

Focus on Equity



A quarterly research brief to maximize student success

About this brief

This quarterly research brief brings equity research to practice through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative, statewide equity work, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for California's most vulnerable youth. The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for teachers and administrators to use during grade- or department-level collaborative conversations.

This issue of *Focus on Equity* explores how educators can use a culturally and linguistically responsive framework to improve student learning and increase equity and global competencies in themselves and their students.



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Produced by the San Diego County Office of Education Equity department
For questions or comments, contact Dr. Jaguanana (Jag) Lathan
Executive Director, Equity at jaguanana.lathan@sdcoe.net

San Diego County Office of Education
6401 Linda Vista Road, San Diego, CA 92111 | 858-292-3500



There is, in fact, no teaching without learning.

– Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Courage*, p. 31



Focus

When students are in classrooms with teachers who engage in culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices, they demonstrate increased levels of student engagement, motivation, resiliency, and academic achievement.^[1] While all instruction is inherently culturally and linguistically responsive to at least one culture (generally, the dominant culture), an inclusive, research-based culturally and linguistically responsive lens or framework helps educators—particularly white educators who make up more than 80% of the current and projected teacher workforce—to intentionally leverage each student’s cultural and linguistic strengths.^[2]

The San Diego County Office of Education defines educational equity as students having access, opportunities, and supports to thrive in school. This requires a systemic approach that flexibly responds to the needs of students, when they need it, and how they need it. Social or cultural factors should not predict whether or not students are prepared for college and career. To this end, equity-conscious educators seek to recognize, understand, and critique their own intersecting and evolving cultural beliefs and behaviors, specifically relating to language, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religion, within a racially hierarchical education system. Broadly speaking, cultural identity is the way we see the world. A culture is a group of people defined by their

shared history, values, and patterns of behavior. Similarly, global competencies refers to the ability to understand cross-cultural issues, social justice, and diversity. Hammond (2018) compares the levels of culture—surface, shallow, and deep—to a tree and part of a larger ecosystem. She explains that **surface culture** (concrete displays of culture, such as dress) and **shallow culture** (norms, such as concepts of time) may change over time. Conversely, **deep culture** (including tacit knowledge, learning styles, and unconscious assumptions) is rooted in our formative experiences and shapes how each of us makes sense of the world.^[3]

In their 2018 book, *Culturally Proficient Inclusive Schools*, Lindsey and her co-authors explain that cultural proficiency learning and leading is “anchored in the belief that, in order to be effective in a cross-cultural setting, a person must learn one’s own assumptions, beliefs, and values about people and cultures that are different from him or herself.”^[4] A foundational first step for educators to become more culturally proficient is to explore their own multi-faceted identities, including language, race, class, age, and gender. In the 2018 book, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, DiAngelo underscores the need for sustained self-reflection, learning, relationship-building, and anti-racist practice to identify and interrupt racist patterns.^[5] When teachers understand their own cultures and become students of their students’ cultures, they become more “constantly aware of the critical role that cultural identity and cultural perceptions play in the dynamics of the classroom environment.”^[6] This process builds mutual respect, rapport, and trust, also called relational trust, which manifests itself in rigorous and engaging instruction, collaborative seating structures, celebrated student work displayed on the walls, and culturally diverse classroom libraries.

This discussion is grounded in the seminal work of two of the most widely recognized researchers on this topic, Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings. Both Gay and Ladson-Billings emphasize the principal role of culture and language to learning and academic achievement. Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching “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.”^[7] Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”^[8]

In her 2013 book, *Multiplication is for White People*, Delpit provides insight as to how teachers can begin to make learning more relevant and rigorous when she expands on the term *warm demanders*, originally coined by Kleinfeld (1975) to describe highly effective teachers in Native American Alaskan communities.^[9] Delpit explains that “warm demanders expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them

reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment.”

