

# USING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE FRAMEWORK TO LEVERAGE THE STRENGTHS AND MEET THE NEEDS OF MLs

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During parent–teacher conference time, four elementary teachers are eating lunch together. They begin to complain that many of the parents of the multilingual learners (MLs) in their class do not attend conferences, show up late, attend the conference with a younger child in tow, or do not actively participate in the conference. Conferences are scheduled over the course of three afternoons between 12:00 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. The teachers feel that, in general, ML families are less invested in their children’s education than non-ML parents. They decide they will share their frustrations with the English language development (ELD) teacher.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What role might culture be playing in this scenario?
2. What other factors might be at play?
3. As an advocate for MLs in this scenario, what might you do to encourage stronger relationships between the elementary teachers and the ML families?



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There are many factors that might be at play in this scenario, both cultural and situational. First and foremost, ML families might not have experience with parent–teacher conferences in their home countries. Also, families might not have availability from work during the conference times, might not have access to childcare, or might not have transportation to the school. The school may not have communicated expectations around the importance of conferences and the tight conference schedule. They also might not have arranged for interpreters who speak the families' home languages to be available during the conference times. Additionally, some families might not feel safe or comfortable in the school.

As the opening scenario shows, culture can significantly impact teacher and ML family expectations as well as school and family relationships. While the teachers in this scenario did nothing wrong, there is more that they could do in order to be responsive to the needs of the ML families. For example, the educators involved might begin from a place of empathy and belief in the good intentions of families with the knowledge of how important it is to learn about ML families' backgrounds and build relationships with these families in support of their students. With these considerations in mind, the teachers in the scenario could then take steps to learn about the barriers that might be preventing ML families from attending conferences or arriving on time. For example, the teachers might work with their school administrators and ELD teacher(s) to consider whether alternative conference time slots are needed and how childcare might be provided on site. They could also ask families about what times might work best for them and whether transportation is a barrier. The teachers could also take steps to ensure that interpreters who represent the families' home languages are available for all conferences.

Because of the significant impact that culture can have on the work we do with MLs, we have positioned our discussion of strategies in this book within a framework of culturally responsive teaching. It is our intention that as you work through Chapters 3–9 in this book, you will refer back to this chapter and consider the cultural implications for your instruction, assessment, and general interactions with MLs as well as their families. We recognize that those of you who are choosing to read this book may be more informed and more passionate about the instruction of MLs than others that you work with. It is our hope that this chapter will also provide you with some strategies and talking points that you can use to strengthen your role as an ML advocate and help shift your colleagues' mindsets if needed.

In this chapter, we will define culture and the characteristics of culture, discuss the importance of cultural understanding for your work with MLs, and provide strategies to support culturally responsive and culturally sustaining teaching framed around five guiding principles. We will also ask you to step outside your comfort zone and think critically about your own culture and how it shapes your instruction, your classroom expectations, and your interactions with students. We would like you to consider areas of potential bias in your work with MLs based on your cultural background and experiences.

## What Is Culture?

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. How do you define culture?
2. Why is an understanding of culture important for your work with MLs?



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While there are many, varied definitions of culture, it is generally understood that **culture is “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group”** (Merriam-Webster, 2023). In thinking about different aspects of culture, social scientists generally believe that it is not the cultural artifacts, tools, or other tangible aspects of culture that are the essence of a culture but rather how members of a cultural group understand and relate to these tools or artifacts (Banks & Banks, 2019).

In order to understand the importance of culture in your work with MLs, in Application Activity 2.1, we have highlighted some considerations when thinking about aspects of culture and the potential impact that culture may have on teaching and learning for MLs. For each consideration, make note of the potential impact for MLs in your context. The first example has been completed for you.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.1: POTENTIAL IMPACT OF CULTURE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR MLs

CONSIDERATIONS	IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR MLs
<p><b>Variability:</b> There is great variability of cultures within social groups. We are each a member of various cultural groups. These smaller cultural groups are part of the larger, mainstream culture (Banks &amp; Banks, 2019). Our connection to specific cultures and how the culture manifests itself in our ideas and behaviors can change throughout our lives (Erickson, 2007).</p>	<p>MLs' culture(s) may be different from their parents' or caregivers' culture(s). This may be particularly true for MLs who were born in the United States. Second-generation immigrants are often pulled between the culture of their families and the culture that they learn at school or in the community. This means that it's important to avoid overgeneralizing aspects of culture (e.g., "Mexicans like to . . .") or asking one student to speak on behalf of their culture or nationality.</p>

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CONSIDERATIONS	IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR MLs
<p><b>Distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures:</b> One aspect on which a culture can be measured is the degree to which individualism versus collectivism is prioritized. Individualist cultures prioritize independence and individual achievement. Collectivist cultures prioritize interdependence and cooperation. The United States is the most individualistic culture worldwide. In contrast, 80 percent of world cultures prioritize collectivism (Dubner, 2021; Hofstede, 2016; Hofstede et al., 2010).</p>	
<p><b>Levels of culture:</b> There are three different levels of culture. An analogy is often made between these three levels and an iceberg (Hall, 1976). The elements of culture that are visible (at the surface level), such as food, clothing, and language, are understood to carry a low emotional load. The invisible elements of culture that include both shallow and deep culture, such as beliefs about time and notions of justice, are much more likely to lead to misunderstandings and frustration when there are cultural differences (Z. Hammond, 2015).</p>	

In her description of the levels of culture, Z. Hammond (2015) uses an analogy of a tree that highlights the dynamic nature of culture. Hammond argues that surface culture (the branches, leaves, and fruit) and shallow culture (the trunk) can change over time through migration, intermarriage, and generational changes. However, deep culture (the roots of the tree) is more fixed and is what grounds and sustains individuals and informs their sense of self and group belonging. Figure 2.1 provides more details about the three levels of culture. As you look at Figure 2.1, consider how culture is discussed in your context. At which level of culture do you feel most of the

conversations occur? How might you integrate more considerations of shallow and deep culture into your work with MLs?

