



CREATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM

AN E-WORKBOOK AS ONE OF THE STORY CROSSROADS
MEMBERSHIP QUARTERLY BENEFITS

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CREATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM



INTRODUCTION

Students Need Mirrors and Windows

When working with teachers, I often show a video I made of my colleague, storyteller, and former school librarian Anne Shimojima. In it, Anne shares that while growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, whenever someone in her family spotted a person of Asian descent on TV, they would shout to the rest of the family, "Asian on TV!" Everyone would come running into the living room to witness this rare sight.

Anne recounts the first time, in her mid-thirties, that she saw two Asian actors on stage. She experienced the strangest—and most profound—sensation. She says, "I realized that because they were there" (she points to the imagined stage), "I was here. In my seat, I was here. I existed. I had never realized until then how utterly invisible I had felt. When you look out into popular culture and no one looks like you, it's like looking into the mirror of life and finding no reflection."

Imagine not seeing yourself in the world around you! Children deserve to know they are real, that they and people like them exist. Students who do feel this perform at their highest levels. Too many believe they must leave their home cultures at the door when they enter school, making it feel like a parallel universe.

Similarly, a Latina friend attended a school that ignored her ethnic heritage. Each day felt like stepping onto an alien planet. She never heard her language, enjoyed her music, studied her people's accomplishments, or saw her family's food on the Basic Food Groups chart.

In 1995, the NAEYC stated, "We cannot know all the consequences of cultural discontinuity for students' development. We do know that children thrive when the school program respects and integrates their home languages and cultures."

As teachers and working artists, we must provide students with mirrors—to see themselves, feel visible, and know they count—and windows—to understand, appreciate, and value others.

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WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT IN THIS E-WORKBOOK?

WHAT IS A JOURNEY LIKE TOWARDS CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM?

How Can We Create a More Inclusive Curriculum?

In 2014, Dr. Carmen Ayala invited me to work with teachers in Plainfield, Illinois, on aligning their curricula across grades. The teachers had already mapped out learning objectives, showing how each grade's content built on the previous one.

Why Does Cultural Relevance Matter in the Classroom?

My role was to ensure that the curriculum included cultural content, making students feel seen and valued. I also collaborated with teachers from other districts, working with various Subject Area Committees to make their curricula more inclusive. I wish I could have that time with each of you.

What Will You Find in This E-Workbook?

This e-workbook expands on a chapter I contributed to *Restoring the Soul of Education: Equity Closes the Achievement Gap*. It offers a framework for creating culturally relevant curricula, with examples across subjects to inspire your own teaching.

How Can We Recognize and Address Barriers to Learning?

As Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards note, adapting curricula to students' home cultures is essential for their development. Recognizing that some students may feel excluded can help you avoid taking resistance personally and motivate you to build trust with them.

How Can Educators and Artists Work Together for Change?

I encourage you to collaborate with other educators and artists. Viewing your subjects through the eyes of diverse students will help you invest the necessary time, research, and sensitivity to create a truly inclusive curriculum. You'll learn a lot about yourself—and have fun!

WRITE YOUR GOALS FOR THIS E-WORKBOOK IN REGARDS TO
CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM:

CHAPTER #1 – WHAT IS CULTURE? WHAT IS RACE?

When we meet other people, one of the first things we naturally notice is their appearance.

However, when you consider yourself—the person you are—what makes you uniquely you, what else comes to mind besides your looks?

What makes you uniquely you?

Your height, build, hair, skin, eyes, gestures, and so forth are visible and may or may not identify you as part of a specific racial or ethnic group. However, most of who you are is not immediately visible. Many of the diverse and less obvious personal traits that make you unique arise from the culture(s) in which you grew up or currently live.

Cultural groups are like individual people. While we can easily observe visible aspects of a culture, such as dress, holidays, and artistic expressions, much of what defines a culture lies beneath the surface. These less obvious elements include the cultural values, beliefs, and approaches to life that are not as easily seen or understood. We refer to this as the Cultural Iceberg (see image on next page).

