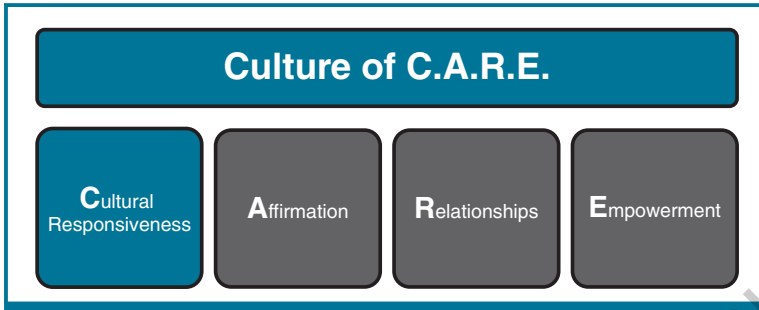


The “C”: Cultural Responsiveness

LEARNING GOALS

As a result of reading this chapter, educators will:

- Understand the meaning of cultural responsiveness.
- Know how the “Ugly Truths” serve as barriers to meeting the needs of all students.
- Be able to implement culturally responsive practices in their schools.



Cultural responsiveness is one of those ubiquitous and ambiguous terms in education, like *rigor*, *differentiation*, and *equity*, which are often used but rarely understood. The terms *culturally responsive* and *culturally relevant* emerged from the research of scholars Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings who sought to codify the practices and approaches of successful teachers of students of color-African American students in particular. Ladson-Billings helped us to understand that while best-in-class strategies were essential, it was the heart of these teachers that drove their practice. They loved and cared for their students. They were not just names on the roster or vessels to deposit knowledge. These teachers saw their students as brilliant and talented and worthy of support, and nurturing. They saw themselves in their students and believed it was their responsibility to positively shape the lives of their students. Regardless of their home lives and the unique circumstances their students often found themselves in, these teachers maintained high expectations of their students and believed they had assets they could leverage in meaningful ways to enrich their academic experiences and those of their peers.

Ladson-Billings (1994) says to be culturally responsive is to create a school and classroom environment that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates the diversity of students' cultures in meaningful ways and offers full, equitable access to education for all students. Culturally responsive school leaders, teachers, and staff recognize the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. Despite claims that schools are not designed to be culturally responsive and that educators need more training on becoming more culturally responsive, the reality is that schools and the adults who work in them are indeed culturally responsive.

Schools are designed to respond to the culture of white, Christian, middle-class families. Everything from how school calendars are constructed, to celebrated holidays, to curriculum materials, to norms for student behavior are based on white, Christian, middle-class values. Without launching into a discussion of the history of public education in the United States, we know that the function of schools and how they operate has not changed since their inception in the 1800s (Labaree, 2010; Rose, 2012); we also know that when those schools were designed, they did not take into consideration the needs of African Americans, Latinx, working moms, or nontraditional families. The systems and structures we inherited in our schools from previous generations of educators were not designed to address the needs of the diverse students in our schools. Despite demographic shifts, we have failed to shift our practices. As of the Fall of 2021, more than 50% of students in U.S. public schools are African American, Latinx, Asian, mixed race, or Native American (National Center for Education Statistics [NCE], 2023). The world has changed, yet the way we do the business of schooling has not.

THE UGLY TRUTHS

When making a case for why cultural responsiveness is necessary, I will begin with what I call the “ugly truths.” These truths help us understand why we have not made the requisite shifts but also (hopefully) raise our collective sense of urgency around why cultural responsiveness is necessary. Owning these truths is the first step toward becoming a more culturally responsive educator.

Ugly Truth #1: There Are Systems in Place That Create and Reinforce Inequities That Lead to the Oppression of Historically Marginalized (Particularly African American and Latinx) People

Culturally responsive educators have to be willing to acknowledge that most, if not all, U.S. systems were designed to reinforce inequities and oppress people of color, African Americans in particular (Ewing, 2018; Irby, 2021; Khalifa, 2018). African

American people pay more in taxes, more for insurance, attend worse schools, and have constrained access to quality health care (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wilkerson, 2020). This is a fact, not an opinion. That's not to say that the tax attorneys, the insurance agents, the teachers, and the doctors who work in these systems are racist. As Bonilla-Silva (2014) asserts, racism persists in U.S. society even though most Americans self-identify as non-racist. Racism, as Eve Ewing (2018) reminds us in her book *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, does not just live within individuals; it lives in the systems; it lives in the very fabric of U.S. society. This is why our society "consistently follows a pattern, churning out different outcomes for different people in ways that are linked to race" (p. 12).