**FIGURE 2.1 THREE LEVELS OF CULTURE**

LEVEL OF CULTURE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
<b>Surface</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprises concrete elements of culture that can be seen</li> <li>Carries low emotional load</li> </ul>	Food, clothing, celebrations, music, literature, and dance
<b>Shallow</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprises the cultural rules for everyday communication and behavior</li> <li>Carries strong emotional charge</li> <li>Differences can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements</li> </ul>	Beliefs about time, concepts of personal space, nonverbal communication patterns, and relationship to authority
<b>Deep culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprises the unspoken knowledge and unconscious understandings in how we relate to others and the world</li> <li>Carries substantial emotional charge</li> <li>Differences at this level can lead to culture shock</li> </ul>	Ideas about cooperation and collaboration, notions of justice, and concepts of self

*Source:* Adapted from Hammond, Z. (2015). Culture tree (p. 24).

Now that we have discussed different aspects of culture, we would like you to take a little time to reflect on the cultural groups to which you belong and how they shape your sense of self and belonging.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.2: MY MULTICULTURAL SELF

1. Make a list of all of the cultural groups that you belong to (e.g., Asian-American, female, Jewish, gay, person with a disability). Then, consider which ones you identify with most, and put a star next to those.

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## Why Does Culture Matter for MLs' Teaching and Learning?

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.3: MS. MONTROSE'S CLASSROOM

Read the scenario that follows, and then, answer the reflection questions.

**Scenario:** Ms. Montrose is a sixth-grade language arts teacher in a rural school with few MLs. The MLs in her class are from the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, and South Korea. She regularly includes discussion activities in her lessons and expects students to be active participants in these discussions. She selects discussion prompts that she hopes will encourage debate, as well as close analysis of the texts that the class is reading. Ms. Montrose has worked with the ELD teacher to develop the language scaffolding that her MLs may need to participate, including vocabulary instruction, sentence stems, and word banks. However, she has been frustrated by her MLs' participation patterns in these discussions. Some of her MLs contribute very little, and in general, they tend to avoid controversial topics. Ms. Montrose thinks that some of the MLs aren't very motivated to be successful in her class, and she is at a loss for what more she can do to encourage these students to be more active in the discussions.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.3: REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What impact might culture have on MLs' participation in classroom discussions in general?

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2. What might be preventing Ms. Montrose's MLs from being more active participants in the class discussions?

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3. What might Ms. Montrose do to support greater participation on the part of her MLs? Consider linguistic supports, student groupings, and other types of support she could offer.

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Culture impacts students' and teachers' beliefs about education and learning. It can have an effect on MLs' ways of communicating, their classroom participation and behavior, and their expectations for the role of the teacher, among other areas. Similarly, culture has an effect on educators' expectations for students, their ways of communicating with students, and their classroom management. This means that the expectations for student behavior, communication, and patterns of language use at home could be significantly different than the expectations for student behavior, communication, and patterns of language use at school (Banks & Banks, 2019; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983, 2012; Ogbu, 2003). When teachers and students do not share the same cultural and linguistic background, the differences may influence their relationship and also student learning. Accordingly, teachers need to recognize these potential differences and validate MLs' students and families' expectations of teachers and the school (Staehr Fenner & Teich, in press). They also need to support students in learning the expectations of the teacher and the school (Delpit, 1995). All students need guidance in learning how to function within and across cultures in order to build their sociocultural consciousness while also feeling proud of their home cultures. **Sociocultural consciousness is understanding that your worldview is not universal and believing that your worldview is not superior to the worldviews of others.**

For example, in the scenario discussed earlier, Ms. Montrose had specific expectations for what student engagement and participation looked like, and when her MLs did not meet those expectations, she questioned their motivation, placing blame on the students. There are several barriers that might be standing in the way of student participation from a linguistic perspective, including students having sufficient understanding of the content and the structure of the discussion activities. However, Ms. Montrose should also explore cultural differences that may be preventing some MLs from participating in ways she expects. She can be explicit with her students about expectations for academic discussions in her classroom while at the same time validating experiences from MLs' cultures. For example, Ms. Montrose could engage in a discussion with her students about how norms for discussions and debate vary from culture to culture and even within cultures. She should also provide models of academic discussions via video clips that students can use to inform their understanding of her expectations. It would be important for Ms. Montrose to make sure that she does not call out, stigmatize, or make MLs feel unwelcome during these discussions and that she also affirms expectations from students' home cultures.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. How do you think your cultural beliefs and expectations around teaching and learning may differ from those of MLs that you teach or work with?
2. How might you address these differences in your context?



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## What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Once you have begun to recognize how culture impacts who you are as an educator, as well as learned more about the backgrounds and experiences of your MLs, you can apply this new or more nuanced understanding to your teaching. Culturally responsive educators draw on the cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and experiences of their students in order to make the learning more meaningful. Ladson-Billings (1994) developed the term **culturally relevant teaching to describe “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes”** (p. 18). Gay and other researchers began using the term *culturally responsive teaching*, which is the term more widely-used today. Gay (2010) defined **culturally responsive teaching as “using 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 [students]”** (p. 31).

It can also be helpful to think about what culturally responsive teaching is not. Nieto (2016) explains that “culturally responsive teaching is not

- A predetermined curriculum
- A specific set of strategies
- A watering down of the curriculum
- A ‘feel-good’ approach
- Only for students of particular backgrounds” (p. 1)

Instead, Nieto (2016) describes culturally responsive pedagogy as a mindset that respects and builds on students’ backgrounds and experiences through the use of materials and specific teaching approaches. Culturally responsive educators strive to learn what makes each student unique in order to appreciate the diverse perspectives and insights they can bring to their classroom. Culturally responsive educators are also able to confront their own biases.

Paris and Alim (2017) have built on the idea of culturally responsive teaching in their work on culturally sustaining practices. They describe the urgent need for schools to be places that nurture the cultural practices of students of color. **Culturally sustaining practices are instructional practices that meaningfully integrate students’ languages and ways of being into classroom learning and across curricular units** (Paris & Alim, 2017). Paris and Alim (2017) describe the importance of identifying which aspects of culture and language students and their families want to sustain through schooling.