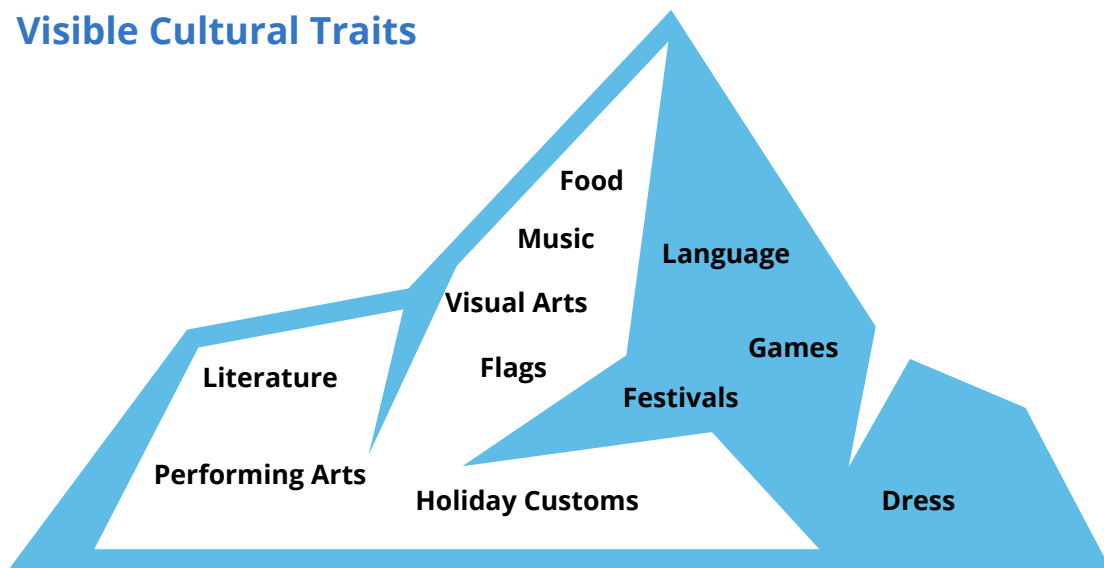
Culture serves as a shared design for living. It's the "this is how we do things here" that a group communicates, both explicitly and implicitly. Beyond race and ethnicity, there are many other designs for living—such as gender, generation, religion, physical abilities, education, and income levels. However, for the purposes of this workbook, I will primarily focus on the diversity dimensions of ethnicity and nationality.

In addition to culture, the term 'race' frequently comes up. For this e-workbook, I consider race a social construct. However, because many people, as well as institutions/government entities like the census, use it as an identifier, I include it alongside ethnicity.



CULTURAL ICEBERG

Visible Cultural Traits



Less Visible Cultural Traits

A dark blue iceberg shape representing less visible cultural traits. The traits are listed inside the shape:

- Nature of Friendship
- Notions of Beauty
- Notions of Modesty
- Values
- Religious Beliefs
- Importance of Space
- Norms
- Body Language
- Views of Raising Children
- Learning Styles
- Concept of Fairness
- Attitudes towards Age
- Approaches to Problem Solving
- Notions of Cleanliness
- Gender Roles
- Expectations
- Importance of Time
- Assumptions
- Leadership Styles
- Notions of 'Self'
- Attitudes towards Social Status
- Thought Processes
- Perceptions
- Etiquette
- Rules

EXERCISE: WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE?

Now it's your turn to create a list of what makes you unique as you reflect on your culture, ethnicity, and race. You may refer to the Cultural Iceberg image from the previous page for inspiration, if you'd like. Feel free to make your list as short or as long as you prefer.



CHAPTER #2 – YOUR PERSONAL CULTURAL LENS

One of the more challenging aspects of creating culturally relevant curricula is the introspective work you must undertake.

Cultural competency isn't just about adding cultural references to your lesson plans; it's also about understanding your personal cultural lens.

Recognizing that your approach is just one of many is essential for respecting your students and enabling them to benefit from your teaching. We don't easily learn from people who fail to see and respect us.

REFLECTING ON YOUR CULTURAL LENS

Reflect on the following questions. If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

- **What racial, ethnic, or national group(s) have you been part of or influenced by?**
- **What are some of the group's favorite and proudest achievements?**
- **Consider the below-the-waterline attributes in the cultural iceberg graphic and reflect on your group's designs for living. For example, did your group emphasize cooperation or competition? How did they express affection or disapproval? What lessons were you taught about handling money or making a living?**
- **How are you similar to and different from others in your group(s)?**
- **What do you wish others would understand about your community? How could they show that they value you?**

EXERCISE: CULTURAL VALUES

Whether you identify with a specific racial group or ethnicity, it may be helpful to explore a continuum of values you experienced as a child. For each continuum, mark "M" to indicate where you think your mother (or any other significant guardian) would fall, "F" for your father (or any other significant guardian), and "Me" for where you would place yourself on the continuum now.

Time is strict & controlled	←→	Time is fluid & spontaneous
Change is constant	←→	Tradition & continuity
Individuality most important	←→	The needs of the group first
Privacy honored	←→	Openness
Private ownership	←→	Group property
Informal	←→	Formal
Competition	←→	Cooperation
Equality	←→	Hierarchy
Think and plan short term	←→	Think and plan long term
Work most important	←→	Leisure balances work
Task-oriented	←→	People-oriented
Direct communication style	←→	Indirect communication
Action	←→	Planning

REFLECTING ON RESULTS OF CULTURAL VALUES

How are you similar to or different from the people who raised you?
What cultural values might you be more likely to misunderstand or judge?

INCREASING YOUR COMFORT & EFFECTIVENESS

Assumptions about other people and groups swirl around us like the air we breathe.

You are not to blame for the biases you have absorbed. However, it is crucial to become aware of these preferences now, as this awareness will help you better understand the ethnicities you are less familiar or comfortable with. By creating a plan to increase your knowledge and connection to these groups, you can boost your comfort level and, consequently, your positive impact when working with students from different cultures.