Ugly Truth #2: We Have All Been Socialized Into Believing in the Inherent Inferiority of People of Color (Non-whites), Particularly African American People

A culturally responsive educator acknowledges Ugly Truth #2. All Americans are taught that African American and Latinx people are less human than others. This narrative that African American people are inherently inferior was necessary to justify their oppression, subjugation, and enslavement. This persists today as schools, mass media, and social media continue to advance this notion that African American people are less intelligent, less hardworking, more susceptible to deviance and criminality, and less trustworthy. We are all socialized this way. This is why white educators often fear their African American students. It is also why teachers struggle to see the inherent brilliance in their students of color and the assets in the communities they serve. African American educators struggle with this as well. After graduating from college and earning graduate degrees, they often find themselves adopting the same values as their white coworkers and adopting the same types of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," or "I made it, so can you," mindsets that are inherently problematic. African American educators will often begin to develop an identity where they see themselves as better than the families and the communities they serve. This leads to the last of the ugly truths.

Ugly Truth #3: School Cultures Are Hostile Toward Minoritized Students

Achievement and discipline data support the fact that school cultures are hostile toward minoritized students (Khalifa, 2018). African American and Latinx students often experience schools as disempowering, disconnected, joyless places. They are often constrained from accessing the full depth and breadth of the academic curriculum, are disconnected from the rich social aspects of schooling, are overly disciplined, and are suspended and expelled from schools at six to seven times the rate of their white peers. That, coupled with the fact that there is such a dearth of African American and Latinx educators in schools, they struggled to find people who look like them to forge a personal connection with. Culturally responsive educators must acknowledge the history of oppression and marginalization that has taken place in our schools, a history that has drastically undermined the experiences of African American and Latinx students.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this chapter is to share concrete practices that educators can begin to implement tomorrow without having to register for another professional development course or invest thousands of dollars on curriculum materials and new technology. What is most required of educators is a shift in mindset. This mindset shift forces educators to engage in what Muhammad Khalifa (2018) calls “critical self-reflection.” More broadly, it requires educators to reject the othering of students and families and be willing to problematize our systems and deeply interrogate what we do in our schools and why we do it. Historically in education, we engage in behavior and practices simply because “we have always done it that way.” When our results are not what we want them to be, rather than ask ourselves, *What could we have done differently?* we blame the unintended outcomes on our students (kid blaming) and their families. We consistently, year after year, decade after decade, do what we have always done and expect that, somehow the results will be different. We do not thoroughly examine the

effectiveness of our practices because doing so might reveal a need to change them. Changing our practices would force us out of our comfort zones and schools are nothing if not bastions of adult comfort. Comfort has always been the enemy to progress. A reason why schools have failed to respond to the needs of students en masse is because of the desire of many educators, teachers and principals alike to hold on to past practices and strategies that are outdated and ineffective.

EXAMINING MISCONCEPTIONS

Before launching into a discussion of how to operationalize cultural responsiveness, let us address a few misconceptions.

Misconception #1: “I Don’t Know How to Be Culturally Responsive”

Yes, you do. Every educator is a culturally responsive educator. The question is, as Ladson-Billings asks, whose culture are you responding to? Many educators are unwilling to and uncomfortable with responding to the needs of students for which they feel no cultural connection to or responsibility for. It is easier to feign ignorance, than to admit, I am uncomfortable teaching these students.

Misconception #2: “I Need a List of Strategies to Become a Culturally Responsive Educator”

No, you do not. Being a culturally responsive educator is not about strategies and behaviors. It is about what is in your heart and mind. Leaders and teachers who have a track record of success with African American, Latinx students, and other marginalized students do not point to a particular book, class, or Ted Talk for their awakening. They point to their passion, commitment, and dedication to all students. As a teacher, I had very little in common with my white students who lived in mansions and summered in the Hamptons. I did not, however, allow our dissimilar cultural

experiences to justify disconnecting from them as their teacher. It just meant I had to work harder to forge relationships with my students.

