds, and to the objection of teachers who would wish to see greater advocacy in curriculum (Foster, 1995, 1997). Culturally relevant teaching was initially thus considered to be “creative but not disruptive.”

These facets of the educational system which have emerged over decades of political and structural changes to schools serve to indoctrinate minorities into the dominant culture so they can further serve the reproduction of their current roles in society through entering the workforce and perpetuating the same economy that isolates and takes advantage of those like them. Students who demonstrate compliance and assimilation are seen as desirable, while those who do not fit in are sorted in accordance with any number of labels that mark them as different, deficient, defective, disturbed, disruptive, or disabled (Gay, 1975; Katz, 1985; Boykin, 1994).

The creation and assignment of such labels separates students into those who are alienated from their identities and those alienated from education as unuseful, unproductive, or likely unsuccessful, and they are further inundated with similar messages of inadequacy and undesirability in media and society (Nieto, 1994), or what Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) called “establish[ing] the psychological climate in which students work” (p. 41). Boykin (1994), in citing Cummins (1986), observed:

Much of the functioning that transpires at the cultural deep structure level is especially effective because it is done in an unarticulated, matter of fact way without explicit reference to the cultural power issues at play. These dynamics often are effective, but not for the officially intended goal of educating children. They are effective for children who have different cultural capital in the process of uneducating them, alienating them, and disempowering them. (p. 247)



While the problem is clearly institutional, much scholarship has focused on the teacher as the agent of systems of domination and oppression, particularly in the enforcement of “Standard” English education at the expense of the languages more frequently practiced and employed in students’ lives. Delpit (1995/2006) locates racism and the reluctance of those from a privileged cultural status as obstacles to exposing the rules of the game to students and making them aware of their subjective status in such institutions. This leads to the construction of students from nondominant cultures, in the minds of teachers, as “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995/2006). One of the established negative outcomes of such praxis is “stereotype threat,” the term for the phenomenon by which student anxiety arises from the student’s recognition of expectations of their incongruence and expected failure in settings in which they perceive their fitness subject to the judgment of others (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In response to these systematic and historical problems in education of disconnectedness to significant and growing segments of student populations, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies attempt to answer the call for more inclusively-minded and more asset-focused instruction of diverse student populations. Ladson-Billings (1992) called upon the work of Freire (1973/2000), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), King & Wilson (1987), and McLaren (1989) in defining culturally relevant teaching as “what minority teachers must do to emancipate, empower, and transform” their classrooms and the educational experiences of their racially and culturally diverse students (p. 105).

When students do not perceive their instruction to be personally and culturally relevant, student resistance appears in the classroom: resistance to curriculum, to instruction, to teachers, and to the very institution of school itself, which becomes constructed (recognized) by the student as antagonistic to their identities (Lee, 1999; Mirón & Lauria, 1998). On the other hand, when curriculum is seen as relevant to their lives and needs, the curriculum and instruction are accepted and seen by the student as “nurturing.” This must also be true of teacher practices, as teachers transmit expectations and levy grades upon students that signify the student’s perceived potential value and welcomeness within a classroom, shaping how future students are permitted to imagine for themselves in their society.

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Culturally relevant teaching was initially situated specifically within the problematic context posed by traditional educational systems and practices to Black and African-American students. This established the foundation of culturally responsive education as recognition and advocacy for the most historically oppressed identities. As more identities would begin to assert more vocal resistance to other forms of oppression, the door opened for culturally responsive pedagogies to likewise recognize some of these “kindred” struggles.

Gay (2000/2010) expanded upon the initial conceptions of culturally relevant teaching in her theorization of “culturally responsive” education. To her, cultural responsiveness was rooted heavily in practice, requiring “multiethnic frames of reference” (p. xxiii). Gay continued to critique the classrooms that embraced deficit perspectives of students as the most likely to fail those students, and that instead, successful classrooms embraced asset views of students and their cultural groups. Gay levied a specific critique against test scores and grades, both in terms of deficit expectations and by taking group averages that sacrificed nuances of class and the inequities of assessment frameworks, stating, “no ethnic group is culturally or intellectually monolithic” (p. 18). Culturally responsive education, then, views the diverse cultural backgrounds of students as strengths and contends that embedding more culturally inclusive curriculum, assessment, and instruction makes the act of education more “comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory” (pp. 27-8).