REFLECTING ON UNFAMILIAR CULTURES

Reflect on the following questions. If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

What culture(s) do I know the least about or have less experience with?

My plan for learning more about these cultures in respectful ways:

CHAPTER #3 – VALUING, NOT JUST TOLERATING DIFFERENCES

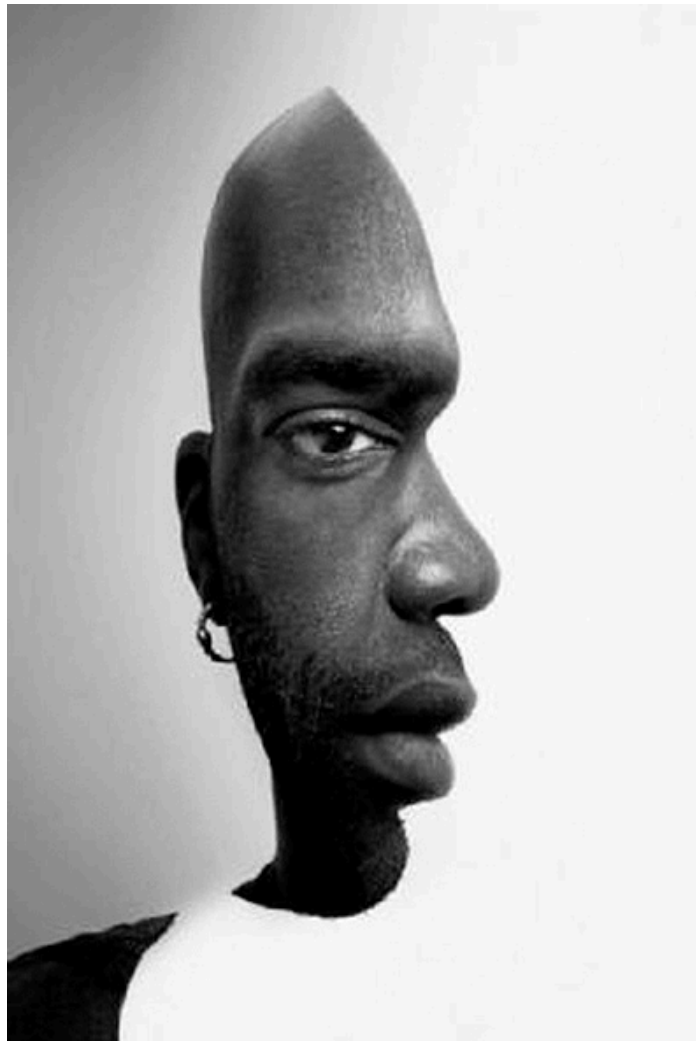
Anthropologist Wade Davis stated, “The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.”

Every culture seeks to make sense of this complex world and helps its people navigate life by teaching them how to view time, privacy, etiquette, gender roles, and more. As a result, every culture is unique.

Unique, but not necessarily better. Any group, not just the majority culture, can be guilty of ethnocentrism—the belief that “our culture is the right and best way to view and act in the world.” Valuing other people’s ways of doing things requires thought and conscious effort.

WHAT DO YOU SEE...

Can you see these faces from both perspectives—frontal and profile?



**Double-Face
by
Fernando Cezan**

WHAT DO YOU SEE THIS TIME...

Can you see the older woman? The younger woman?



The "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" ambiguous figure, also known as the "Boring Figure," was published by the cartoonist William Ely Hill in 1915 in *Puck*, an American humor magazine.

Feel how it takes real mental work to make yourself see a different perspective and how you don't see the other image until you see it.

EXERCISE: REFLECTING ON BIAS & PERSPECTIVE

The following five questions encourage you to reflect on your personal growth and perspective. If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

1. Which groups were considered superior to your group? Why?

2. Which groups were considered inferior to your group? Why?

3. When did you come to value a different way of seeing and doing things than how you were raised? Share a moment.

4. What made it possible for you to shift your perspective?

5. How can you use this awareness to keep an open mind in the future?

CHAPTER #4 – FOUR COMPONENTS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULA

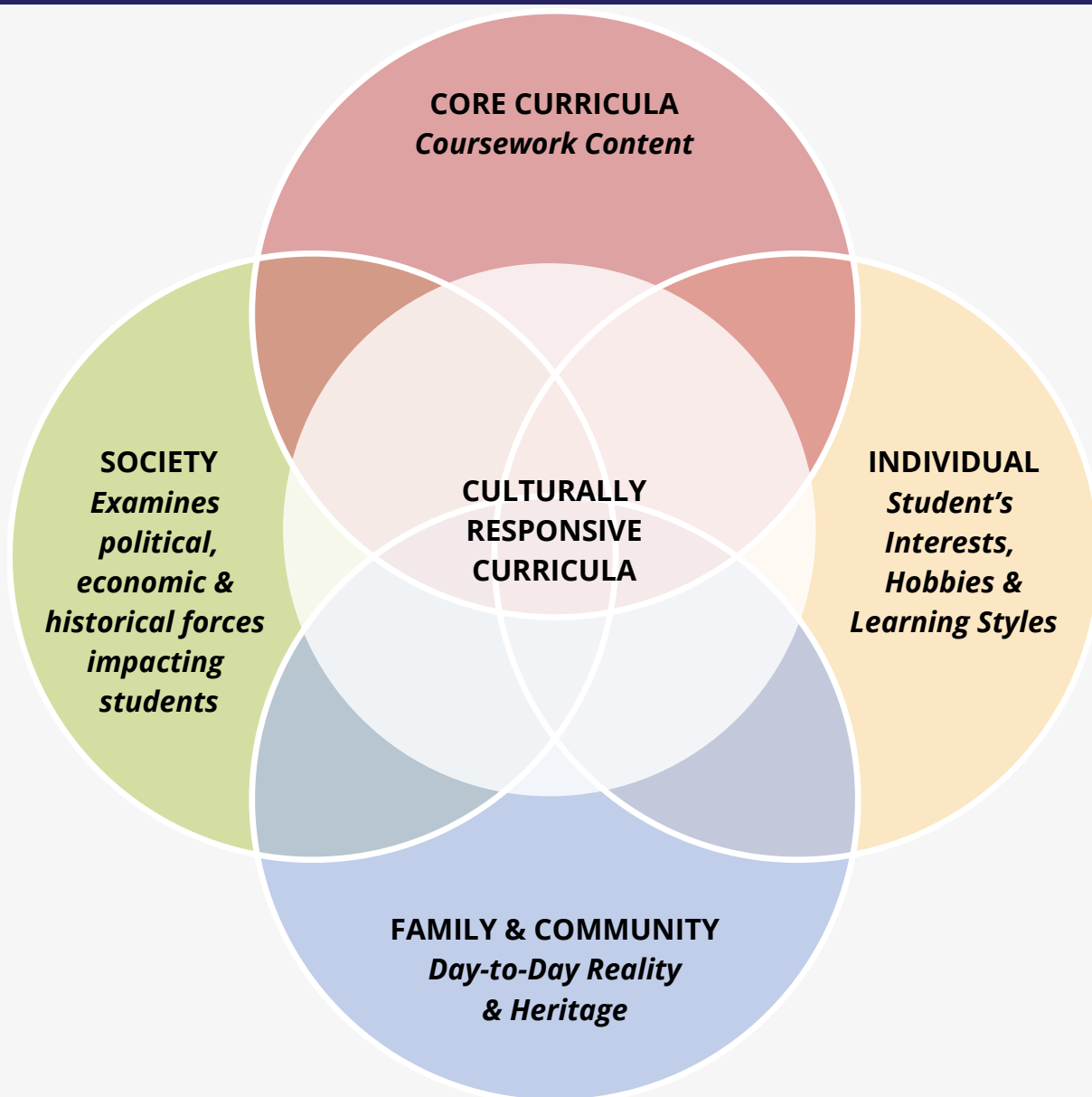
By adopting a more open cultural perspective, we can work toward creating a more inclusive classroom environment. Developing culturally responsive curricula involves four key components:

- 1.Core Curricula**
- 2.Individual**
- 3.Family & Community**
- 4.Society**

We aim to increase our time teaching in the area where the four components intersect.



THE GOAL OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULA



Curriculum content is developed by subject matter experts from schools across the district (SAC). The Curriculum Coordinating Committee (CCC) ensures that coursework is aligned both horizontally and vertically within the district.

Is the subject matter taught in a way that helps students develop real-world skills and understand its relevance?

Does the subject matter reflect students' backgrounds? Are teachers encouraged to examine their own cultural lens to approach the subject matter from different perspectives?

Are teachers given the resources and time to learn about each student's interests and learning styles?

The goal of a culturally responsive curriculum is for every student to confidently say, "Yes! This subject relates to me, my family, and my world."

CHAPTER #5 – FIRST COMPONENT: CORE CURRICULA

First, the CORE CURRICULUM—the subject matter for which teachers and story artists are responsible—serves as the foundation.

Culturally responsive teaching does not mean replacing or merely adding to the basic curriculum; rather, it focuses on making the content meaningful and engaging. When subject matter experts design curricula that are aligned both vertically and horizontally within the school district, students are better equipped to engage with the next three components.

CORE CURRICULA ***Coursework Content***



CHAPTER #6 – SECOND COMPONENT: INDIVIDUAL

The second component, FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL, emphasizes making instruction responsive to each student. Lessons are most effective when they connect to a student's interests, hobbies, and personal learning styles.

When discussing any ethnic or racial culture, it's important to acknowledge that shared history, geography, and language can create common tendencies within a group. However, while we recognize these similarities, we must also see students as both part of and distinct from their cultural communities.

Think about how different you might be from a sibling or cousin, even if you share the same ethnic or racial background. Students, too, are shaped by but not defined solely by their home cultures. Honoring each student's individuality is essential to truly embracing the diversity within every cultural group.