Misconception #3: “All of This Talk About Cultural Responsiveness Focuses Too Much on African American and Latinx Students”

And we should be! They are being failed by school systems that have subjugated and oppressed them. However, culturally responsive mindset shifts, and practical strategies are applicable to all marginalized groups. Find the most marginalized groups in your school and leverage some of these practices; you will be amazed at the impact they will have.

Misconception #4: “With All That I Have on My Plate, I Do Not Have Time to Learn the Culture of All the Students I Teach”

Find another job. If an African American teacher said that they could not effectively teach white students because they do not have time to learn white culture they would be dismissed immediately. Such a statement would be deemed educational treason, yet non-African American and Latinx leaders and teachers reflect this sentiment in both words and actions. Being a culturally responsive educator is so much more than knowing the latest hip hop songs, making TikTok videos, or understanding the latest slang. It takes commitment and dedication to your craft and a willingness to connect with students and their families.

CONCRETE PRACTICES FOR OPERATIONALIZING CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

The aim of this section is to demonstrate what culturally responsiveness looks like in a school. Here, I seek to provide concrete practices that educators can employ to become more culturally responsive. This list is not exhaustive. It is my

attempt to bridge the gap between the theoretical, that is, our intellectual understanding of the concept, and the practical, what it looks like in practice.

Culturally Responsive Practice #1: Shadow a Student

In education, we spend and unfortunately waste a lot of money on professional development. The field is rife with consultants, experts, trainers, and developers, many of whom have spent little if any time actually working in schools. Year after year, decade after decade we invest heaps of money on “professional learning,” attending conferences, participating in book talks, and more, yet this investment yields few, if any, substantive practice changes. I will save my diatribe about poor quality professional development and share a strategy that aspiring culturally responsive educators can employ tomorrow, for free: shadowing a student.

As a leader, shadowing a student was one of the most powerful professional learning experiences I have ever had. Before discussing its potency, let me define what I mean by shadowing a student. First, you must clear your schedule for the day. If you are principal or assistant principal, you want your team to behave as if you are out of the office (you are not available that day); if you are a teacher or staff member, you need to make sure your classes and other duties are covered for the day. Second, you must select a student. You can randomly choose a student, or if you are interested in observing the experiences of a particular type of student (i.e., African American, Latinx, Advanced Placement, English Language Learner, or diverse learners), select a student that will allow you to sufficiently observe those experiences. After clearing your day and selecting your student, follow that student the entire day, beginning with their first period class all the way through dismissal. Whether you choose to eat lunch in the student cafeteria is up to you. Trust me when I say that you will learn so much from this experience. Seeing the school from the students’ perspective is a powerful experience. The learning is rich and educative. I shadowed a student when I served as chief academic officer (CAO) of a network of charter high schools and here is just a snippet of what I learned:

- The day is excessively long; I was exhausted at the end of the school day.
- Overall, my students were well behaved.
- Out of seven academic classes, I noticed quality instruction in only two of them.
- Most of the classes I attended were boring.
- Engagement was low in all but two classes.
- As long as students were not disruptive, they were allowed to sit quietly and not engage in learning at all.
- Teachers needed support in lesson design and execution.
- Some teachers struggled with classroom management.
- The learning was disconnected from my student’s lived experiences.

The data I collected and the patterns that emerged from this shadow experience helped drive the professional development (PD) that we planned for teachers. The PD that we provided became more relevant to the teachers because we were not simply basing our PD focus on numbers from a spreadsheet. We were triangulating assessment data, grades, and what we observed from classroom visits, particularly these shadow days (the entire leadership team had to perform one). Our conversations about student performance and teacher needs were so much richer because they came from living, breathing experiences not simply observational snapshots or uncontextualized data.

Culturally Responsive Practice #2: Hire Teachers of Color

If you want to establish a more culturally responsive school you have to hire more teachers of color. Students need to see people who look like them teaching and leading. Research shows that African American students benefit from having African American teachers (Gershenson et al., 2017; Milner, 2006). These teachers are more likely to have high expectations of them, provide requisite support, recommend them for Honors and AP classes and are less likely to recommend them for suspension or expulsion. Similar research reveals that all students (yes, even white students) benefit from being taught by and attending schools led by people of

color. One of the best ways to combat long-held notions of African American and Latinx inferiority and racism is to surround children with living examples of excellence. Racism thrives in racial isolation. When people from diverse backgrounds converge and establish community with each other, it is difficult if not impossible to hold on to stereotypes and tropes. When we begin to normalize people of color in positions of authority and power in our schools, students are better equipped to reject racism and xenophobia. Yes, African Americans can be outstanding basketball players, but they can make great chemistry and English teachers too. Yes, Asians make great doctors, but they make great history teachers too.