CRE arrived late enough in the education reform debate to include a narrative of what standards and standardized testing meant for the education of oppressed groups. Specifically, Gay noted that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pushed forward the agenda for standards and created real funding consequences for schools who did not utilize approved evaluative frameworks, curriculum, and assessment to demonstrate the “success” of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic subgroups. However, by focusing on outcomes but not process, the game was once again stacked against historically disadvantaged students. The normative frameworks and stakes essentially propped up dominant groups and cultures at the expense of all others, and used accountability to push forth other political agendas of schools using minority children as chips and pawns in the game. As she stated:

Their achievement levels are not increasing by leaps and bounds; the overall quality of their educational opportunities continues to be substandard; they do not have highly qualified teachers in all of their classrooms; uniform curriculum content is not tweaking their interest, developing their intellect, or enticing them to remain in school; the curriculum scope is narrowing; and the under resourced schools they attend are further compromised because they are sanctioned and penalized by losing funds for not reaching the levels of yearly average progress mandated by NCLB and state regulations. (Gay 2010, p. 14)

More recent scholarship has extended the critique of exclusion beyond the policies and practices of teaching, seeking to once again center culture and difference as central to reclaiming the purpose of education. Paris (2012), Paris and Alim (2014; 2017), Alim et al. (2017), and others ask whether the evolution from deficit to difference to asset to resource pedagogy goes far enough, suggesting that the responsibility of education is not only to prevent the exclusion of historically silenced, erased, and disenfranchised groups, but perhaps also to assist in the promotion and perpetuation of cultures, languages and ways of knowing that have been devalued, suppressed, and imperiled by years of educational, social, political, economic, and other forms of oppression. This philosophy, founded on several “loving critiques” of Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy, is called by these scholars culturally sustaining pedagogy, or CSP.

CSP makes its focus the historical struggles for recognition, emancipation, and inclusion in social, political, and human life and positions the classroom at the heart of those ongoing struggles for acceptance of all forms of difference into the project of humanity. Paris and Alim (2017) describe CSP as a fundamental act of dissent and disruption of the “colonial project” of assimilation that has made, in their words, “anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and related anti-Brownness (from anti-Latinidad to Islamophobia) and model minority myths” parts of the foundation of state-sanctioned schools (p. 2). Waitoller and Thorius (2017) and Alim et al. (2017) extend the CSP discussion to other underrepresented groups, particularly disabled persons, identifying CSP as liberatory for all forms of difference.

Rather than simply arguing for inclusion in the curriculum, a proverbial seat at the table, CSP asserts that in addition to the assets that all students bring to the classroom, the teacher and school have a reciprocal and binding duty to prepare students to have the “dynamic cultural dexterity” required in a pluralistic society (Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP emphasizes neither singular nor static changes in pedagogy, but rather accepts and embraces the fact that since cultures are in constant states of flux, teacher adaptability and versatility need to be sufficient to sustain cultures that are not static (Paris & Alim, 2017; Pennycook, 2007). Thus, culture is not an artifact to be displayed in a classroom but a vibrant and evolving resource that schools have an obligation to both preserve and sustain as among their core function and mission.

Also receiving a greater focus in CSP are the bodies of students as objects of the same forms of historical oppression, carried out in the modern day through seating arrangements, classroom and school disciplinary policies, and implicit bias. As Paris and Alim (2017) state, “we cannot separate culture from the bodies enacting culture and the ways those bodies are subjected to systemic discrimination” (p. 9).



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CSP also reasserts differences in language not as deficits to be overcome but rather essential salient cultural identifiers; thus, including cultures in the curriculum without valuing the languages and literacies they practice is an incomplete and insufficient brand of inclusion that falls short of the goal (Paris, 2012).

