

# Capacity Building Series

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SECRETARIAT SPECIAL EDITION # 35

## Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Towards Equity and Inclusivity in Ontario Schools

### Some definitions ...

**Diversity** – The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization or society.

**Equity** – A condition or state of fair, inclusive and respectful treatment of all people.

**Inclusive Education** – Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students.

*(Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009)*

Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) provides a framework for building an inclusive education system. The strategy identifies ways to remove discriminatory biases and barriers to student achievement and well-being that relate to ethnicity and race, faith, family structure and socio-economic status as well as to sexual orientation, ability and mental health. To support implementation, Policy Program Memorandum No. 119, released by the ministry in the spring of 2013, requires all Ontario school boards to develop an equity and inclusive education policy. The goal is nothing less than the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all students in all Ontario schools.

This monograph emphasizes how crucial it is to acknowledge our students' multiple social identities and how they intersect with the world. It is designed to spark conversation and support educators as they seek to give life to equity strategies and policies. Its intent is to deepen understanding of teaching practices that engage student populations with a full range of differences in learning background, strengths, needs and interests.

### Culture is about ways of knowing ...

Culture goes much deeper than typical understandings of ethnicity, race and/or faith. It encompasses broad notions of similarity and difference and it is reflected in our students' multiple social identities and their ways of knowing and of being in the world. In order to ensure that all students feel safe, welcomed and accepted, and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning, schools and classrooms must be responsive to culture.

Student Achievement Division

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## Culture is a resource for learning ...

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) introduced the term "Culturally Relevant Teaching" to describe teaching that integrates a student's background knowledge and prior home and community experiences into the curriculum and the teaching and learning experiences that take place in the classroom. There are three central tenets underpinning this pedagogy: (1) holding high expectations for all students, (2) assisting students in the development of cultural competence and (3) guiding students to develop a critical cultural consciousness. In this student-centred framework, the uniqueness of each student is not just acknowledged, but nurtured.

Other theorists, among them Gay (2000) and Villegas and Lucas (2002), use the terms "Culturally Responsive Teaching" or "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy" to describe teaching that recognizes all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure and social or cultural identity. Theorists and practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy more than acknowledge the "cultural uniqueness" of each student; they intentionally nurture it in order to create and facilitate effective conditions for learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). They see student diversity in terms of student strengths; they orient to it as presenting opportunities for enhancing learning rather than as challenges and/or deficits of the student or particular community.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not about "cultural celebrations," nor is it aligned with traditional ideas around multiculturalism. It involves careful acknowledgement, respect and an understanding of difference and its complexities.

Theorists write about three dimensions which comprise culturally responsive pedagogy:

- 1. Institutional**
- 2. Personal**
- 3. Instructional**

The **institutional dimension** refers to the administration and leadership of school systems, including the values developed and reflected in school board policies and practices. It highlights the need to critically examine the formal processes of schooling which may reproduce particular patterns of marginalization. Educators need to consider which patterns need to be intentionally interrupted and changed.

The **personal dimension** encompasses the mindset of culturally responsive educators and the practices they engage in, in order to support the development of all students. Not only are culturally responsive educators self-aware, but they also have a deep knowledge of their students and how they learn best.

The **instructional dimension** includes knowing learners well and considering the classroom practices which lead to a culturally responsive classroom.

All three dimensions are foundational to the establishment of an inclusive school culture (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2006).

## Making a better space for everyone ...

"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone."

(Dei et al., 2000)

## Where we are in Ontario ...

To support culturally responsive pedagogy, school leaders promote reflection, face complex issues head on, find ways to honour community and support authentic collaboration among all stakeholders.

Here are some inquiry questions for school leaders:

*What does a school look like, sound like and feel like when we promote reflection, honour the community and support authentic collaboration among staff, students and parents?*

*What does a classroom look like, sound like and feel like when it is inclusive and when instruction is responsive to the full range of student diversity?*

*What further information would be helpful in considering cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness in our school?*

*How do we work with our communities to help everyone appreciate the importance of culturally responsive teaching?*

*What is the impact on our students when we do not acknowledge the complexity of culture and difference?*

### Leaders take on the role of catalyst ...

*"School leadership acts as a catalyst without which other good things are quite unlikely to happen."*

*(Leithwood et al., 2004)*

Across the province, it is strongly believed, and well supported by research, that there is a strong correlation between school leadership and student achievement. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), leadership is second only to teaching with regard to impact on student outcomes.

Although principals are not as directly involved with students as classroom teachers are in terms of day-to-day instruction and learning, they do make a difference. Further, as outlined in Ontario's *Leadership Framework*, it is the responsibility of school and system leaders to be responsive to the increasingly diverse nature of Ontario communities by ensuring that schools are inclusive and welcoming of diversity, as reflected in both school climate and the classroom learning environment.

The institutional dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy underscores the significance of education policy and the way schooling is organized. At the school level, it means paying attention to school budget priorities, the relationship between parents and the community and how curriculum and instruction impact the conditions for student learning and student experience. While Ontario is highly regarded internationally as a leader in improving student achievement and supporting student well-being, there is still much work ahead.