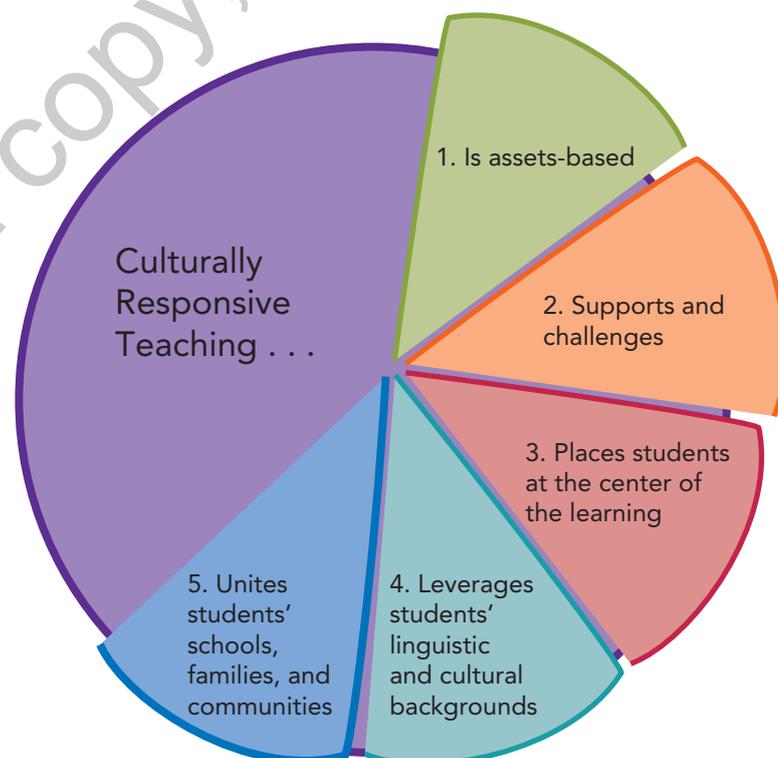
## What Are the Guiding Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching?

While educators and researchers describe varying characteristics of culturally responsive teaching, we have attempted to synthesize these ideas into five overarching guiding principles. Figure 2.2 highlights how the five guiding principles connect to one another. The guiding principles are as follows:

- Guiding Principle 1: Culturally responsive teaching is assets-based.
- Guiding Principle 2: Culturally responsive teaching simultaneously supports and challenges students.
- Guiding Principle 3: Culturally responsive teaching places students at the center of the learning.
- Guiding Principle 4: Culturally responsive teaching leverages students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Guiding Principle 5: Culturally responsive teaching unites students' schools, families, and communities (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021).

In the sections that follow, we will provide an explanation of each guiding principle, its relationship to MLs, and some classroom “look-fors” that indicate these criteria are at work in the classroom and school.

**FIGURE 2.2 THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING**



### **Guiding Principle 1: Culturally responsive teaching is assets-based.**

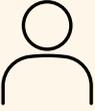
When we consider the obstacles that MLs must surmount in order to acquire a new language while, at the same time, learning academic content, it can be easy to approach our work with MLs from a deficit perspective. **A deficit perspective is one in which we focus on MLs' challenges and frame our interactions with them in terms of these challenges.** Using a deficit lens, educators tend to view MLs' home language(s) and culture(s) as hindrances to overcome. In addition, they may attribute performance or achievement that falls below expectations to MLs' linguistic abilities in English, motivation, lack of parental involvement, or other such factors (Adair et al., 2017; González, 2005; Matthiesen, 2017; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). In contrast, **an assets-based perspective is one that values students' home languages and cultures and sees them as foundations for future learning** (González, 2005; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Zacarian & Staehr Fenner, 2020). Similarly, an assets-based perspective recognizes that parents of MLs are engaged in their children's education and support their children in varied and perhaps unrecognized ways (Staehr Fenner, 2014a).

Essential to having an assets-based view of MLs and their families learning about them, their backgrounds, and experiences. We have included some suggestions for how to learn about them in the list that follows. Figure 2.3 provides a tool that you can complete as you learn more about each ML you work with.

- Look for opportunities for students to comfortably share about themselves, their families, and their backgrounds and experiences. You can build activities into instruction that provides a space for students (if they feel comfortable) to share about their families, their backgrounds, their responsibilities, how they spend their time outside of school, and their interests (Staehr Fenner, 2014a; Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021). When you are asking students to describe their backgrounds and experiences, it is important to be clear that you are not asking students to speak for an entire cultural group.
- Take opportunities to talk with students informally (e.g., at lunch, after school, or on field trips), and get to know more about them.
- Collaborate with other educators to find out relevant background information on MLs (e.g., home language or educational experiences).
- Attend school and community events that your MLs and their families attend.
- Conduct home visits with MLs and their families (if families are comfortable and have an opportunity to decline). It can be effective to visit in the beginning of the year as a get-to-know-each-other activity to build relationships and limit discussions about behavior and academic progress.
- Research general information about your MLs' home cultures and important features of their home languages (Staehr Fenner, 2014a).

- Conduct a community walk. A community walk is a student or family-member led tour of a community that allows educators to have a better understanding of students, families, and their communities (L. Markham, personal communications, November 25, 2019; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021).

**FIGURE 2.3 WHAT I KNOW ABOUT MY ML**

<p>Name:</p> 	<p>Country of birth or family's country of birth:</p> 
<p>Home language(s):</p>  <p>Comments related to strengths in home language (e.g., oracy and literacy in home language, identity as a speaker of home language):</p>	<p>If applicable</p> <p>English proficiency level:</p> <p>English language proficiency scores from _____ (date)</p> <p>Composite (the combined score): _____</p> <p>Speaking: _____</p> <p>Reading: _____</p> <p>Listening: _____</p> <p>Writing: _____</p>
<p>Relevant educational experiences (e.g., amount of time in U.S. schools, educational experience in home country, areas of strength in current school):</p> 	
<p>Cultural connections with schooling (e.g., individualist vs. collectivist, nonverbal communication preference, interactions with teacher):</p> 	

Family background (e.g., who student lives with, what family likes to do together, family interests):



Student interests (e.g., sports, animals, video games, musical artists):



Student plans and/or goals (e.g., high school graduation, career and technical education courses, college):



Inequities student may face (e.g., microaggressions, access to technology, childcare duties):



*Source:* Snyder and Staehr Fenner (2021); adapted from Staehr Fenner and Snyder (2017). Icons by iStock.com/nuiun, iStock.com/bubaone, iStock.com/LuliiaBagautdinova, iStock.com/ilyaliren, iStock.com/bsd555, iStock.com/Dmytro\_Vyshnevskyi.