In terms of practice, CSP also calls out curriculum and policy that pays token homage to languages and cultures in superficial ways. Examples of this essentializing are the “multicultural days” that feature food or music as emblematic of an entire culture and then set aside these cultures until the next such planned activity. These essentializing acts distill a culture or language down to a single stereotyped icon, phrase, or holiday, and can actually further relegate and trivialize rich histories and cultures which engage and validate the lives of students in classrooms who identify with those cultures on a deep level. Since the new mainstream in U.S. schools, in contrast to the mid-20th century, is a mainstream of culture, there must be a genuinely perceived and executed effort to “strive toward equality in an unequal and shifting racially and ethnically diverse society” (Paris, 2015, p. 222).

These pedagogies, CRT, CRE, and CSP, embody the philosophies of “resource” pedagogy (Moll & González, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001) and recognize, value, and welcome students’ “funds of knowledge” into the acts of teaching and learning in the classroom. In contrast to the deficit pedagogies that preceded them and can still be found in classrooms throughout the country today, these pedagogies view the languages, cultures, and identities of students of various backgrounds not as barriers to be overcome or shed for inclusion, but in fact the means of education itself (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017).





Five Unanswered Questions About CRE

“What do we do with all this?”

Given all this rich scholarship, policymakers and practitioners alike are left with the obvious question: “What do we do with all this?” Assuming everyone accepts the general premises of the largely theoretical research and what quantitative data do exist, what is culturally responsive education? Is it a curriculum? A teacher training protocol or program? An accountability system? Can it be any or all of them? The scholars who helped shape and expand this philosophy differ in both specific and vague ways on such questions. Gay, for instance, is quite clear that CRE is an ethical practice of teachers, whereas for Paris and Alim, CSP appears to be heavily mindset- and systems-oriented due to its return to its critical theory roots. Further, given the breadth of its scopes and the decades of conversation that have occurred, what are the gaps or inconsistencies that have yet to be filled? If culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies, as Paris and Alim (2017) state in their recent edited volume on CSP, are about the fundamental purpose of education, then their critiques and their solutions ought to be universally applicable. Below we list some of the more complicated and outstanding questions of policy and practice related to CRT/CRE/CSP.





The extent, nature,
and limits of inclusion

The first question is, do the teaching philosophies that run from culturally relevant through culturally sustaining pedagogies truly include everyone? What does a culturally inclusive education look like in non-urban, non-Black, non-Latinx settings? What does it look like for students with “cross-cultural” memberships (Labonty & Danielson, 1988). What does it look like for students who happen to be White but exist at other oppressive intersections and are silenced by the other dominant categories: cis-hetero male, Christian, classist, patriarchal, ableist cultures (e.g. LGBTQ, female, poor or disabled students)? Culturally relevant pedagogy was not conceived with these groups explicitly in mind. However, as the focus has shifted to valuing human diversity broadly, what responsibility does culturally responsive policy have to ensure they are included? What other groups may not have even made it to the discussion yet (ex., Muslims, refugees and displaced persons, homeless students, as a start)?





Ladson-Billings (2017) issued an admonition in forum discussion about expanding the purview of CRE/CSP if it results in lack of focus on how education systems construct certain bodies and identities as problematic:

I have a caution, however, and that is that we become so specific that we become unmanageable and unwieldy, and we lose what I would think is the significant political impact that I had hoped my work has made from almost thirty years ago. But it wasn't just about, "Oh, let's do something different for these little black kids."...I think that the place where there's some convergence [between other oppressed groups and Black/Latinx/indigenous groups] is around the way in which eugenics continues to play a role in the construction of the human subject. Who is the good child? (p. 3)

In other words, the critical focus and critical consciousness must be maintained. Alim (2017) continues the critique of the American school as a "site of trauma" that instills and perpetuates a "sense of otherness" (pp. 13-14). The remedy, he and colleagues argue, is not to trust in the sites of oppression but rather in the very bodies that have been historically robbed of their rightful voice.