INDIVIDUAL *Student's Interests, Hobbies & Learning Style*



EXAMPLES: PERSONALIZING LEARNING

If you teach math to elementary students, you can make numbers more personal by asking them to name and measure:

- I am ____ years old.
- I am in ____ grade.
- I have had ____ broken bones.
- I am ____ feet ____ inches tall.
- I can lift ____ pounds.
- I have ____ brothers and ____ sisters.
- I have ____ pets.

Other examples could include:

- A middle school student who loves monsters might be asked to create a map illustrating the land and sea monsters from different countries' mythologies and oral traditions.
- A high school student passionate about football might be asked to predict successful field goal attempts based on the trajectory of the kick or analyze whether two-point conversions are always advantageous.

If a student loves horses, you could develop a lesson in your subject that ____.

If a student is into stamp collecting, you might design a lesson in your subject that ____.

You can't fault a teacher who responds with, "That sounds great, but I have 20 (30, 40, 50) students. How can I create examples for every interest they might have?" This is where departmental or grade-level cooperation comes in. By understanding the broad interests and hobbies relevant to students' grade levels—such as sports, dinosaurs, scrapbooking, types of video games, and more—teachers can share the responsibility of creating individualized examples for their subjects.

Think about the things you were passionate about as a child. How could your teachers have made school more exciting and engaging by incorporating your interests?

REFLECTING ON YOUR EXAMPLES

**Reflect on the examples of how you can personalize learning for your students.
If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.**

If you have five minutes before the end of class, establish a simple fill-in-the-blank ritual to engage with each student daily, or take turns hearing from different sections of the room—even if it's just for one sentence.

Ask students to complete sentence stems such as:

- "My favorite movie is..."
- "My favorite sport is..."
- "I love the game..."
- "A world problem I'd like to solve is..."
- "What stood out for me in what we learned today is..."
- Others: _____

Take note of students' responses to gain insight into their interests. Parents and family members can also be valuable sources for learning about students' interests outside the classroom.

Additionally, using a variety of approaches can effectively engage all your students. Incorporate different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, reading), communication styles (direct or indirect, systematic or spirited, big picture or detailed), action styles (task or relationship-oriented), and personality styles (introvert or extrovert).



AVOIDING STEREOTYPES IN LEARNING STYLES

Sometimes, well-meaning educators attempt to engage Asian American students by describing them as “independent, solo-oriented, visual readers,” or African American students as “gregarious, group-oriented, kinesthetic learners.”

While these generalizations aim to be inclusive, they can ultimately lead to re-stereotyping. Though there may be common tendencies within cultural groups regarding learning or collaboration, it's important to recognize that there are always exceptions. You might be teaching students who don't fit these typical patterns.



REFLECTING ON STEREOTYPES

**Reflect on how you work to avoid stereotypes.
If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.**

EXERCISE: LEARNING STYLES ASSESSMENT

INDIVIDUAL

The following self-assessment explores your adaptability with different learning styles. If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

Kinesthetic or experiential learners may grasp math concepts, such as calculating the diameter of a circle, more effectively by rolling a hula hoop across the playground or by jumping through addition and subtraction problems on a hopscotch grid.

Write Your Ideas for Kinesthetic Learners:

Visual learners might be asked to draw the dimensions of a fenced-in field to maximize crop yield.

Write Your Ideas for Visual Learners:

Auditory learners often retain information better when it's presented with rhythm, rhyme, or in a call-and-response format.

Write Your Ideas for Auditory Learners:

When considering the **diversity of physical and intellectual abilities, language, religion, geography, and other factors**, it's clear that no single method works for teaching any ethnic group. The key is to consistently vary learning, communication, action, and personality styles so that all students can connect with the subject matter.

Examples of when I have used different learning styles:

Examples of when I have used different communication styles with students:

Ways I mix task-oriented or relationship-oriented assignments:

I engage introverted students by:

I engage extroverted students by:

I have the following lesson plans where I could adapt the style of my presentation:

CHAPTER #7 – THIRD COMPONENT: FAMILY & COMMUNITY

The third component, FAMILY & COMMUNITY, provides students with opportunities to see reflections of their home and family cultures within the school. Culture serves as a shared blueprint for living, offering students a set of guidelines for how to navigate the world. These are the "this is how we do things here" messages that students absorb and internalize as they grow.

In the past, the mental health field often viewed individuals as isolated units, focusing solely on the internal psyche.

Then, family therapy emerged, challenging this notion by asserting, "Human behavior cannot be understood outside the family context. People develop their identities based on the roles they are assigned and the expectations placed on them by their families."

In this e-workbook, we want to take it a step further by stating, "Human behavior cannot be fully understood without considering a person's cultural context."

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ***Day-to-Day Reality & Heritage***



CULTURAL STRESS RESPONSES

In the groundbreaking 1982 book *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, therapists highlighted significant cultural differences in how various ethnic communities handled stress. They explored how individuals from different backgrounds responded to challenging situations, revealing distinct coping mechanisms.