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The process of learning about MLs and differences between your cultures and theirs might bring up some feelings of discomfort or uncertainty. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and even be open and transparent about them. Keep this idea of discomfort in mind as you read the scenario in Application Activity 2.4.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.4: MR. GERARD'S CLASSROOM

Read the scenario and answer the discussion questions that follow.

**Scenario:** Mr. Gerard, an elementary school music teacher, has a new student in his class from Indonesia. He looks at her name on the attendance list, and then he asks her what her name is. She responds, "Cinta Hartono." Mr. Gerard immediately feels uncomfortable with this unfamiliar name and asks, "Can I call you Cindy?" Cinta agrees that would be fine.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.4: REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What is the underlying message that Mr. Gerard is sending to Cinta about her home language and culture?

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2. What steps could Mr. Gerard take to become more comfortable learning and using the names of students that might be unfamiliar to him?

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In order to envision how an assets-based perspective plays out in the classroom, review the classroom look-fors in Figure 2.4. Consider which of these practices are already in place in your context and which you might wish to prioritize for improvement.

#### FIGURE 2.4 GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1 LOOK-FORS

- ✓ Administrators, teachers, and staff pronounce MLs' names correctly.
- ✓ Administrators, teachers, and staff show interest in MLs' home languages by learning a few words or phrases.
- ✓ Administrators, teachers, and staff are aware of MLs' interests outside of the classroom or school setting.
- ✓ The school puts supports in place to help MLs and their families overcome obstacles that may get in the way of student learning or family participation.
- ✓ MLs' cultural, linguistic, and community backgrounds are incorporated into instruction.

An assets-based perspective requires that you approach the work you do with MLs with respect and empathy. Respect and empathy will grow when you try to put yourself in the shoes of MLs and their families and imagine what it is like to assimilate into an unfamiliar culture, learn a new language, and figure out a new school system (Staehr Fenner, 2014a). For example, if you happen to catch yourself blaming MLs or their families, try to “shake up” your thinking so that you start by assuming the best about the student or the family members involved and consider their perspective, as well as challenges or obstacles that they might be facing. Application Activity 2.5 provides you with an opportunity to think about how you might reframe a deficit perspective into actions that come from a place of grace for MLs and their families.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.5: ASSETS-BASED PERSPECTIVE SCENARIOS

We present three scenarios in this application activity.

1. Read the first scenario. Also, read the second and third columns, which present another way of understanding the scenario.
2. For the second and third scenarios, complete the second two columns. First, approach the MLs and their families in each scenario from a respectful and empathetic perspective, and then determine what steps the teacher(s) in the scenarios might take to change their deficit perspectives.
3. In the final row, write a scenario that is relevant to your context.

SCENARIO	RESPECTFUL AND EMPATHETIC PERSPECTIVE	STEPS YOU MIGHT TAKE TO SUPPORT MLs AND THEIR FAMILIES
1. The members of an elementary school parent-teacher association (PTA) are complaining that despite there being a significant number of MLs in the school, none of the ML parents attend the PTA meetings. They feel that families of MLs are not interested in supporting the school.	There are many reasons why the families of MLs may not be involved in the PTA. For example, ML families may come from countries where parent associations do not exist or information about the PTA meeting may not be clearly shared with families in a language they can understand. The PTA meetings may not be welcoming or comfortable for ML families. Additionally, family members may have such constraints as having to work, not having childcare, or not having transportation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider what steps you have taken to build relationships with ML families and make them feel welcome. Consider what more might need to be done.</li> <li>• Make sure meeting information is clear and delivered in families' home languages.</li> <li>• Reach out to families and explain what the PTA does and how their participation would benefit the group.</li> <li>• Be welcoming to ML families who attend meetings, making sure that they understand what is being discussed and that there is a comfortable way for them to contribute (if they wish).</li> <li>• Offer childcare during PTA meetings.</li> <li>• Offer support with transportation if needed.</li> </ul>

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SCENARIO	RESPECTFUL AND EMPATHETIC PERSPECTIVE	STEPS YOU MIGHT TAKE TO SUPPORT MLs AND THEIR FAMILIES
<p>2. A fifth-grade science teacher has students work in groups on various assignments. He has three emergent MLs in his class who are at a low-to-intermediate English proficiency level, and he has tried to group them with emergent MLs at higher English proficiency levels. However, he finds that when they are grouped together, they like to speak Spanish. He feels uncomfortable because he doesn't know what they are saying, and he is worried that they are off task or talking about him.</p>		
<p>3. A ninth-grade math teacher feels frustrated when a new emergent ML from Afghanistan is added to her class mid-year. She complains to the ELD teacher that the student doesn't speak any English and isn't able to follow the lessons, can't understand the word problems, or take part in small-group discussions. The math teacher feels that the student doesn't appear very motivated to be a part of the class and hasn't asked for help in understanding the assignments.</p>		
<p>Scenario from my context:</p>		

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## Guiding Principle 2: Culturally responsive teaching simultaneously supports and challenges students.

The second guiding principle is based on the importance of having high expectations for the MLs in your classes while at the same time giving them the support that they need to achieve. MLs should have access to the same grade-level content and texts as their non-ML peers, but they should receive sufficient instructional support for this work (August, 2018). Kleinfeld (1975), in her work with Inuit and Yupik students in Alaska, coined the term *warm demander* to represent the need to have high expectations for students as a way to foster student autonomy in their learning while at the same time providing adequate assistance (Z. Hammond, 2015). We have expanded this term to be *warm and informed demander*. **A warm and informed demander understands students' multifaceted past histories and present contexts and uses this knowledge to both support and challenge students in their learning** (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021).