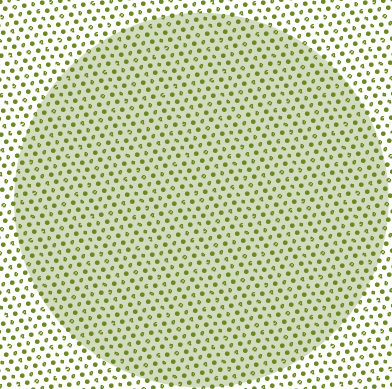
One thing that characterizes much of the scholarship up through the present area is that relevance was created for classrooms of mostly minority students, primarily Black and Latinx. With pushes for greater integration and desegregation in major metropolitan areas like New York City, what would culturally relevant curriculum and instruction look like in classrooms that are not monocultural? CSP calls for pluralism as both an ideal and an end, but the process itself in heterogeneous classrooms has not been fully fleshed out in practice. If pluralism is not a natural condition in a classroom, how do we both center pluralism and sustain culture(s)?

Further, as CSP begins to broaden to include the perspectives, experiences, and learning styles of disabled persons, what does that look like in practice? Is it merely a matter of inclusive education, or does it require further transformation of curriculum? Are teachers left to be the ones to “adapt” a curriculum to different learning styles and physical capabilities at the level of the individual classroom, or should school districts and state education systems require curriculum to be fully inclusive of the diversity of voices present in classrooms? What should culturally responsive curriculum and instruction look like in a self-contained classroom? Further still, should there be self-contained classrooms of any student population, or is full integration a legitimate goal?

“If pluralism is not a natural condition in a classroom, how do we both center pluralism and sustain culture(s)?”

As is already apparent, the goals of these cultural approaches to education are commendable, but on the policy level, a multitude of questions persists. Do states wish to assume the responsibility of defining culturally responsive and sustaining practices at the school level, and for which aspects can a state even assume responsibility without risking overriding the ability of teachers to be responsive to their unique classrooms? Mandating or facilitating culturally responsive and sustaining practices to schools and teachers as a specific set of practices or as a specific curriculum may compromise the teacher adaptability that all the research demonstrates is necessary for responsive education.





Limitations on the conceptions of 'culture'



“What is/are the cultures to which a school is responsible for being responsive?”

The second significant question is related to the first. If we first wonder about who is included in responsive practices, we must then also ask, what is/are the cultures to which a school is responsible for being responsive? CSP defines culture both specifically in terms of language and literacy practices of certain subgroups and populations, but also broadly in terms of ways of being, knowing, and understanding. Thus, if “culture” is to encompass both content and process of knowledge accumulation, are we really only speaking in terms of culture, or something much larger? Moreover, is culture that which is merely added to the curriculum, or are schools responsible for not only sustaining but transforming children’s conceptions of culture, their own as well as others?

Culture, as it was used from as early as the Kamehameha program in Hawaii and as inspiration for early scholarship on culturally relevant teaching, was meant to signify the cultural practices and languages of ethnic and racial minorities. As it adapted and entered the educational literature through culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies, it became clear that “culture” was conceptualized largely as a code word for the education of Black and Latinx children, as well as children of indigenous cultures. As the discussion continues to broaden through CSP to include other “kindred” underprivileged statuses, is culture the right word for the distinctiveness of which we are speaking?

This may very well be the case. However, policymakers and school professionals ought to be careful in defining and using the word culture, to be clear about what is and is not considered culture for the purposes of being culturally responsive. For instance, two teachers may observe an interest in hip-hop in their students but approach that interest in completely different ways, adjusting their instruction to meet the interest. The first may decide to add hip-hop to the classroom by referencing famous artists from the genre throughout their teaching of content. The other teacher may decide instead to center hip-hop and allow students to learn curricular content by using hip-hop structure and format, using battling techniques or cyphers as vehicles for learning. A teacher looking to center hip-hop as pedagogy could also center the additions to hip-hop, both in content and structure, that the youth culture in their own classrooms are currently creating, making the utilization of hip-hop pedagogy transformative rather than essentialized to names from pop culture as a means for teachers to “pass” as “cool” (cf. Emdin, 2016).

These examples require different definitions of culture and consequently different depths of engagement with student culture on the part of the teacher. In the first example, culture is a token: something that can be sprinkled into instruction to bridge the gap between school culture and student culture by “relating” to students “on their level.” In the second example, rather than simply employing icons from a style of music the teacher does not fully grasp, the teacher recognizes that, for her students, hip-hop embodies a deeper understanding of culture as a way of processing and communicating information. The students of the latter teacher will gain more from their learning than the first.