# The Mindset of Culturally Responsive Educators

Culturally responsive teachers share a particular set of dispositions and skills – a mindset that enables them to work creatively and effectively to support all students in diverse settings. In the next few pages these characteristics, as outlined by Villegas and Lucas, are identified.

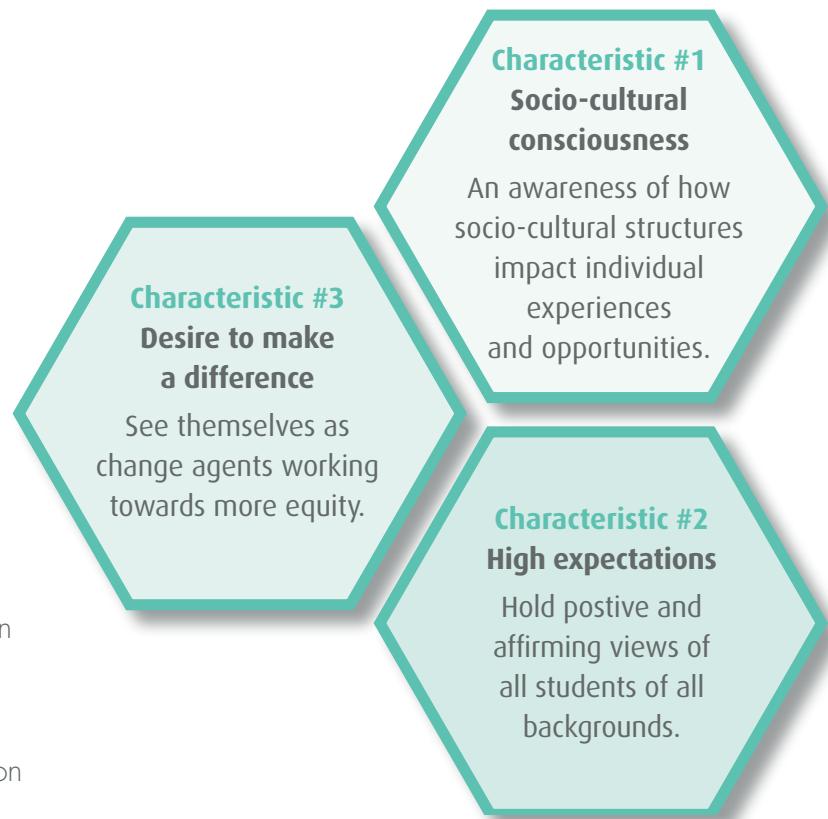
## Characteristic #1 Socio-cultural consciousness

Canadian research continues to affirm that “membership in the white middle-class group affords individuals within this group certain privileges in society,” while those outside of this group experience challenges (Dei, et al., 2000). This is because society is influenced by the norms established by the dominant group (Gay, 2002; Dei et al., 2000). Culturally responsive educators understand their position in our present social, historical and political context; through questioning their own attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, they come to terms with forms of discrimination which can affect the experiences of students and families in multiple ways.

Self-reflection is foundational to the examination and identification of one’s own biases. This critical process includes understanding the issues related to the distribution of power and privilege and the relationship of power dynamics to one’s own social experience. Self-reflection also allows us to recognize how our own social identity is constructed and to think about how social identities are positioned and shaped by society. This is what it means to possess socio-cultural consciousness.

## Characteristic #2 High expectations

The perceptions we hold of students’ abilities have a significant impact on student achievement and well-being (Ladson-Billings 1994, 2001, 2011). However, historically, some social identities – particularly those linked with disabilities or



intersecting with race and low socio-economic status – have been deemed as contributing to notions of “at-risk-ness” in students (Dei, 1997; Portelli, Vibert & Shields, 2007).

Culturally responsive educators hold positive and affirming views of their students and their ability to learn and achieve academic success. They demonstrate genuine respect for students and their families as well as a strong belief in their potential. They consider the social identities of students as assets rather than as deficits or limitations.

#### **Characteristic #4 Constructivist approach**

Understand that learners construct their own knowledge.

#### **Characteristic #6 Culturally responsive teaching practices**

Design and build instruction on students' prior knowledge in order to stretch students in their thinking and learning.

#### **Characteristic #5 Deep knowledge of their students**

Know about the lives of students and their families; know how students learn best and where they are in their learning.

#### **Characteristic #4 Constructivist approach**

Culturally responsive educators build upon the varied lived experiences of all students in order to bring the curriculum to life. Through this approach, they integrate locally situated learning into daily instruction and learning processes.

Constructivist approaches promote inquiry-based learning – they support students asking questions and creating new knowledge based on their natural curiosity about their own experiences. Knowledge building is reciprocal because students play an active role in crafting and developing learning experiences for themselves and their peers. This results in making learning relevant and accessible for all students in the classroom as they are able to see themselves in the curriculum.