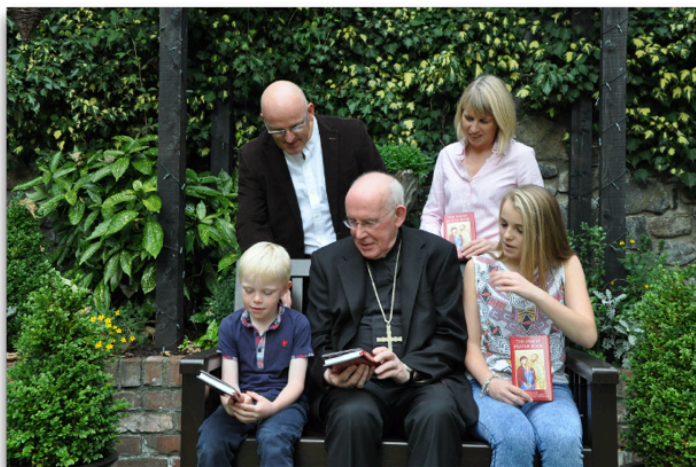


For example, their studies found that individuals identifying as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants often managed stress through a more stoic form of isolation. The motto "Keep a stiff upper lip" encapsulated their approach to dealing with difficulties.

Many Jewish families found solace in sharing their experiences. They would ask, "What are the primary causes of our stress? What possible remedies might we consider?"



When feeling pressure, many Italian families would immediately cook a large meal and gather everyone together.



For many Irish Catholic clients, addressing their problems often involved speaking with a priest, praying, and “offering up” their troubles.

West Indies participants, on the other hand, chose consulting the elders for advice.



The majority of Norwegian participants noted that “fresh air and exercise” could solve just about any problem.

TREAT PEOPLE AS PART OF THEIR GROUPS & AS INDIVIDUALS

Cultural differences can be fascinating and even surprising, but they come with a caveat. In our effort to be inclusive, we risk reinforcing stereotypes by using a single label to describe an entire group.

A few facts or brief interactions may lead us to believe we understand a culture, but this oversimplification misses its complexity.

Cultures are always evolving, with values that can be inconsistent and influenced by various factors. Understanding any culture—whether from the inside or as an observer—can be challenging.

As educators, we must recognize that students arrive with their own cultural scripts, shaped by how they eat, sleep, dress, and solve problems. They carry these understandings into our classrooms, and part of respecting them is acknowledging and connecting with what they already know. Their home cultures satisfy their deep need for self-identity and historical continuity.

The U.S. concept of the "Melting Pot" often implies that everyone should conform to the dominant culture, making it the "norm" by which others are measured. This approach can create feelings of inferiority in those who don't easily "melt," while ignoring the fact that people maintain their home cultures long after immigration, removal, or capture.

While focusing excessively on culture can lead to division, we should instead aim to celebrate and learn from our students' cultures. By doing so, we reduce ethnocentrism, helping students value their own identities while recognizing that their ways of doing things are just one approach, preparing them for a flexible and open-minded life in our global society.

REFLECTING ON DIFFERENT CULTURES IN CLASS

**Reflect on the different cultures represented with your students.
How can we respect and value the diverse cultures students bring
while encouraging openness to other perspectives?
If you need more space, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.**



Students' awareness of their ethnicity varies based on factors like age, family history in the U.S., neighborhood, community involvement, and connections to their country of origin, including political, religious, and familial ties, as well as their education and socioeconomic status.

Some students may not identify with a specific ethnicity due to diverse backgrounds. In one K-12 "ethnic introductions" activity, three teachers discovered a shared German heritage, despite their age differences. They found common ground in the value of frugality, sparking laughter as they recalled their families' creative reuse of household items. Even with intermarriage, values like frugality may persist, even if the cultural label fades.

Our ethnic and national backgrounds often go unnoticed until pointed out by others. The stereotype of the "ugly American" reminds us that our customs aren't always the norm. When reviewing the cultural continuums in Chapter 2, consider where your students might fall.

Rather than labeling behaviors by ethnicity, it's more important to allow multiple cultural expressions in the classroom. For example, you might say, "Let's try Jose's approach today" or "Let's relax the time limits for this assignment." Emphasizing that "In many of your families, not making eye contact shows respect. For now, let's practice making eye contact when I ask you a question" encourages understanding.

Incorporating diverse cultural ways doesn't mean abandoning standards. It means recognizing multiple paths to high standards and explaining the process: "Sometimes we do things my way, sometimes yours, and sometimes we create a new way together—and here's why."

STUDENTS NEED TO SEE THEMSELVES

One exercise I enjoy with teachers involves challenging them to find accomplished women of color in their fields—scientists, mathematicians, historians—whom they’ve never heard of.

With just two minutes and a phone, they discover countless accomplished women. This activity demonstrates the importance of providing students with images and stories of people who look like them and succeed in various fields. You don't need expensive posters to do this.

Am I providing mirrors so children can see people who look like them daily? How could I provide more mirrors?