Guiding Principle 2 is also framed around the idea that within our society, certain groups of people have unearned privileges based on traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference that are not granted to individuals outside these groups. Culturally responsive teachers develop lessons that include the history and experiences of diverse groups and provide instruction about structures that reinforce power, privilege, and discriminatory practices in society. In addition, culturally responsive teaching provides opportunities for students and educators to think critically about institutionalized inequity, how inequity and injustice impact their lives or the lives of others, and the steps needed to address this inequity (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems [NCCREST], 2008).

Figure 2.5 offers some suggestions for how to apply this guiding principle in your classroom. An example of what Guiding Principle 2 might look like in practice is a unit that is taught at a diverse urban high school in California. The ninth-grade English teachers at the Nelson Mandela Academy have developed a unit called

### FIGURE 2.5 GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2 LOOK-FORS

- ✓ MLs are taught grade-level content and texts. Instructional texts include a balance of grade-level texts and texts at students' reading levels.
- ✓ Instruction and materials are appropriately scaffolded so MLs are able to access and engage with grade-level content and texts.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Instruction includes activities that require students to make connections with their prior learning.
- ✓ Instruction includes activities that require students to consider alternative ways of understanding information and push students to challenge the status quo.
- ✓ Instruction includes activities that foster critical thinking and reflection (e.g., open-ended discussion prompts and student monitoring of their learning).
- ✓ MLs have access to and the support needed to be successful in gifted, honors, and college preparatory classes.

<sup>1</sup>For more on scaffolded instruction strategies, see Chapter 3.

“Linguistic Biographies” in which students reflect on their own experiences of using language in different contexts and engage in collaborative academic tasks designed to foster students’ appreciation for linguistic diversity and strategies for responding to negative comments about their home language(s) or dialects (California Department of Education, 2015). During this unit, students take part in a variety of collaborative activities, including reflecting on their own multilingual or multidialectal experiences, analyzing poetry and contemporary music to understand the connections between language choices and cultural values and identity, and producing writing and multimedia pieces that examine the connection between language, culture, and society.

### Guiding Principle 3: Culturally responsive teaching places students at the center of the learning.

Student-centered learning is not new in the field of education, and there are a variety of approaches that fit within this model (e.g., collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, or project-based learning). **Student-centered learning can be defined as an instructional approach in which the students in the classroom shape the content, instructional activities, materials, assessment, or pace of the learning.** Student-centered learning also prioritizes peer learning with the goal of providing students opportunities to learn from one another rather than solely from the teacher. We dive into peer learning opportunities for MLs in Chapter 4 and also discuss peer learning activities to support reading and writing in Chapter 8.

In order to incorporate student-centered learning practices in your classroom, review the classroom look-fors in Figure 2.6.

**FIGURE 2.6 GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3 CLASSROOM LOOK-FORS**

- ✓ Classroom activities frequently include structured pair and small-group work.
- ✓ Students and teachers develop the classroom norms and expectations together.
- ✓ MLs are given choice in their learning.
- ✓ MLs are given opportunities to speak and write about their lives and people and events that are important to them.
- ✓ MLs are involved in goal setting and assessment through the use of student goal sheets, checklists, peer-editing activities, and teacher–student or student–student conferencing.
- ✓ ML student work is displayed in the classroom.
- ✓ Lessons include intentional groupings of students to support student learning and to allow for grouping that considers language backgrounds.

One step toward student-centered learning is engaging students in self-assessment and goal setting related to learning goals and language development. For MLs, this could be an unfamiliar experience. Figure 2.7 is a document that you could use to help emergent MLs set goals for their language development. We have also included a student example.

**FIGURE 2.7 STUDENT GOAL SETTING FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

MY SCORE	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0
<b>Listening</b> 						
<b>Reading</b> 						
<b>Speaking</b> 						
<b>Writing</b> 						

**To exit the ELD program, I need an overall score of 4.5.<sup>2</sup>**

From the data, I know that I am really good at \_\_\_\_\_.

From the data, I know I need to improve \_\_\_\_\_.

I can improve my \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.

*Source:* Rebecca Thomas. Icon by iStock.com/Zham.

<sup>2</sup>The English language proficiency score that students need to be reclassified and exit the ELD program varies by state.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

My Score	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0
Listening 						6.0
Reading 						3.6
Speaking 						3.5
Writing 						3.8

To exit the ESOL program, I need an overall score of 4.5.

From the data, I know that I am really good at Listening and writing

From the data, I know I need to improve Reading and speaking

I can improve my speaking by saying full sentences, speaking english more.

In this goal-setting document, the student identifies that he wants to improve his speaking skills by using complete sentences.

#### Guiding Principle 4: Culturally responsive teaching leverages students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The fourth guiding principle focuses on ways that teaching and learning can elevate students' home language, cultures, and experiences. This guiding principle builds on the idea of Guiding Principle 1, being assets-based, and asks educators to create multicultural and multilingual learning environments for students as a way to use MLs' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as foundations for all learning. In their work on culturally sustaining practices, Paris and Alim emphasize the need to support students in making meaningful connections between their learning and the languages, practices, and histories of their communities (Furlazzo, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017).

In order to think about what this guiding principle looks like in practice, read the classroom look-fors in Figure 2.8, and then complete Application Activity 2.6.

**FIGURE 2.8 GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4 CLASSROOM LOOK-FORS**

- ✓ Lessons include multicultural materials and resources.
- ✓ Lessons and units include perspectives of individuals that come from MLs' home cultures (e.g., literature written by non-U.S. American authors).
- ✓ Lessons include activities that draw on MLs' backgrounds and experiences.
- ✓ Lessons include opportunities for MLs to use bilingual resources (e.g., dictionaries, books, or glossaries) and home languages.
- ✓ ML families and communities are included in the learning (e.g., community members are invited to speak in class).

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.6: MR. WASHBURN'S CLASSROOM

Read the scenario that follows, and consider how Mr. Washburn might make his unit on immigration more culturally responsive to the MLs whom he is teaching. Answer the discussion questions that follow.

