



CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Excerpted from *Skills and Dispositions that Support Youth Success in School, Part 2: Strategies for Building Motivation, Engagement and 21st Century Skills*

Across Washington, public school students are becoming more culturally diverse. The diversity of teachers is not increasing at the same rate. 2012 statistics from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reveal that while 89% of Washington teachers identified as white (not Hispanic), only 59% of its students identified similarly.¹ This fact highlights just one aspect of the culture gap between staff and students in our schools, and underscores the need for cultural responsiveness work in order to meet the needs of a diverse student body. It cannot be assumed that teachers or youth workers (of any race or cultural background) have the awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills to appropriately serve all young people. Developing these competencies must be a transparent, ongoing and intentional part of continuous improvement.

Cultural Responsiveness is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.² One's cultural identity lies at the intersection of one's national origin, religion, language, LGBTQ status, socio-economic class, age, gender identity, race, ethnicity, and physical/developmental ability. This set of factors contributes to the complexity of individuals and their relationships.

Discrimination based on cultural factors can create barriers to education. Students are sometimes targeted for engaging in behaviors that are cultural in origin. This may contribute to a conception of success in education that is narrowly culturally specific. Cultural discrimination can also present barriers to communication. Without a high level of cultural responsiveness, a large and growing proportion of our youth will remain poorly served by our schools and organizations. Ensuring that every school, district, classroom and youth program is providing a culturally responsive and relevant experience for young people is essential if we are to adapt to the changing realities of our students and communities. It is also essential for preparing all students with the 21st century skills they will need to work in increasingly diverse settings in the future.

HOW TO APPROACH CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS WORK

In the effort to "be" culturally responsive, school districts and youth development organizations often provide trainings or seek certifications. Despite this tendency, cultural responsiveness is not an end to be achieved; rather it is an ongoing process of self-reflection and behavior change at the individual and institutional level. Cultural responsiveness is the process of understanding one's own culture, values and biases, then seeking knowledge and awareness of other cultures, values and biases.

In organizations that are working toward cultural responsiveness, staff members learn skills that seek to minimize the negative impact of cultural biases. They then begin the work of changing the systems that perpetuate cultural discrimination. At an organizational level, cultural responsiveness can mean that organizational staff and leaders actively seek to change policies and procedures that support the institutionalized and structural discrimination that is prevalent in our communities.

¹ State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) (2012)

² Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs (1989)



CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH HIGH LEVELS OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS: ³	CHARACTERISTICS OF SETTINGS WITH HIGH LEVELS OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuously practice active self-reflection and ongoing education and engagement with others to uncover cultural values, biases and world views • Value cultural differences that may affect how youth and adults express themselves • Practice the “platinum rule” in treating others how they wish to be treated • Proactively respond to bullying, discrimination and bias between students and/or staff • Are skilled in ways to engage in cultural discussions and reflection • Work toward institutional transformation – policy and procedure changes that mitigate the effects of institutional discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create inclusive opportunities for youth and staff to participate • Establish safe environments for youth to explore and express their own cultures and identities • Develop culturally relevant and sensitive curriculum, materials and tasks⁴ • Do not assume or require that students acculturate or assimilate to the dominant cultural practices (i.e. allow Muslim girls to remain covered during P.E.; address gender non-conforming youth by the pronoun they prefer)

HOW CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS CAN HELP CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

Cultural discrimination includes the “aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and whiteness, and devalue, stereotype, and label people of color [or any non-dominant cultural groups] as ‘other’, different, less than, or render them invisible.”⁵ Though often unintentional, unconscious and unrecognized by people in power (including teachers, youth development professionals and administrators), cultural discrimination can result when individuals and institutions are not actively and intentionally focused on their own cultural responsiveness and the cultural relevancy of their programs. Research suggests that teachers with higher levels of cultural responsiveness produce better results in students.⁶

By actively reflecting on beliefs and assumptions, school and organizational leaders can create environments that are inviting and supportive to all youth and staff. Through training and program development, staff can reflect on their own beliefs, and provide the space for youth to self-reflect and voice their experiences. This process of self-reflection creates the foundation for mutual understanding and respect. Through the sharing and experiencing of other cultures, staff, parents and youth can breakdown the pejorative assumptions about cultures different from their own.⁷

CONSIDERATIONS

Cultural responsiveness work is critical to developing many of the skills and dispositions that support youth success in school. This work is not about surface-level modifications in language or attempts to create a “colorblind” environment, nor one that ignores other aspects of human cultural diversity and experience. It requires a commitment to deep individual and group work meant to transform some of our most basic assumptions about the nature, potential, experiences and world

³ Hollins (2012)

⁴ School’s Out Washington (2010)

⁵ Adams, Bell & Griffin (1997), p.162

⁶ Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2005)

⁷ School’s Out Washington (2010)



views of groups and individuals. It asks that we explore uncomfortable conversations within ourselves and with others in order to push the boundaries of norms that are so deeply ingrained that we often have difficulty identifying them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center)** - <http://www.tolerance.org/>
Teaching Tolerance has provided well-developed and research-based cultural education for 21 years (SPLC 41 years). Teaching Tolerance has hundreds of activities that address many topics including gender, race, bullying, immigration and migrant workers. The programs range from very specific to broad topics.
- **Cultures Connecting** - <http://www.culturesconnecting.com/index.html>
Caprice D. Hollins, Psy.D and Ilsa Govan, M.A. provide workshops, both custom and framed. Based out of Renton WA, Cultures Connecting provides well-developed and culturally responsive training on the self-reflection processes of understanding cultural discrimination and responsiveness.
- **Non-Profit Anti-Racism Coalition** - <http://www.nparcseattle.org/>
NPARC acts as a forum to: understand and address the intersection of race, racism and other forms of oppression; share information, resources and best practices; and provide training for members.

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