While it’s often easier to integrate students’ cultures in history or sociology classes, any subject can be made culturally relevant. For example, in math, students could investigate:

- What did things cost when your parents and grandparents were growing up?
- If your family lived in a different country, what form of money did they use?
- How have inflation rates and currency conversion rates changed from your parents’ generation to today?

Other ideas for family and community in math classes:

If you teach physical education or health, encourage students to discuss:

- What games or sports did/does your family play? Can you teach us one of them?
- How does your family take care of you when you’re sick?
- What health remedies are common in your family? How have they evolved over time?

Other ideas for reflecting family and community in PE and health classes:



If you teach English or literature, be sure to include folktales from your students' ancestral countries of origin.

When students hear a story they've encountered at home, you'll see their posture straighten, their eyes widen, and smiles of recognition appear. Additionally, give students time to share personal stories.

During one of my school residencies, a third-grader shared how her grandfather came from Mexico each year to pick cotton. Encouraged to speak in images, she vividly described how her grandfather worked 12-hour days, cutting his hands and fingers on the dried bristles. "He watched the white of the cotton turn red from his blood," she said.

I don't need to know everything about the lives of migrant workers or all the cultures in my classroom (for example, 43 languages are spoken at my local high school!). What's important is creating space for children to share their own stories—stories about making tortillas, going to the mosque on Friday afternoons, or the unique customs they cherish. Hearing and sharing these stories helps bridge the divide many children feel between their school and home lives. It can help them feel whole, as one hyphenated-American friend put it when her culture was finally integrated into her school experience: "I no longer felt like I was straddling two worlds. Each patch in the quilt of my life was unique, but I felt made of one cloth."

Provide students with sentence starters such as:

- "A big area of debate in my family right now is..."
- "One of my favorite holidays is..."
- "My mother's favorite thing about being (ethnic group) is..."

Other ideas for family and community reflections in my classes:





As children hear stories from different cultures, they begin to realize that others in their schools and communities are both individuals and members of their own unique cultural groups, just as they are.

Having felt seen and valued for their own culture, they are now able to recognize and appreciate the differences in others. They learn to embrace the “both/and” concept of cultures—understanding that while we share similarities, we also celebrate our differences.

You can connect students' personal interests with cultural exploration by assigning projects such as an essay about the favorite computer games of children from various countries or having students create a photo essay on the diverse ways children around the world travel to school—by motorcycle, boat, or horse, for example.

Other essay topics that could offer cultural insights include:

In science class, students could research Ramadan and the lunar calendar, or calculate the nutritional content of certain South Asian foods.

Other scientific ideas to explore cultural differences:

As you introduce new cultures, be mindful that students may need guidance in understanding and valuing differences. If demeaning comments arise when discussing new cultures, help students recognize why these comments may be uncomfortable.

Consider asking:

- Did that name (idea, custom, or language) sound unfamiliar to you?
- Have you encountered it before?
- New things can sometimes seem strange, but laughing at people's names, customs, or languages can hurt their feelings. It's okay to ask questions if something is unfamiliar. You might say, “I've never heard that before.” If words like “weird,” “funny,” “wrong,” or “strange” come up, I will encourage you to rephrase your question in a respectful manner.

CHAPTER #8 – FOURTH COMPONENT: SOCIETY

Finally, by incorporating the fourth component, SOCIETY, into our classrooms, we acknowledge the broader world in which students live. Subjects like science and math not only teach established theories and principles but also provide opportunities to explore how societies are structured and function.

Students need to see their communities confronting and overcoming challenges throughout history. From a young age, they begin to recognize power imbalances between societal insiders and outsiders. By addressing these realities in age-appropriate ways, we validate students' lived experiences and build trust with them and their families.

SOCIETY
***Examines
political,
economic &
historical forces
impacting
students***



Students live in the real world and bring that reality into the classroom. Hate, bigotry, and discrimination fill daily headlines, and your classroom can serve as a space for reflection and analysis, preparing students to better confront these challenges now and in the future.

Students value authenticity and often emphasize the importance of "keeping it real." If they perceive that you lack knowledge or interest in understanding their world, they may lose respect for you and feel marginalized. Studying broader societal contexts provides a clearer understanding of how diverse groups navigate their lives and fosters respect for their lived experiences.

In one history class, an African American student, frustrated by being asked to write about "these white dudes who owned slaves," asked if he could write about the Black Panthers instead. The teacher, unfamiliar with the Black Panthers' contributions to society, declined, stating, "This is a history class. I don't want you writing about any sports team."

The student's frustration was palpable. His behavior—striking his desk—needed to be addressed, but his feelings were valid. He had spent years in a school system that failed to acknowledge his life experiences or the issues his community faced.

Imagine if the teacher had paused and asked, "Could you tell me about the Black Panthers and your interest in them?" It would have opened a dialogue and affirmed the student's perspective.

