

Motivating Diverse Learners Using Culturally Relevant & Responsive Education

A Practice Brief for Educators of Diverse Populations

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What is Culturally Relevant & Responsive Education?

Addressing the motivational and learning needs of multicultural students requires adapting educational strategies. Multicultural education (Banks, 2016), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2015) theories (referred to here as culturally relevant and responsive education; CRRE) share similarities that can be leveraged to support all students' motivation to learn.

CRRE is a process that is committed to educational equity. Educators using CRRE teach to and through learners' diverse cultures, lived experiences, and interests by adjusting the curricular, pedagogical, and social supports of the classroom. Beyond simply 'good teaching,' CRRE is aligned with social justice because it challenges structures and expectations that can perpetuate racism. Thus, to implement CRRE effectively, it is critical that educators exercise awareness of themselves and their students.

Awareness

Maintaining an asset-mindset and validating students' funds of knowledge (historical and cultural knowledge and skills). This requires continuous self-reflection and making an effort to learn about students' cultures, interests, and strengths.

Prejudice Reduction

Fostering cultural humility—an empathy and appreciation for cultures beyond your own—through cooperative learning opportunities coupled with prosocial learning interventions.

Content Integration

Diversifying curricular content and examples used to mirror students' lived experiences.

Knowledge Construction

Pushing students to critically analyze the knowledge presented to them with the goal of strengthening their sociopolitical consciousness.

Equity Pedagogy

Using a variety of pedagogical approaches, learning activities, and assessments that attend to individual differences (e.g., cultural or cognitive) to ensure academic success for all.

Empowering School & Social Structure

Creating an overall school culture that values diversity by caring for, not simply about, students. This involves a commitment to tackling systemic inequities.

Research suggests that learning communities that incorporate CRRE components have better academic outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). For example, studies have associated teachers' use of CRRE with an increase in students' test scores, subject competence, interest, confidence, and engagement.

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The Motivational Potential of Culturally Relevant & Responsive Education

The motivational capacity of CRRE may have positive implications for student persistence and intrinsic value for learning. For example, the characteristics of CRRE can be seen as aligning with the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which fosters motivation to learn by supporting students' competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Kumar et al., 2018). Through this lens, students should feel more motivated when they feel they have the knowledge or skills to be successful (*competence*), a sense of control (*autonomy*), and feel an interpersonal connection (*relatedness*). Many elements of CRRE overlap with the dimensions of Self-Determination Theory, as delineated below. (A number of these ideas also overlap with Social Emotional Learning. See the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) for more information).

Self-Determination Theory

Culturally Relevant & Responsive Education

Competence

Competence is the certainty that one has the knowledge and skill-set needed to be successful in a particular task

- Diversify curricular content that validates the funds of knowledge (cultural knowledge) students bring to the classroom
- Use examples that mirror students' lived experiences
- Adjust pedagogical approaches to leverage students' strengths and cultural styles
- Support students in taking ownership of their own learning—shifting perspectives from students being consumers of knowledge to that of producers
- Incorporate formative assessments to gauge students' learning and make real-time adjustments
- Make learning authentic by linking to the real world or students' aspirations
- Engage in academic caring, where teachers support students through the struggle of creating ideas while attending to the emotional fluctuations during the process

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the sense of control one feels to act in a way that aligns with their own interests and desires.

- Incorporate learning activities that support students' creative freedom
- Give students some choice in their assessments
- Allow students to act as a consultant in planning learning activities
- Foster students' sociopolitical consciousness by questioning sources of knowledge

Relatedness

Relatedness corresponds with the interpersonal connectedness one feels in a particular context.

- Foster a school culture that values students' funds of knowledge by building symmetrical relationships with families (e.g., by making home visits to learn about the cultural knowledge and skills the student has been raised with)
- Create a safe learning environment by teaching students to empathize with others and identify and manage their own emotions
- Adopt a "warm demander" persona by accepting no less than a student's best, and supporting them throughout the process
- Develop a standard of care wherein the community of learners make decisions that demonstrate concern for others
- Incorporate prejudice reduction interventions to foster cultural humility
- Implement school-wide policies that are committed to educational equity

When enacted effectively, culturally relevant and responsive education has the potential to motivate students' learning.

Gaps & Limitations

- Causal evidence to support the effect of CRRE on student outcomes and motivation is sparse. However, other research designs—such as qualitative, correlational, and mixed-methods—seem better suited for investigating this dynamic context.
- Because CRRE is so complex, research tends to focus on just one dimension (e.g., content integration or teacher awareness).
- Little has been done to examine the interaction of CRRE and student motivation. However, in looking at how they overlap, we are provided with research-informed suggestions of what might be effective in the classroom.
- Motivational research historically uses Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratize (WEIRD) samples. There is a need to diversify this area of research.

References

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