^[10] Warm demanders look in the mirror at their own cultural values and beliefs, and they become dedicated students of their students’ cultures, values, beliefs, behaviors, and learning styles. For example, warm demanders understand the cultural continuum between individualistic and collectivist worldviews, and they know that many of our culturally and linguistically diverse students learn best in collaborative, interactive learning environments. For example, culturally and linguistically responsive teachers leverage the communal competencies their Native American students bring to the classroom, and students see their deep cultures, histories, and communities reflected in the curriculum. Warm demanders understand the idea of race is an entirely social construct, and they make connections to the larger sociopolitical factors that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities.

As Duncan-Andrade describes in *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* (2008), these warm demander teachers “are excited about what they teach. They move among groups of students, checking for understanding, listening to students, responding, pushing students to question.” ^[11] Warm demander teachers plan lessons collaboratively, help teachers change their beliefs about what they can teach well and what their students can learn well.” ^[12]

To begin to become the warm demander that this approach necessitates, a synthesis of the research on culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices supports the need to focus on two broad capacities: relationships and mastery.

Focus on Relationships

Warm demander teachers build on students’ backgrounds. They take the time to learn about the interests, aptitudes, and academic needs of each student and encourage students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices. For example, teachers might survey students about high-interest topics to integrate into lessons and affirm students’ languages and cultures through thoughtful text selection. Similarly, teachers might make subtle, purposeful shifts to deconstruct the gender dichotomy in their classrooms. For example, a teacher might say, “Good morning, everyone” rather than, “Good morning, boys and girls.” In her 2018 book, *Schooltalk*, Pollack provides an in-depth discussion on the transformative role of language in instructional practice. ^[13] A culturally and linguistically responsive instructional lens provides the data for teachers to intentionally design learning where students explore their own intersecting identities and local communities and make relevant connections across home, school, community, local, national, and global contexts. Building on students’ backgrounds is key to student engagement—and culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum and instruction should reflect this.

Focus on Mastery

According to research conducted at the National Center for Urban School Transformation, teachers in high-performing urban schools engage in rigorous instructional planning. They ensure that their students achieve a deep level of understanding related to specific academic concepts. In their 2019 book *Teaching Practices from America’s Best Urban Schools*, Johnson, Uline, and Perez point out that students feel valued and capable when their teachers explicitly define the objective they want their students to learn. ^[14] These teachers ask, “What do my students need to see, do, hear, touch, and experience in order to understand and master this important concept?” Likewise, they design bell-to-bell lessons that focus on higher-level thinking processes and language, including comparing, evaluating, and synthesizing, to deepen students’ understanding. Students in these classrooms know what they will learn and why it is important; they are actively engaged in relevant analysis and dynamic discussions.



Implications

To move toward a more racially just school system, recent research highlights the need for far greater numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers. As a profession, we need to recruit, support, and mentor future teachers from historically marginalized communities. ^[15] Furthermore, all teachers need the time and space to learn about and design culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. Teachers need to engage in ongoing professional learning that focuses on an inside-out approach with meaningful opportunities for personal reflection. Likewise, educators benefit from experiences that build a deep understanding of the historical and sociopolitical issues of power and privilege that have shaped the learning experiences of African American, Asian, Latinx, LGBTQ, and Native American communities. For example, when more teachers learn about the American Indian boarding school era (late 1800s to 1970s), they better understand and respond more effectively to intergenerational trauma. Through building an equity lens, educators can better design policies and practices (such as creating master schedules that ensure access to the arts and rigorous coursework) to address inequitable practices and appropriately respond to the needs of students.

**Julie Goldman, Ed.D., Director,
Equity Curriculum and Instruction**



Questions

1. What do we know and understand about cultural proficiency?
2. What do we need to learn about cultural proficiency to better serve our students? What do we need to learn about our students and their families and community?
3. What are the barriers to becoming a more culturally proficient system?
4. What systems and structures do we need to support our culturally and linguistically diverse students?
5. Who needs to be at the table to discuss the shift toward cultural proficiency?

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