If you are a principal, be mindful of surrendering your hiring responsibilities to teacher committees. Despite student needs, teachers are more likely to prefer and recommend candidates they have a personal and cultural connection with. They are more comfortable with candidates that look like them, speak like them, and that they share experiences with. Subconsciously, and despite what the job description may indicate, they seek candidates that they can be friends with.

Culturally Responsive Practice #3: Grow Your Own Staff

Schools with a commitment to cultural responsiveness do not make statements like “We are looking for African American and Latinx teachers, but they are not out there.” Yes, there are challenges to finding teacher candidates of color. Many of these challenges are a result of systemic barriers that we will not delve into here. We know that this is a problem, however, a potential solution to the problem of finding candidates of color is to grow your own. If you have staff members of color who are dynamic teacher assistants, school assistants, or security staff, encourage them to go into teaching. This is a long-term strategy that will certainly pay off. These staff members often have positive relationships with some of your most challenging students and families. They are often connected to the community and have the ability to serve as both school employee and community ambassador. Already a school employee? Check. Great with

kids? Check. Good with families? Check. Lives in and has deep connections to the community? Check. Sounds like this person would make a great teacher. Because of teacher shortages, many education programs have alternative certification pathways. Partner with your local colleges and universities. Host alternative certification classes in your school or district and grow your own staff. Everyone wins when you do this.

Culturally Responsive Practice #4: Empower Teachers and Staff of Color

Within schools that serve “diverse” communities there often exists a racialized hierarchy. Administrators are usually white, and the support staff, that is, disciplinarians, teacher assistants, lunchroom staff, and custodians are people of color. In predominantly white schools where there is an emerging African American population, often the security team is mostly, if not all, African American. One can easily see the problem with such a hierarchy and focusing on hiring teachers of color (see above) can disrupt such hierarchies. However, one way schools can be more culturally responsive institutions is to empower the voices of staff members who are just as much a part of the academic experience of students as administrators and teachers. Representatives of these support teams should be a part of the school leadership team and should be empowered to offer their expertise, and perspectives on how we can better serve the needs of all students. Support staff are often your front line when interacting with parents and often have relationships with some of your most challenging students. Amplify their voices. Just because they do not have a teaching license or a bachelor’s degree does not mean that they cannot offer an important perspective.

Culturally Responsive Practice #5: Engage in Community Walks

“What are y’all marching for bruh?” This question was posed to me by a member of my school community during our first community walk. His curiosity was sparked seeing

upward of forty teachers and staff members walking through the neighborhood one late summer morning. While he was unsure of the walk's purpose, we were clear it was to get to know the community. Whether we are comfortable admitting it or not, most people look at the African American and Latinx communities from a deficit perspective. Because of how we have been socialized and maybe even what we have seen, we enter predominantly African American communities fearful of being robbed, shot, or worse. What is not often acknowledged is that even in the poorest, most crime-ridden communities, there are tremendous assets and rich histories that must be seen and honored. When I was selected to serve as turnaround principal of the Sherman School of Excellence on Chicago's South Side, I knew that my greatest challenge would be assembling a team of teachers and staff who were not scared of the African American children and families we signed on to serve. Everything you heard about this particular neighborhood was negative. This community, like so many predominantly African American neighborhoods nationally, struggled with poverty, gangs, drugs, and dysfunctional schools. Despite this reality, there were also dedicated and committed community warriors who fought daily to build a better life not just for their children but for others as well. I needed my staff to meet some of these people and the institutions that they were a part of. I needed them to understand that there was brilliance in this community and that it was not the hopeless, downtrodden place that most people thought it was. Rather than invite these community representatives into our school, we stepped away from the comfort of our school building and visited with members of the community on their turf and what we discovered was remarkable. This neighborhood, despite what we had heard on the news, read in the newspaper, or seen on social media had valuable assets. A beautiful park, long-standing restaurants, community organizations dedicated to combating violence and poverty, mom-and-pop grocery stores, day care centers, and homeless and battered women's shelters all existed within this "hopeless" neighborhood. This became another