This is likewise a challenge in dual language, bilingual, and ENL education. To use Spanish-English bilingualism as example, whereas finding books that are translated into Spanish for greater immersion in the Spanish language may be seen as an important step in pushing cultural responsiveness into the education of some English Learners (ELs), it can also be seen as falling short. Translating English phrases to analogs loses the cultural authenticity of unique ways of writing and telling stories in various Spanish-speaking cultures, for example. The number of words, emphasis on particular inflections, even number of words per page are different between English and authentically Hispanic and Latinx texts. To erase the storytelling tradition and replace it with approximation in Spanish toward the desired English norm excludes essential distinguishing cultural markers of storytelling and writing to the detriment of Spanish-speaking cultures. In this way, the translated language is used to silence the remainder of the culture.

In more recent works (Alim et al., 2017; Waitoller & Thorius, 2017), scholars have emphasized a definition of culture that moves away from the idea of culture as traditional and static, embracing that culture is ever changing, complex, and even sometimes problematic. If the more recent, even more inclusive version of culture is to be the standard toward which we strive, or a step toward an even fuller inclusiveness we have not yet envisioned, then the care given to any reforms around cultural responsiveness must be that many more times deliberate and careful, so as not to exclude, essentialize, or otherwise diminish or erase these other equally significant identity perspectives. It would be tragically ironic for pluralism to become so homogenized as to overlook its own purpose.

“A definition of culture that moves away from the idea of culture as traditional and static, embracing that culture is ever changing, complex, and even sometimes problematic.”

A good example of such is the relationship between culturally sustaining pedagogies and the goals of “decolonized” education. As CSP grows to include more indigenous perspectives and include the indigenous critique of colonialism and the disability rights’ critique of ableism in addition to the Black critique of Western imperialism, it seems that it grows much closer to fully overlapping the position of decolonization in education. Critiquing the histories and languages embedded in traditional, Western-inspired curricular interpretations of history, art, culture, is now a perspective of both projects. Thus, the goal should not be to dig into academic camps about terminology, but to continue to identify potential partners in building the critical project of cultural studies in education, by whatever name it is called. This avoids the trap of educational “paradigm wars” (Gage, 1989)—in which researchers defend entrenched camps of thought that would otherwise appear to be natural allies of one another—and allows researchers to continue forging new paths without sacrificing the interests of those whose lives are most affected by outdated and insufficient educational practices and resources every day. As Ladson-Billings writes in Alim et al. 2017:

One thing that we continue to miss is that sort of foundational structural argument and understanding of the formation of the US nation-state as a settler colonial nation-state, which was begot by the theft of Native land, Indigenous land, and attempted genocide. And then the use of black people for forced labor. Right? And the ways that still to this day, when we look at movements like the movement for Black Lives and for sovereignty, land rights, and clean water at Standing Rock, they continue through schooling as well. (p. 11)



Implications for teacher recruitment and preparation





“What are the implications for CRT/ CRE/CSP on teacher recruitment and teacher preparation?”

A third major question for policymakers is: What are the implications for CRT/CRE/CSP on teacher recruitment and teacher preparation? Much of cultural relevance/competence/responsiveness rests with the teacher’s willingness to challenge preconceptions about students whose identities do not match their own. However, there is also evidence within the scholarship that racial match may be linked to cultural responsiveness, or that racial match facilitates more culturally responsive interactions between students and teachers (Alston, 1988; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Irvine, 1988; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Madkins, 2011; Perkins, 1989; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Therefore, the teaching workforce ought to be more reflective of the populations teachers interact with. Furthermore, having more teachers of color also aids in the recruitment of additional teachers of color (Simon et al., 2015).

It is important to note, however, that Ladson-Billings and Gay both in slightly different ways point out that racial match alone is not sufficient. White teachers who comprise the vast majority of the teaching population still need to assume responsibility for teaching all students, and racial match alone does not necessarily guarantee the appropriate level of cultural responsiveness in an educator. True responsiveness requires ongoing preparation for the current teacher workforce in culturally relevant/responsive/sustaining pedagogies while at the same time creating a more diverse teacher workforce and improving training for incoming teachers.