#### **Characteristic #5 Deep knowledge of their students**

It is important for educators to recognize that parents, caregivers and families know their children best (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). Therefore, in an effort to know their students, culturally responsive educators work to build strong relationships with their students' families. They promote mutual respect between home and school and embrace a collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

Deep knowledge, not just of content, but of one's students as individual learners, enables educators to integrate lived experiences into the daily learning of the classroom. Drawing on students' experiences provides teachers with the opportunity to represent their knowledge in the curriculum so it is meaningful and students see themselves reflected in the learning that takes place in the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

#### **Characteristic #3 Desire to make a difference**

Educators who are culturally responsive see equitable and inclusive education as fundamental to supporting high levels of student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Gay, 2004). Consistent patterns of underachievement found in groups, such as those students with special education needs or those with students from low socio-economic circumstances, need to be seen as created by deeply problematic systemic and institutional barriers. Culturally responsive educators are committed to being agents of social change, ultimately working to remove barriers and creating conditions for learning that are beneficial for all students (Ministry of Education, 2009).

## Characteristic #6 Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

A wealth of research is available both nationally and internationally on culturally responsive instructional strategies. At the core of these strategies is a) holding high expectations for learning while b) recognizing and honouring the strengths that a student's lived experiences and/or home culture bring to the learning environment of the classroom. As Villegas and Lucas observe about culturally responsive educators, "they use what they know about their students to give them access to their learning" (2002, p. 27). Learning experiences are designed to be relevant and authentic, enabling students to see themselves in the daily learning of the classroom. This sends a message to students and the community that student, parent/community knowledge and experiences not only have value, but that they are also important to the learning in school.

(Toulouse, 2013)

**The following are some inquiry questions for culturally responsive educators:**

*What questions might we reflect upon to examine our own biases towards diversity and cultural responsiveness?*

*How would we start a staff discussion on moving towards cultural responsiveness in a more intentional way?*

*How might we integrate specific life experiences of our students into daily instruction and learning processes?*

## Effective instruction matters!

The quality of the instruction and the expertise of the teacher considerably outweigh the challenging circumstances that some of our students bring to the classroom (Collins, 2006; Willis & Harris, 2000). Effective instruction also ensures academic rigour which is essential in a culturally responsive framework; high expectations need to be coupled with the appropriate supports to scaffold new learning (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Some strategies to implement a culturally responsive framework are suggested below. They are adapted from the work of Jeff Kugler and Nicole West-Burns (2010):

- Expand upon what is considered as the "curriculum" – recognizing both the informal and the subtle ways in which the curriculum defines what is and what is not valued in our schools and society.
- Use inquiry-based approaches to student learning to develop engaged and self-directed learners. Support students in making decisions about their learning that integrate who they are and what they already know with their home and community experiences.

- Use a variety of resources, including community partners, to ensure the learning environment and pedagogical materials used are accessible to all learners and that the lives of students and the community are reflected in the daily workings of the classroom. Resources, materials and books should present both local and global perspectives.
- See the curriculum as flexible and adaptive to the lived experiences of students so they see themselves and their lives reflected in daily learning opportunities.
- Know and build upon students' prior knowledge, interests, strengths and learning styles and ensure they are foundational to the learning experiences in the classroom and the school.
- Ensure that learning engages a broad range of learners so that varied perspectives, learning styles and sources of knowledge are explored.
- Differentiate instruction and provide a wide range of methods and opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning, ensuring both academic rigour and a variety of resources that are accessible to all learners.
- Work to ensure that the socio-cultural consciousness of students is developed through curricular approaches, emphasizing inclusive and accepting education, to inform critical examination and action regarding social justice issues.

Here are some questions to provoke thinking about what a more culturally responsive curriculum might look like:

*How do we define relevant and authentic learning opportunities in the context of our school?*

*How might we support students in making decisions about their learning that integrate who they are and what they already know with their home and community experiences?*

*How can we lessen dominant perspectives in our curriculum so that contributions from different backgrounds can be better understood and integrated into learning?*

### **Take an asset-based approach ...**

*"The knowledge children bring to school, derived from personal and cultural experiences, is central to their learning. To overlook this resource is to deny children access to the knowledge construction process."*

*(Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 25)*

### **Preparing to teach all our students ...**

Those engaged in the work of culturally responsive pedagogy are "committed to collective, not just merely individual empowerment" such that the impact of this approach to teaching is directed towards making change for all members of society (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). As educators, we must be prepared to teach all students while also being committed to preparing students for the reality of a diverse Canadian and global society. The journey towards equity and inclusivity in Ontario schools seeks to empower everyone in the learning environment. Such an

approach validates and affirms the cultural capital that our students bring to the classroom each and every day. This journey also brings us closer to reaching our goal in Ontario – providing relevant and authentic learning opportunities every day for every student in every classroom.

Here are some ways to think about your next steps in the journey towards equity:

*What will our school conversation focus on?*

*How might a process of inquiry among staff further this conversation?*

*If we implement specific strategies to support a culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning, how will we assess the impact on student learning and achievement?*

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- Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide for School and System Leaders* <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/discipline.html>
- Jointly developed with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, this guide is intended to assist school and system leaders in fostering a bias-free approach to progressive discipline, prevention and early intervention practices to support positive behaviour among all students.**