powerful learning experience for both our teachers and staff, regardless of color or years of experience. We learned that the community our students came from while challenging, was a community of fighters and survivors. And while much was needed to help transform the community, people were not sitting by passively waiting for Superman; they were taking an active role in reshaping their own lives. We learned there were resources in this community that we could leverage to help us do our jobs better. But most importantly, we learned that we were not the smartest people in the community and that there were institutions in the neighborhood that we could rely on—expertise we could request to better serve our students.

Culturally Responsive Practice #6: Prioritize Being in Classes

I have always thought that the best part of being a school leader is having full unadulterated access to the entire schoolhouse. You have a backstage pass to every classroom, gym, cafeteria, and office. As principal, I would start each day visiting every classroom for at least a few minutes. I enjoyed checking in with my teachers, staff and students, it was my daily routine. As a former high school teacher, I really wanted to get a feel for how elementary school classrooms operated. When I became CAO, I prioritized being in classrooms because I was engaging in organizational diagnosis. In short, classroom visits were a tremendous source of learning for me. Classrooms were also where the magic was happening. Culturally responsive educators understand that whether you are a principal, assistant principal, or department chair, you must prioritize being in classrooms not just to evaluate teachers. While that may be part of the job, your first priority is to learn what is happening in classrooms so that you have a better sense of the student experience and the ways you need to support your teachers moving forward. Teachers pay attention to what you pay attention to. It does not matter what you say, it really only matters what you do.

Culturally responsive educators prioritize spending time where students spend the majority of their time and that is in classrooms. The provision of feedback and coaching is a major responsibility of culturally responsive educators. Developing teacher capacity to craft and execute high quality lessons that enhance the academic experience of students is imperative. Deep instructional leadership work cannot happen in the office. It only happens when school leaders, principals in particular, prioritize being in classrooms and observing instruction.

Culturally Responsive Practice #7: Counsel Out Bad Teachers and Staff

Somewhere between 90% and 95% of teachers and staff want to do what is right by children. The other 5% to 10% are what I call “kid killers.” These are adults who need to find another profession. Because we prioritize adult comfort over student needs, we allow these individuals to continue to harm children. These are the adults who, no matter how much support you give, how much coaching and mentoring you invest in them, have made it clear that they have no intention of making any effort to improve their practices. They blame kids, take no accountability for their actions, and are unwilling to do what is necessary to support their students. They use colorless but racist language, long for the good old days, and suck all the positive energy out of the room. These people need to go. Being willing to counsel out bad teachers and staff requires two things: familiarity with your district’s collective bargaining agreement (we do not want to violate contractual rights) and courage.

Becoming a more culturally responsive educator requires more than simply a set of strategies, it requires a commitment to changing how we enact our roles and responsibilities. It requires a shift in mindset, it requires us to be willing to step outside of our comfort to forge deeper relationships with our students and our families. Consider the seven culturally relevant practices in this chapter—How might you implement them in your school tomorrow? What other culturally relevant practices would you like to incorporate into your current practices?

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

- All schools are culturally responsive, but not every culture that is represented in a school is appropriately responded to.
- Creating a Culture of C.A.R.E. requires adults to create educational spaces that acknowledge, respond to, and celebrate the diversity of students’ cultures in meaningful ways and offer full and equitable access to education for all students.
- Culturally responsive educators see cultural diversity as an asset and a way to build students’ cultural competence and awareness.
- Cultural responsiveness requires courage and the willingness to step outside one’s comfort zone to meet the needs of oft-marginalized students.
- All students benefit from culturally responsive spaces, not just African American and Latinx students.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to create culturally responsive educational spaces? How do you envision your students and families benefiting from a culturally responsive school?
2. How has your school been hostile to marginalized students? What are you currently doing to address hostility and repair the harm caused to students?
3. What might your families and students say about your school’s responsiveness to their needs if asked?
4. How do you ensure that students, particularly your most marginalized students have access to the fullness of the school experience?
5. What actions can you take tomorrow to create a more culturally responsive school environment?

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