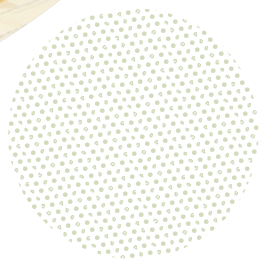
In terms of other recruitment solutions, teacher residency models have in recent years produced an excellent track record of recruiting, placing, and retaining a diverse pool of highly qualified, culturally responsive teachers in high-poverty, low-performing, high-minority urban and rural districts (Kyse et al., 2014; Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2016; Robinson et al., 2014). Part of the strength of such programs is their emphasis on diversity in recruitment pools and building strong relationships with school and district leadership to form coalitions of support for incoming teachers in high-needs districts with largely poor Black and Latinx populations.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argued that a lens for culturally relevant practitioners should be applied at the stages of teacher recruitment and training, claiming culturally relevant teaching practices are integral to culturally relevant schools. However, she also noted some policy obstacles to remediating the cultural relevancy gap, namely limited educational opportunities, more lucrative career options, and standardized testing requirements (Albers, 2002; Gitomer, 2007; Gordon, 1999; Irvine, 1988; Madkins, 2011; McNeal & Lawrence, 2009; Murnane et al., 1991; Shipp, 1999). However, Irvine et al. (2001) caution against teacher preparation as a cure-all, as simply educating in practices will not foster the reflective and adaptive mindset of truly responsive teachers.



Implications for curricular and standards-based reform





“Culturally responsive pedagogies, by working to decenter dominant cultures and ideologies, contest traditional ways of thinking about policy. The culturally responsive teacher knows what is asked and required to contend with this mismatch and makes pedagogical choices accordingly.”

A fourth major policy question is: What does cultural responsiveness look like in the context of curriculum and standards? Early scholarship in cultural responsiveness called for a pedagogy of “resistance to standards and standardization” (Noddings, 1988). CRT/CRE/CSP each call upon teachers to recognize that curriculum, as frequently designed, is curriculum that centers whiteness and other dominant cultures and ideologies at the expense of all others, and to resist teaching those curricula as designed. Recent reforms focused on standards and standardized tests follow the same dominant centering as occurs in curriculum, which- coupled with an atmosphere of test preparation rather than teaching- has contributed to an even greater gap in student performance over time, something policymakers and teachers were initially instituted to track and lessen (Gay, 2010).

Culturally responsive pedagogies, by working to decenter dominant cultures and ideologies, contest traditional ways of thinking about policy. The culturally responsive teacher knows what is asked and required to contend with this mismatch and makes pedagogical choices accordingly. Policy reforms toward these ends must consider how policy affects the teacher’s ability or willingness to adopt culturally responsive pedagogies. For example, in their ethnographic case study of the effects of policy on the instruction of English Language Learners in two classrooms, Michener et al. (2015) found that an English-only policy affected the curricular and pedagogical choices of teachers and their interactions with students. One teacher strongly aligned with monolingual norms and simply used district-mandated textbooks and leveled readers that explicitly focused on instruction on English-only standardized testing.

As a result, she employed a limited range of pedagogical strategies, namely adhering to a pedagogy of “read, practice, reproduce” (p. 209), using closed questions and calling mostly on monolingual English-speaking students. When opportunities to explore linguistic and cultural differences emerged in the classroom, those instances were treated as distractions to learning.

At the policy level, curriculum reform should begin with a critical eye to curricular resources currently in classrooms to determine whether they accurately and adequately reflect the lives and lived experiences of the students who learn with them. Additionally, classrooms should go further to match culture and curriculum (Allen & Boykin, 1992).

Student-directed learning (SooHoo, 1993) in the form of project-based learning and student action research is another practice that aligns to the culturally responsive philosophy. In this practice, students are both the drivers and collaborators of the design and shape of their own learning. This allows students to begin their instruction with questions and topics relevant to their lives and experiences, and facilitates the social learning opportunities that are proven to be effective.