**Scenario:** Mr. Washburn is a middle school social studies teacher at an urban middle school with a large population of MLs from Mexico and Central America. He has seven emergent MLs in one of his social studies classes. Three of the MLs have been in the country for less than a year. The other MLs have been in the United States for two to six years. Mr. Washburn is currently teaching a unit on U.S. immigration, focusing on the experiences of immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1900s. As part of this unit, students will take a virtual tour of Ellis Island, read excerpts from *Island of Hope: The Story of Ellis Island and the Journey to America* (Sandler, 2004), and give an oral report on one aspect of the immigrant experience during this time (e.g., travel to the United States or life in the tenements).

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.6: REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. In what ways is the unit plan relevant to the lives of the students in the class? In what ways could the unit be made more relevant to their lives?

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(Continued)

(Continued)

2. What steps could the teacher take to build on the backgrounds and experiences of the MLs in the class?

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3. What might he need to be cautious about related to students' own experiences with the topic?

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4. What additional recommendations do you have for activities that would strengthen students' engagement with the unit and bring in diverse perspectives?

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As you probably concluded, a unit on immigration is most likely very relevant to the lives of MLs. However, rather than focusing only on immigration in the early 1900s, the teacher could also discuss current immigration. There are many young adult novels that address issues of immigration (e.g., *American Street* [Zaboi, 2017], *Inside Out & Back Again* [Lai, 2013], *We Are Not From Here* [Sanchez, 2021], *Messy Roots: A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American* [Gao, 2022], and *Shooting Kabul* [Senzai, 2011]). Students could also read and discuss editorials about current immigration from a social justice lens. They could make connections between why immigrants came to the United States in the early 1900s and why they come now. There are many resources for teaching about immigration that support a multicultural perspective on the topic, such as *Learning for Justice's* "The Human Face of Immigration" (Costello, 2011). You can also find text sets on a particular topic, such as immigration, that offer materials at varied reading levels (in addition to providing scaffolded instruction of grade-level texts on the topic). As you plan lessons, even on those topics that may seem far removed from the lives of the MLs you work with, keep looking for opportunities to make meaningful connections to MLs' own experiences while at the same time being sensitive to possible trauma that students may have experienced and topics that may be difficult for them to discuss.

### What About Home Language Use and Translanguaging?

With the increase in online translation tools, there has also been an increase in the use of translation to support MLs' understanding and learning of new content. Research indicates that MLs can draw from their home language when acquiring knowledge and skills in English. Instruction that incorporates and builds on MLs' home language will support them in developing literacy in English (August, 2018; August et al., 2009; Carlo et al., 2004; Dressler & Kamil, 2006; Liang et al., 2005; Restrepo et al., 2010). In addition, by providing MLs opportunities to use their home language through using translanguaging practices, you are validating MLs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and honoring the benefits of being multilingual. **Translanguaging is the use of more than one language for communication, and it allows students to make full use of their linguistic resources** (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; O. García et al., 2017).

In our work, we recommend intentionally and strategically using translation and opportunities for translanguaging. We specify being intentional and strategic because we know that MLs benefit when they are taught to use their home language as a resource for new content learning and language development. However, translation should not be the primary or only scaffold used to support student understanding and engagement. Let's take a look at two examples. Consider which example provides a model of intentional and strategic use of home language.

- **Example #1:** A science teacher presents a lesson in English on energy transfer. She pauses her instruction every couple of minutes so the bilingual paraprofessional can interpret the lesson in Spanish for a group of emergent MLs at lower levels of proficiency. After the lesson, students work independently to answer a set of questions that the paraprofessional translated into Spanish. The students use Google Translate to translate their responses into English. During this activity, the emergent MLs rely heavily on Spanish and make minimal use of English in describing terms and concepts associated with energy transfer.
- **Example #2:** A science teacher presents a short lesson in English on energy transfer. She embeds visuals, hands-on examples, and instruction of key terms in English. Emergent MLs at lower levels of proficiency are provided a bilingual glossary that includes short definitions in English and students' home languages as well as images to support understanding. After the lesson, students work in home language groups to answer discussion questions. Students are able to discuss in any language they choose and then use their glossary and sentence stems to write responses in English.

#### REFLECTION QUESTION

Which scenario is a better example of intentional and strategic use of MLs' home languages? Why?



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While it is important to honor and draw from MLs' home languages, the overuse of translation and interpretation as we see in Example #1 can result in missed opportunities, such as a waste of valuable teaching time, a lack of opportunity for language development, and a reluctance by students to take risks with language use as they acquire language. Instead, translation should be understood to be just one of many types of instructional supports that can be used to foster students' acquisition of language and content learning.

There are many different ways to incorporate home language use and translanguaging into instruction, even if you do not speak students' home languages. When providing students opportunities to work in their home language or use home language resources, it is essential that you have a clear understanding of their literacy skills in that language. Students who do not have strong home language literacy skills are not likely to benefit from written resources in their home languages, and they might also be embarrassed if they do not feel comfortable reading and writing in their home language. Consider the following strategies:

- **Home language resources:** School librarians are often wonderful resources for finding translated or home language texts to support the content you are working on (e.g., a translated copy of a short text about types of energy).
- **Bilingual assignments:** You can provide students with opportunities to do bilingual work on their assignments such as using a bilingual glossary, writing a story in both English and their home language, or having them interview a family or community member in their home language. You can also encourage students to make connections between their home language and English as a tool for language development.
- **Multilingual discussions:** Another strategy for supporting home language development is intentionally grouping students to allow opportunities for them to use their home language during group work (as appropriate). It is understandable that if you don't speak the home language, you may be uncomfortable with this strategy because you don't know what is being discussed in the group. However, if you set up concrete tasks for the group, you will be able to identify whether or not students are engaged in the activity. You can also have students record their discussions and seek support from a colleague who speaks the home language (if you have one) to interpret the conversation for you.

### **Guiding Principle 5: Culturally responsive teaching unites students' schools, families, and communities.**

The final guiding principle highlights the importance of collaborating with MLs' families and communities. There are strong positive connections between family engagement and student outcomes such as higher rates of high school graduation, higher grades and test scores, higher levels of language proficiency, and increased enrollment in higher education (Ferguson, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lindholm-Leary, 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and

Medicine [NASEM], 2017). Additionally, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires family engagement as a critical step toward improving ML student outcomes. Schools are required to solicit recommendations from families related to school programming and share information with families about supporting their children's education.

