

Cultural competence is the key to thriving in culturally diverse classrooms and schools - and it can be learned, practiced, and institutionalized to better serve diverse students, their families, and their communities. Cultural competence is the ability to successfully teach students who come from a culture or cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, understanding certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching and culturally responsive teaching.

Cultural competence doesn't occur as a result of a single day of training, or reading a book, or taking a course. Educators become culturally competent over time, but researchers suggest some places to start.

Main Issues

We all have a culture that shapes us personally and professionally. According to NEA's C.A.R.E. Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps, "Culture is the sum total of experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and interests represented by the diversity of students and adults in our schools. While culture is often defined and perceived by schools as the celebration of important people, religions, traditions, and holidays, as well as an appreciation of the customs of different groups, it is also more than that. Culture is as much, or as little, as the everyday experiences, people, events, smells, sounds, and habits of behavior that characterize students' and educators' lives. Culture shapes a person's sense of who he or she is and where he or she fits in the family, community, and society."

Understanding our culture is important so that we understand how we interact with individuals from cultures that are different from ours. This understanding helps us see our students and their families more clearly, and shape policies and practice in ways that will help our students to succeed.

There are five basic cultural competence skill areas. They apply to individual educators as well as the schools they work in and the educational system as a whole. Growth in one area tends to support growth in another (Adapted from Diller and Moule, *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*, Thomson Wadsworth 2005):

- **Valuing Diversity.** Accepting and respecting differences—different cultural backgrounds and customs, different ways of communicating, and different traditions and values.
- **Being Culturally Self-Aware.** Culture—the sum total of an individual's experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and interests—shapes educators' sense of who they are and where they fit in their family, school, community, and society.
- **Dynamics of Difference.** Knowing what can go wrong in cross-cultural communication and how to respond to these situations.
- **Knowledge of Students' Culture.** Educators must have some base knowledge of their students' culture so that student behaviors can be understood in their proper cultural context.
- **Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge and Adapting to Diversity.** Culturally competent educators, and the institutions they work in, can take a step further by institutionalizing cultural knowledge so they can adapt to diversity and better serve diverse populations.

Strategies

Culturally responsive teaching is how instructional staff (and schools) demonstrate—or implement—their cultural competence. Geneva Gaye, in her essential text, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory,*

Research and Practice, published by Teachers College Press in 2000, defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through students' strengths.

According to researchers at Brown University, culturally responsive teaching is characterized by:

- Communicating high expectations
- Learning within the context of culture
- Culturally-responsive curriculum
- Teachers as facilitators
- Student-centered instruction
- Positive perspectives on parents and families.