Lee (1999) gathered student feedback on educational reforms. Their suggestions included the following, many if not all of which align with the literature on culturally responsive practices:

- **Challenging curriculum**
- **Great expectations**
- **Interactive learning**
- **Close student-teacher relationships**
- **Modifications that include more than group busy work**
- **Greater enthusiasm and energy from teachers during instruction**
- **More culturally relevant materials**



Team- and community-building activities with teachers and peers ○

More activities, projects, and field trips ○

Greater voice in deciding topics ○

Fairer grading practices ○

Ongoing teacher feedback ○

Student evaluations of teachers ○

Later start time for school days ○



A list such as this is obviously neither complete, binding, nor prescriptive. Rather, it indicates the value of ideas that can come from students and suggests that comprehensive culturally responsive reform begin and end with accountability to the students whom it is intended to benefit.

Implications for school choice and the educational reform agenda





A fifth area in which CRT/CRE/CSP can continue to interrogate and open lines of broader policy examination and improvement is in the discussion of school choice and educational reform as a whole. The ability to have a choice to leave a failing school is the given rationale by some school choice advocates. However, if students are assets, allowing children to remain at their local schools and improving the culture and pedagogies that are driving them and their families out of the schools could bring ideas and improvements to their existing schools and communities. Separating children from their local schools may appear to benefit individual student outcomes, but what is the impact on their community by depriving them of the assets provided by students and their families? How is this being culturally responsive to the needs of their failing schools? Culturally responsive mindsets require that teachers, parents, and policy makers think more deeply about the causes and consequences of school failure, and also about the consequences of school flight in terms of what is sacrificed and lost in allowing even one school to fail, especially in terms of what is lost to the local community.

As noted above, the question remains whether cultural responsiveness is an ethic that local and state educational agencies (LEAs and SEAs) can engage in at the level of the individual school, let alone the classroom. Is cultural responsiveness achieved from the top down or the bottom up? If the latter, what can LEAs and SEAs do to facilitate that grassroots level of practice? One thing in the research seems fairly clear: culturally responsive educators and educational practices tend to be identified at the level of the classroom, so perhaps it is a process of converting one classroom at a time to more culturally responsive mindsets and practices (Heller, 1989).

**“Culturally responsive mindsets
require that teachers, parents,
and policy makers think more
deeply about the causes and
consequences of school failure.”**

Some organizations have attempted to draft standards-based accountability tools. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) out of Manoa, Hawaii has drafted a set of culturally responsive educational standards that are rooted in and inspired by the traditional ways of knowing and learning in indigenous Hawaiian cultures. While more research must be conducted on the successfulness of CREDE's standards and culturally responsive standards in general, the work is being done. Further, it is possible to embed awareness of culture and its relationship to learning within standards-based education.



Joint Productive Activity (JPA)

.....

The teacher and children collaborating together on a joint product.

Contextualization (CTX)

.....

Connecting the school curriculum to childrens' prior knowledge and experiences from their home and community.

Instructional Conversation (IC)

.....

Teaching children through dialog. The two main features of an IC are identified in the name: Instructional & Conversational.

Child Directed Activity (CDA)

.....

Encouraging children's decision-making and self-regulated learning.

Language and Literacy Development (LLD)

.....

Developing childrens' competence in the language and literacy of instruction in all content areas of the curriculum.

Complex Thinking (CT)

.....

Challenging childrens' thinking toward cognitive complexity.

Modeling (MD)

.....

Promoting children's learning through observation.

CREDE Standards in Early Childhood

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/coe/crede/sample-page/>

Similarly, reforms targeted at school integration raise questions for cultural responsiveness. Much of the literature on CRT/CRE/CSP addresses the education at schools that contain largely racially or linguistically homogeneous populations. Thus, the inclusion of their culture in the curriculum can be satisfied by restructuring the curriculum around these particular identities. However, when schools are better integrated, how does a culturally responsive classroom or culturally responsive instruction look? How does the culturally responsive teacher respond to multiple cultures in a room without essentializing or privileging any of them? This is delicate work that, perhaps, gets ahead of where the current terrain of theory and research is. Nevertheless, as the push for integration continues—a worthwhile endeavor—it will undoubtedly bring changes to how culturally responsive practices are defined and structured.