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching for Multilingual Learners: Tools for Equity* (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021), we suggest five strategies for strengthening ML family engagement and collaboration with ML communities.

1. **Create a welcoming environment for ML families.** Consider what it might feel like to be an ML family entering your school for the first time. How might they be greeted and to what extent would they see themselves represented in the visual images that are displayed around the school? This strategy is framed around the idea of creating a space where ML families feel comfortable and that they are valuable members of the school community. Take a look at this picture of a welcome sign that greets families as they enter Whittier Primary in Findlay, Ohio. Educator Chrystal Whipkey shared that the purpose of this sign is to support a welcoming environment for all students.



This welcome sign at Whittier Elementary includes the languages of all the students who attend the school. Additional languages will be added as the population grows and changes.

Source: Chrystal Whipkey.

2. **Build relationships with ML families.** In order to build strong partnerships with MLs' families and communities, it is essential to get to know families' backgrounds, experiences, and goals for their children. Spending time, both informally and formally, in ML families' communities is a wonderful way to learn more about ML families and their assets. For example, take time to participate in community events and consider hosting a school event in families' communities if possible.
3. **Communicate effectively with ML families.** It's important to determine families' preferred ways of communication and set up a system that also makes it easy for families to communicate with the school. Many schools are now using messaging apps that include translation options. It is also critical to have interpreters who represent ML families' home languages at all school events and meetings.
4. **Overcome barriers to ML family engagement.** This strategy calls on educators to work with families to determine barriers that might be preventing family engagement and then brainstorm possible solutions to those barriers. Possible barriers might include language, transportation, time, childcare, understanding the school system and role of families, and fear related to immigration status. Surveys, focus groups, and discussion with community leaders are some possible ways to learn more about potential barriers.
5. **Empower ML families.** The final strategy is empowering ML families. When ML families develop a stronger voice, they are better positioned to advocate for the needs of their children and provide an often-missing perspective to schools. Some ways to empower families include providing English classes or other support services in the school to help families in becoming more comfortable at the school, strengthening representation of ML family members on district committees and advisory groups, and asking ML families to share their perspectives on such topics as school policies and procedures (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021). It is essential that ML families have an opportunity to talk about the issues that matter most to them.



**SYRACUSE  
CITY SCHOOL  
DISTRICT VIDEO**

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If you would like to see one way Syracuse City School District strives to unite students' schools, families, and communities, please watch the video *Building Relationships with Multilingual Families Through Family Engagement Events*. As you watch the video, consider what strategies the district uses to build strong partnerships with ML families. The video can be found on the online companion website. To access the companion website, please visit [resources.corwin.com/FennerUnlocking2E](https://resources.corwin.com/FennerUnlocking2E).

Figure 2.9 provides a list of look-fors related to the strategies for uniting students' schools, families, and communities.

**FIGURE 2.9 GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5 LOOK-FORS**

- ✓ The school visually demonstrates a commitment to multicultural families and students (e.g., flags from students' home countries, signs posted in multiple languages, student work displayed on walls).
- ✓ Interpreters are provided at all school events.
- ✓ Educators use a variety of tools to communicate with ML families (e.g., emails, phone calls, texts in home languages, flyers in home languages).
- ✓ School administration looks for ways to remove barriers that might prevent ML families from participating (e.g., timing of events, childcare, transportation).
- ✓ ML family members are actively involved with school committees or organizations that are open to parents (e.g., PTA).

Now that we've explored the five guiding principles for culturally responsive teaching, let's apply this lens to our work with ML newcomer students and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), as well as to our work around collaboration, equity, advocacy, and leadership.



## ML NEWCOMER STUDENTS AND SLIFE CONSIDERATIONS

### What Are Key Considerations for Culturally Responsive Teaching for ML Newcomer Students and SLIFE?

While all MLs benefit from schools and classrooms that embrace a culturally responsive school climate, culturally responsive teaching is particularly critical for students who are new to the country or who enter the school system with gaps in formal education. We want to acknowledge that the very language that we use to describe these groups of students is framed from a deficit viewpoint. Shouldn't we instead use an acronym that highlights their strengths of resiliency, perseverance, motivation, problem-solving skills, family and community bonds, and cultural and linguistic capital?

While we use the terms *ML newcomer students* and *SLIFE* for the sake of shared understanding, we advocate for a classroom and school climate that values and creates space to build on the assets that these students bring as well as opportunities to share their assets and perspectives with other students. In each chapter, we will highlight specific considerations that are relevant to our work with ML newcomer students and SLIFE related to the strategies discussed in that chapter. Specific considerations related to culturally responsive teaching follow.

(Continued)

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**Considerations:**

- Cultural dissonance: ML newcomer students and SLIFE may experience a sense of disharmony, confusion, and even alienation because they do not understand the expectations and requirements of North American schools (DeCapua et al., 2020). We need to provide a safe space for students to learn the expectations of their new schools and classrooms and give them the tools and resources to make connections with teachers and peers as well as language for asking for support. It is also important to note that these students may be arriving throughout the school year, and it is crucial that whenever they arrive, they be welcomed and provided essential information.
- It's also important to recognize that ML newcomer students and SLIFE may be coming from collectivist cultures. As you design group work, consider how you can build in both individual and group accountability. For example, you can have students work in groups but assign them individual roles within the group or individual pieces of the project that they are accountable for. In addition, ML newcomer students and SLIFE will benefit from explicit modeling of expectations.



Source: [iStock.com/AJ\\_Watt](https://www.istock.com/photo/AJ_Watt).

**Example:** Joseph is a seventh-grade student from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He recently arrived in the United States after spending several years at a refugee camp where his opportunities to attend school were irregular. Joseph has come to the United States with his mother and two younger sisters. He speaks Swahili, Lingala, and French. He is mechanically minded and is often able to repair small electronic devices. He also loves to play soccer.

