

Creating a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Classroom

Ensuring that all students see their culture reflected in the curriculum and classroom materials is crucial.

By [Roisleen Todd](#)

February 26, 2021



David Grossman / Alamy

As educators, we are constantly striving to engage our students in their learning. We know that [students are more engaged academically and have improved social and emotional outcomes](#) when they see and hear themselves reflected in the classroom environment and instruction. So, we make our lessons into games, we build positive-incentive systems, and we let our students take the lead in classroom procedures. While these help, they are not enough. Too often, we miss asking ourselves a more critical question: Is this what my students need to be learning? *Should* my students be engaged in this content?

Many popular, tried-and-true curricula [lack diversity in their representation of students, families, and communities](#) with varied and authentic identities as compared with [the students sitting in our classrooms](#). When we use the same curricula that we have for years without questioning the extent to which they reflect our specific students' identities, we're not only failing to maximally engage our students in content—we are actively teaching our students that their identities are less valuable than others. Thus, in order to provide all students with equitable learning experiences, we must intentionally critique and, when necessary, reject using curricula in which our students' identities are not represented. The representation within the pedagogy that we put in front of our students holds power even when we are unaware of it.

This process of reflection and critique is known as culturally relevant teaching (CRT). In her book [Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice](#), educational researcher Geneva Gay defines CRT 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 them.” In CRT, educators intentionally design learning experiences and environments that are reflective of the multiple aspects of the students' identities, which may include (but are not limited to) race, ethnicity, chosen gender, ability status, linguistic profile, family structure, housing status, and cultural identity.

3 QUESTIONS TO ASK TO CREATE CULTURALLY RELEVANT, ENGAGING, AND EMPOWERING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

1. Who are our students? A culturally relevant classroom is not possible until an educator knows their students and begins to understand the multiple aspects of their identities that they bring

with them into the classroom. Educators learn who their students are through robust and caring relationships but also can intentionally plan to learn more about their students, especially at the beginning of the year. Educators can do this by maintaining consistent communication with families, administering student-interest surveys, participating in school and community events, building an asset map of the communities in which students live, and planning instructional activities driven by student voice and experiences.

2. Who do our students see in our classrooms? Educators are constantly learning who their students are, and, as such, they must constantly reflect upon their classroom environment and instruction. Teachers can maintain an ever-evolving map or a list of unique aspects of students' identities and use this as a way to analyze and shape the classroom environment. The identities and the values attached to those identities within our classroom environment influence the ways in which our students develop their understandings about the world and about themselves—even when educators don't explicitly call attention to them. Educators can reflect on their classrooms by considering questions such as the following:

- Which aspects of your students' identities are visibly present and honored through your classroom environment (books, instructional materials, photographs)? Which are missing?
- Are representations of your students' identities authentic and varied? Are there materials that explicitly honor diverse identities as well as texts in which characters with diverse identities are represented without these being central to the plot?

- Are there identities your students do not share that are overrepresented in the classroom?
- Who and what are your students learning to value in your classroom?
- Is language used in the classroom inclusive of all learners' identities? Are there biases being normalized through classroom language (e.g., “families” versus “caregivers”)?

Additional guiding questions for educators seeking to implement CRT in their practice can be found [here](#).

3. How can educators move further toward CRT? Once educators have developed an understanding of who is in their classroom and how their current environment and pedagogy reflect students, they can intentionally act to build a culturally relevant classroom within which their students feel valued and empowered.

Educators can do the following:

- Choose curricula and texts that showcase characters with whom their students share identities and represent these characters in authentic and varied ways.
- Remove curricula and instructional materials that disproportionately represent identities not shared by students.
- Remove curricula and instructional materials that reinforce stereotypes about any identity groups.
- Ask students and families what feels important to learn before planning instruction.

- Plan lessons that amplify student voice and that invite students to pull from their experiences, cultural communities, and histories as valid sources of information.
- Consistently invite family and community members to deliver instruction in the classroom to position communities as valid funds of knowledge.

If our goal as educators is to provide high-quality, equitable learning experiences for all students, we must ensure that the pedagogy we're using in our classrooms is reflective of the unique students sitting in front of us. We cannot continue to use traditional curricula and pedagogy without critically questioning the extent to which they represent, honor, and empower our students.

When we fail to ask these questions, when we fail to create classroom environments in which our students feel seen and heard, we are not only failing to engage them as learners but actively standing in the way of our students' development of a positive, empowering, and confident sense of self-efficacy. Thus, we must embrace culturally relevant teaching. We must engage in the process of constant reflection, of constant learning, in order to ensure that every child, in every classroom, feels seen, heard, and valued for being exactly as they are.