CONCLUSION

The long march to include cultural approaches that are well developed enough to encourage equity in education has been painstaking and has produced both missteps and interesting and exciting advances in research and pedagogy. Ultimately, we are still left with the question of purpose: Is CRE the end goal of policy, or a means to some other end or ends? If the latter, what is its purpose? Without clear direction on this from policymakers, implementation in practice will remain piecemeal and highly subject to teacher buy-in. At the crux of all the outstanding questions about the relevance of cultural relevance is this question: What are we asking teachers, students, and schools to do? Do we have the right tools to give them, and the tools by which we may measure our collective progress? Have we answered these essential questions of policy and practice?



The truth is that it appears the goals of CRE are still being decided. We know that CRE produces better outcomes for students who have found themselves traditionally sidelined in curriculum, in school discipline policies, and in the greater economic frontiers of our nation. We also know that students are more engaged and effective learners and peers when they feel positive about being in school, starting with feeling their beliefs, languages, and cultures are valued and included in instruction and other facets of their schooling experience. Beyond this, how cultural relevance is achieved, practiced, and transmitted as a framework for education are all open questions of political, professional, and personal will on the part of all parties responsible, from practitioners to policymakers.

Nieto (1994) writes: “students are asking us to look critically not only at structural conditions, but also at individual attitudes and behaviors. This implies that we need to undertake a total transformation not only of our schools, but also of our hearts and minds” (p. 424). Rose (in Alim et al., 2017) likewise cautions:

[W]ithout changing the goals, we’re really in danger of succeeding at reaching a destination we don’t really want to arrive at. Without change, we’re confining learners within a system that actually hasn’t been educating kids very well so far, and certainly is not preparing them for the twenty-first century. And it is a system that is inequitable, creating fewer opportunities and more barriers for some students than others. (p. 23)

As a starting point, it may be possible to use culturally responsive investigative tools to evaluate and critique existing practices. Data on disproportionality, for example—on suspensions and special education referrals, risk ratios, as well as indicators of teacher racial match—are concrete starting points using evidence that already exists. These should be bolstered with indicators that take into account the breadth of infusion of cultural responsiveness into school climate and culture, classroom practices going beyond evaluative frameworks, parent engagement rates, community outreach and engagement, partnerships with local community-based organizations to meet the needs of school families, and state-level teacher quality improvements to recruitment, training, and support.

To be sure, authentic and lasting change via CRE cannot occur by edict or arise through a prescribed set of top-down policies, which only risk appearing to echo empty promises of inclusion that have burdened marginalized students for generations and minimized the responsiveness and responsibility of individual educators and school communities to explore, understand, and embrace their significant roles in this important work. Radically transformative ideas must give rise to radically transformed policies and practices so that the shape of CRE will not simply be an alternate take on educational reform, but rather a thorough interrogation of the history and stakes of current practices. This process of transformations promises to lead to a willingness to abandon outdated ideas, ideologies, and ways of thinking that do not speak to the majority of students who are harmed by culturally irrelevant approaches proven over and over again not to work.

“students are asking us to look critically not only at structural conditions, but also at individual attitudes and behaviors. This implies that we need to undertake a total transformation schools, but also of our hearts and minds”

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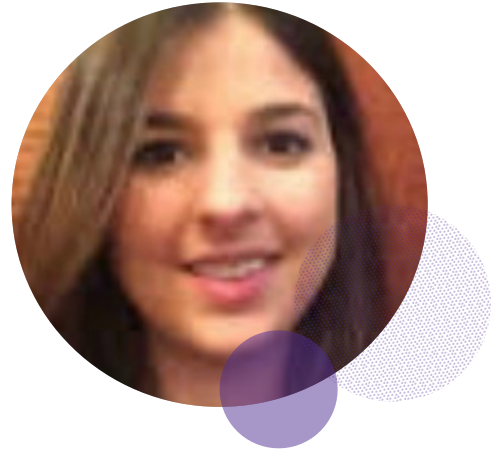


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