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Moving Toward Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why did I choose early childhood as a career?
2. What has informed my curiosity about becoming a culturally responsive and sustaining teacher?
3. Who am I as a cultural being?
4. How comfortable am I with using data to understand my own behavior, children's responses, and overall engagement with children to inform my practices and beliefs?

When people think of culture, they generally think of visible aspects like race, ethnicity, food, language, art, and music. While these are certainly a part of culture, culture is so much more. Culture is a way of being. It is the way people see themselves; the values they hold dear; the way they engage with others; and the agreed-upon rules within their families, communities, social groups, and religious affiliations.

People may share overarching cultures and beliefs without sharing all aspects of their culture. This may show up in something as simple as how a holiday such as Christmas is celebrated within Christian communities and families. For example, one family might attend midnight Mass, while another begins cooking and cooks most of the night. In some families, gifts are opened on Christmas Eve; in others, Santa comes overnight and gifts are opened early on Christmas morning. Some families may serve tamales as part of their traditional Christmas meal;

others might have turkey and all the fixings. Still others celebrate with gifts for Little Christmas on January 6 instead of on December 25. Some Christian families do not celebrate Christmas at all, and many families who do not hold Christian beliefs celebrate some aspects of the holiday.

More deeply, culture influences the ways individuals communicate; how they interact; their humor; their views, values, behaviors; and even how they learn and solve problems. It is a part of their communities, but it is also a part of individual families. Everyone—including children, families, educators, even entire early learning settings—has a culture, a way of seeing the world that has been instilled in them by the circles in which they were raised and by their own experiences.

Although culturally responsive practices in education are often considered to be about other people—in particular, children and families—the real work for educators is building their capacity to understand the cultures that shape who *they* are.

Throughout this book, we encourage you to keep a journal of your reactions, thoughts that come up, or questions you have throughout your journey of becoming a culturally responsive and sustaining teacher.

What Is a Culturally Responsive Teacher?

A culturally responsive teacher centers the cultural identity of each child, supporting and sustaining their authentic self while encouraging them to see themselves and others as whole and worthy individuals exactly as they are. In this book, the primary cultural context of children and families considered is race and ethnicity. Although we discuss other categories of diversity, cultural aspects of race are prominent throughout each chapter.

Rather than shaping, correcting, or leading children to be more aligned with mainstream norms—that is, rather than encouraging and training children to assimilate and change themselves to fit an expectation imposed by a standard—the culturally responsive teacher works to recognize the child for who they are, to encourage and support that child in expressing themselves fully and feeling a sense of belonging in the program or classroom community.

A culturally responsive teacher values and acknowledges what each child knows before entering the learning environment. When a child demonstrates who they are or how they learn or what they like or how they think, the culturally responsive teacher respects and builds on that rather than trying to change it. As a result, the teacher sustains the child's culture.

The culturally responsive teacher also maintains high expectations for every child to be successful, to learn, grow, and develop to their fullest potential. Those expectations are never lowered, but they are flexible enough to make space for many different ways of expressing and achieving that potential.

Notice, for example, how Mr. Jackson not only provides a flexible way for a child to participate successfully in group meetings but also facilitates understanding among the child's peers:

Mr. Jackson's preschool class is sitting around the perimeter of the rug for meeting time. He is leading a conversation about a story the class read together. Most of the children are sitting comfortably with their legs crossed, some have their legs stretched out in front of them, and others hug their knees. One of the boys is curled up in a ball and rolling and rocking in his spot. "Mr. Jackson, why does James always get to roll around?" asks Sadie. Mr. Jackson replies, "Everyone has different ways of learning. James is able to listen better while he is moving. It is just how his brain works best. It is harder for James to concentrate on listening if he has to focus on keeping still."

Every step of the way, a culturally responsive teacher is supporting all of the children in seeing and appreciating each other as unique and nuanced individuals who can all achieve without compromising themselves. So often, and in many ways, children are required to give up aspects of their culture to fit in and assimilate into mainstream cultures, including in early learning programs. The culturally responsive approach embraces differences as neither good nor bad, right nor wrong, preferred nor undesired. This is the hallmark of a culturally responsive and culturally sustaining teacher. There is nothing unusual about difference, and there is nothing compromised in terms of expectations. Everyone is working toward similar goals in the ways that work best for them.

Personal Journeys of Knowing

Becoming a teacher who intentionally supports and sustains children's cultures is a journey that every educator must undertake. It is not a journey with an endpoint but a path of continual growth and discovery. It is not a matter of reading this or any other book, taking a course, or passing a test. It is something each educator embarks on to continuously evolve, grow, reflect, and change so they can respond effectively to the cultural needs of every child.

The journey to becoming a culturally responsive and sustaining teacher requires the deep reflective practice of learning about yourself—your cultures, history, traumas, biases, mistakes, talents, and beauty. Self-examination is critical and requires reflecting on everything you believe and the essence of who you are so that you can offer the children you work with the opportunity to be themselves fully and authentically. On this journey you also learn about the cultures, histories, passions, styles, interests, talents, and beauty of the children and their families to meet them where they are. Further, the journey requires becoming clear about the dynamics of power and bias, both conscious and unconscious, that play out in relationships, including in early learning settings. When teachers understand themselves, the children and families they work with, and the ways relational trust is built and challenged, they can meet each day open to learning and ready to teach in ways that most resonate with the children.

Embarking on your personal journey of knowing will not result in knowing everything about every culture represented among your group of children, but it will lead to opening your heart to seeing children, families, and colleagues more fully.

Your Own Culture

Often when educators think about cultural equity, they think about helping or supporting others. They think about closing educational gaps and making learning more accessible to those who have not historically been provided with that access. They may think about scaffolding learning so that those with fewer advantages can achieve. They might think about being open to other ways of being or of learning. These are some of the ways that teachers work to ensure that every child's needs are met—that their classrooms are equitable and fair.

Consider that all of these ways of approaching equity work position the teacher as one in possession of something, with learners in an “other,” lesser position. Culturally responsive teachers strive to eliminate “othering” children and families and position themselves alongside learners to best grow with them.

To do this effectively, culturally responsive teachers first examine themselves and uncover exactly what positionality they bring to their role in the classroom. This means embarking on the journey of discovering, noticing, and naming the cultural backgrounds and the cultural lens through which they see the world and bring to the learning environment.

According to the Center for American Progress (Nadeau 2022), the vast majority of the early childhood workforce are women (approximately 97 percent), and 38 percent of those are women of color. This means that a great many teachers bring a perspective to their classrooms that is rooted in White values and grounded in lived experiences of being female in a patriarchal society. Because this perspective is well aligned with the system of education in the United States—a system designed by the dominant culture and carried out mainly by women—it often feels very affirmed in teacher preparation programs and in state, district, school, or center rules and expectations. As such, many White teachers have little reason to think about their own cultural perspectives. Some White teachers may view culture as something that other people have, seeing themselves as “just mainstream” or “regular” or without a distinct cultural background. Others may conflate the idea of culture with heritage and ancestry rather than understand it to include the values and beliefs they themselves were raised with.

Examining your values and beliefs takes work, and it can be done in stages. A helpful first step is to determine the core values that drive you and define those values. The next step is to look closely at those values and what they mean to you and try to uncover where they come from. The values exercise on the next page walks you through this process.