



Cultural Relevance vs. Cultural Responsiveness: Why it's important for students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum

Research shows that when children can relate to the things they're studying in school, they retain more information, learn more, and perform better. Text-to-self connections are critically important to helping students comprehend what they are being taught -- but how can they make text-to-self connections if they never see people who look like them or reflect their lived experiences?

Even worse, if students' lived experiences are being refuted or invalidated at school -- for instance, if they're taught racism isn't real while they or people they know might be directly experiencing it, or if they're taught people who look like them are in situations created by their own choices rather than systemic biases -- then they may experience *cognitive dissonance*¹, or worse, think school is not for them and disconnect altogether.

Most curricular material and testing reference questions center the histories, perspectives, and experiences of the majority culture, i.e. Whiteness. Even though students of color outnumber white students as of the 2020 Census, decision makers in education, school leaders, and teachers are still overwhelmingly White. Therefore, Black and Hispanic children and children of Indigenous descent often face, at best, a lack of connection to the materials used in class, and at worse, cognitive dissonance when their teachers and textbooks contradict what their elders may have told them. It's no wonder, then, that these students' performance on standardized tests is traditionally lower than White students who are able to make text-to-self connections to the material more often.

This is why it's important for schools to move beyond cultural competence to cultural responsiveness if there is to be any progress made in closing the so-called achievement gap.

¹ Cognitive dissonance is a theory in social psychology that explains the psychological stress experienced when someone participates in something that contradicts their beliefs, ideas, values, feelings, or lived experiences.



Culturally competent: Acknowledging differences & committing to working across cultures.

Culturally relevant: Making an effort to use materials that reflect the differences so people from different backgrounds feel included. Requires incorporating materials that reflect others' lived experiences into the current way of teaching.

Culturally responsive: Going beyond inclusion to make people from different backgrounds feel welcomed and valued. Requires adjusting the way you've always done things to meet people where they are, according to their lived experiences.

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

CULTURALLY RELEVANT

CULTURALLY
COMPETENT

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