By examining the broader political, economic, and historical forces shaping our society, we teach students to become active citizens. As educator Sonia Nieto said, "Multicultural education is not about holidays and heroes and diversity dinners; it's about people's lives and what's fair and unfair. Critical pedagogy teaches kids to question...while developing literacy skills. This is a core value of a democratic society. When we encourage children to speak up, to ask critical questions, they develop a sense of urgency and the belief that they can make a difference in the world."

REFLECTING ON DIFFERENT CULTURES IN CLASS

Reflect on the hate and bigotry you witness in the world.

How do you bring hope and kindness to students in a world where hate and bigotry are prevalent?

If necessary, feel free to continue on another sheet of paper.

Even young children can learn to recognize inappropriate behavior.

When a reading teacher overheard second graders making derogatory jokes about a Lakota-Sioux student during a discussion of “Cowboy and Indian” movies, she initiated a broader class conversation. She explained, “Many movies misrepresent Indigenous people. We don’t want to offend anyone by spreading false information. Whenever I hear people making untrue statements about First Nations or other groups, I’ll ask them to stop. I’d like your help. You can say, ‘I don’t like stereotypes.’ Can you do that for me?”

After the discussion, the teacher highlighted books featuring diverse historical and contemporary Indigenous people and invited storytellers to share tales from various cultures. As suggested in Chapter 6, educators can ensure students regularly see diverse images of Indigenous people, not just during special heritage months.

Other reading and storytelling examples that reflect broader societal realities:

To explore socio-political and economic contexts in math class, ask students to create a story about a family of four living on two minimum wage salaries in their town. Have them consider the family’s shelter, food, utilities, and daycare costs. What happens when expenses exceed income? What are the emotional and physical impacts of economic stress, especially when parents work multiple jobs? How could societal changes provide real opportunities for this family?

Never ask a student to represent their group. If you conduct this exercise, be sensitive to the economic realities some students may face. Never ask, “Tell us what it’s like.” No one should be expected to speak for their race, ethnicity, or economic status.

Other math examples that address societal realities:

In health or science classes, students can research community leaders fighting for better air and water quality in their neighborhoods. They can investigate how local governments have chosen to place toxic dumps in specific communities and how the community has organized to combat pollution.

Other health and science examples that address societal realities:

In sociology class, organize a bus tour of various neighborhoods to explore parks and playgrounds. Ask students, “Why do some parks get significantly more funding and maintenance than others? How are decisions about recreational spaces made in our city? What can regular citizens do to make amenities in our town more equitable?”

Other sociology examples that address societal realities:

Cultural competency goes beyond simply incorporating cultural and societal references into your lessons.

Just as you reflected on your personal cultural lens at the start of this workbook, it's equally important to examine your societal lens. Ask yourself:

- What do I know about my students' communities—their history, challenges, and triumphs?
- How connected am I to these communities, and how can I foster more authentic, respectful relationships?
- In what ways do race and class impact the creation, teaching, and learning of my subject?



CONCLUSION

Teaching what we may not have personally experienced or confronting how our beloved subject matter might have contributed to our nation's history of exclusion is no easy task. However, the effort is invaluable. The stories we share with children help them shift from a self-centered awareness to a broader, collective consciousness.

A culturally relevant curriculum empowers students by showing them that they are both unique and part of something larger. By fostering both cultural and personal identity, children feel connected to their past, their present community, and a future we can build together.

You'll know you've succeeded when you see that spark in students' eyes that says, "This subject is about me, my family, and my world! I love learning!"



ABOUT OUR AUTHOR

Sue O'Halloran, author of *Avoiding Cross-Cultural Mistakes at Home and Abroad* and *Compelling Stories, Compelling Causes: Nonprofit Marketing Success*, has been performing original stories nationally and internationally since 1969. She has led thousands of seminars in corporate and nonprofit settings.

Sue has produced and performed in award-winning multicultural productions, including *White, Black, and Brown: Tribes & Bridges* at the Steppenwolf Theatre and *More Alike Than Not: Stories of Three Americans—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim*. In 2012, she produced and directed the first online story festival, reaching 52 countries. Her Racebridges website, featuring 260 video stories by professional storytellers, attracted over half a million visitors annually.

Sue has received the Chicago Spirit of Peace Award and the National Storytelling Network's Leadership and Service and Circle of Excellence Awards. Her work has been featured in PBS's *People and Causes*, ABC *Nightline*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. The *Chicago Reader* praised her storytelling, saying, "O'Halloran has mastered the Irish art of telling stories that are funny and heart-wrenching at the same time."

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Resources, Recommended Readings & Credits

Resources & Recommended Readings

Ayala, Carmen I., Bea Young, & Michael L. Kilgore (2019). *Restoring the Soul of Education: Equity Closes the Achievement Gap*. Writers of the Round Table Press, Buffalo Grove, IL.

O'Halloran, Susan (2016). *The Smooth Traveler: Avoiding Cross-Cultural Mistakes at Home and Abroad*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, North Charleston, SC.

Credits for Cultural Stress Responses, pages 21-22

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CatholicBishops.ie - p. 22

India.com - p. 22