Joseph arrived in November, well after the school year had started. His ELD teacher, Ms. Frank, paired him up with Bernadette, a willing ML buddy who had been at the school since fifth grade and also speaks Swahili. Bernadette was given a note to share with her teachers so she could get to class a little late and leave a little early in order to help Joseph find his new classes. Ms. Frank also took the time to introduce Joseph to all his teachers and let them know about the languages he spoke and his love for soccer. She shared this information to support her colleagues in thinking about the assets that Joseph brings and to provide a possible way to connect with him. She also gave him a laminated resource that had questions and corresponding visuals that Joseph might need. She practiced the questions and statements with him, so he could either ask questions to his teachers or point to a question that he had. Here are a couple of examples from the resource:

- Can you please repeat?
- Can you show me an example?

## What Is the Role of Collaboration in Developing a Culturally Responsive Classroom?

Collaboration is at the heart of a culturally responsive classroom. The task of learning more about the cultures of others while, at the same time, reflecting on your own culture requires risk taking, openness, flexibility, and occasional feelings of discomfort. There will be times that you will make mistakes, and there will be times that you may feel angry or frustrated. However, the relationships that you build and the knowledge that you gain can be incredibly rewarding. We make the following recommendations for collaboration with colleagues and ML families:

- Collaborate with colleagues to learn more about the backgrounds, experiences, and cultures of MLs and their families. You can share what you know about specific instructional strategies that have worked well with certain students and strategies for building on students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. You can also share ways that you have for communicating with and engaging ML families. ELD teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators may want to visit ML communities together.
- Collaborate with colleagues to share resources. Building a multicultural library and/or developing online file sharing can be effective ways to support culturally responsive teaching. A multicultural library can include resources related to particular themes (e.g., peacebuilding or the civil rights movement), books written by authors from MLs' home countries, books that share perspectives that may be traditionally overlooked, bilingual books, and more. Your school librarian might be an excellent person to collaborate with on this work. In addition, online file sharing can be a way to share resources

or online tools connected to a particular unit or theme. It can also be a way to share information about student backgrounds, goals, and achievement.

- Collaborate with families of MLs to support MLs' engagement and achievement. Be flexible about the times you are available to meet with families and consider what steps you might take to meet in families' communities. In addition, look for opportunities to invite families into the classroom and participate in classroom activities in ways that they might feel comfortable.

## What Is the Role of Equity, Advocacy, and Leadership in Developing a Culturally Responsive Classroom?

Having a culturally responsive classroom that builds on the strengths of your students, encourages sharing diverse English perspectives and experiences, and ultimately supports each ML in acquiring language proficiency and mastering content knowledge is at the core of equity and advocacy for MLs. However, a climate of cultural awareness and inclusivity is something that must be cultivated not only in your classroom but throughout the entire school. If your school currently does not offer a welcoming environment for MLs and their families or if you feel interactions with MLs are often framed from a deficit perspective, you can take on a leadership role in order to advocate for these students. We suggest that you prioritize an area where you have the greatest opportunity to make an impact, rather than focusing on an area in which there is little chance for change (Staehr Fenner, 2014a). Then, find an ally or two who can help you promote an assets-based perspective of MLs. Next, plan out some steps you will take to make positive changes and advocate for equity for MLs.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.7: MS. MONAHAN'S CLASSROOM

Read the scenario, and answer the discussion questions that follow.

**Scenario:** Ms. Monahan is an ELD teacher at a suburban high school with a growing number of emergent MLs. She felt that the school administration, in general, and the assistant principal, Mr. Yarrow, in particular, did not have a strong understanding of the strengths and needs of the MLs in the school or respect for these students and their families. At one point, when advocating for more professional development for the teachers working with emergent MLs at the school, Mr. Yarrow commented to her that the students didn't seem to be making much progress and that he found them hard to understand. Ms. Monahan decided to invite Mr. Yarrow into her class as a guest. She had her students prepare short presentations on some of their favorite things about the high school (e.g., particular classes, friendships they had, and school activities), and she also encouraged them to speak about some of the challenges that they had (e.g., navigating the lunchroom, understanding some of their teachers, and making new friends). Ms. Monahan also asked Mr. Yarrow to prepare some questions that he could ask the students in order to learn more about their interests, goals, and challenges.

## APPLICATION ACTIVITY 2.7: REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What do you think was Ms. Monahan's goal in inviting the assistant principal into her classroom?

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2. What else might Ms. Monahan do to advocate for the MLs in her school?

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This scenario and the teacher's response demonstrate the need for teachers to take a lead in advocating for better understanding of MLs at all levels within the school. In some situations, complex planning and collaboration will be necessary.



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### Next Steps

We have provided a lot of information in this chapter, and we will explore many of these topics in greater depth throughout the remaining chapters of the book. However, in order to start down the path of culturally responsive teaching, use the Culturally Responsive Tool Checklist and Goal Setting Tool in Appendix D in the online companion website to determine priorities for culturally responsive teaching in your context. This checklist can be a helpful tool as you collaborate with colleagues around this important topic. To access the companion website, please visit [resources.corwin.com/FennerUnlocking2E](https://resources.corwin.com/FennerUnlocking2E).

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have given you an opportunity to reflect on your own culture and how it impacts your beliefs about teaching and learning. We have also shared some insight into how MLs who come from different cultural backgrounds may have varying beliefs about and approaches to education. Finally, we presented five guiding principles for culturally responsive teaching, along with some tools for using these guiding principles in your classroom. In the next chapter, we will provide some strategies for scaffolding instruction to recognize the strengths and meet the needs of MLs of varying proficiency levels. Chapter 3 correlates directly with Guiding Principle 2: culturally responsive teaching simultaneously supports and challenges students.



**UNLOCKING  
RESOURCES**

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**SupportEd  
TOOLBOX**

For ready-to-use, practical tools to support culturally responsive teaching, please visit [SupportEd.com/unlocking-toolbox](https://SupportEd.com/unlocking-toolbox).

## CHAPTER 2 REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What new understandings do you have about how your own culture shapes who you are as an educator?
2. What are two ideas that you have for drawing on students' cultural backgrounds and experiences to make connections to content in your classroom? Or what ideas do you have for building on MLs' cultural and linguistic assets in your school or district?



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