

## Culturally responsive curriculum: A systematic overview

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**Abstract:** A culturally responsive curriculum is a teaching approach centered on students' cultural backgrounds. It emphasizes cultural diversity and understanding by integrating elements of students' cultures into the curriculum to increase their learning motivation and engagement. Hence, a culturally responsive curriculum is an educational approach in which students' cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and social contexts are weaved into the curriculum, resulting in content that is relevant to students' lives and needs. This article provides an overview of the essence of a culturally responsive curriculum. Teachers, especially, can gain a deeper understanding of the principles and significance of a culturally responsive curriculum by reading this article. Finally, the practice of culturally responsive curriculum in the context of Taiwan's culture is discussed.

**Keywords:** Civil rights movement, Culture, Culturally responsive curriculum, Diversity, Multicultural education.

### 1. Introduction

The implementation of education affects a country's development and success, and a key component of an effective education system is the implementation of curriculum. In today's increasingly diverse educational landscape, classrooms are becoming microcosms of the multicultural outside world. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for educators striving to create inclusive and equitable learning environments for students. A culturally responsive curriculum is a teaching approach centered on students' cultural backgrounds; it integrates elements of students' cultures into the curriculum to boost students' motivation and engagement. This educational approach emphasizes that teachers should recognize and respect students' diversity, connecting learning materials to students' cultures to enhance motivation and learning engagement. In culturally responsive teaching, educators play a crucial role in acknowledging and validating students' unique identities and incorporating these into the curriculum. This style of teaching involves selecting texts and activities that reflect students' diverse cultural experiences and perspectives and making intentional efforts to contextualize the subject matter to students' cultural heritage and communities. When students see themselves reflected in a curriculum, they are more likely to feel valued, motivated, and empowered to participate actively, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and effective learning environment. Many teachers and educational researchers have claimed to adopt tenets of culturally relevant education. However, recent research describes how standardized curriculum and testing have marginalized culturally responsive curriculum in the discourse on educational reform. This article provides an overview of the essence of a culturally responsive curriculum. Teachers reading this article can gain a deeper understanding of the principles and significance of a culturally responsive curriculum. The key to advancing culturally responsive teaching lies in how effectively teachers can integrate students' cultural backgrounds into their instruction to enhance learning engagement and foster students' sense of identity. By understanding students' cultural backgrounds and incorporating them into curriculum design, teachers can help students feel respected and understood. Moreover, by creating an inclusive learning environment, teachers can support students in developing a diverse worldview and strengthening their sense of self-worth (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Caingcoy, 2023; Ilaha Ashrafova, 2024; Wang & Shih, 2022).

## 2. Systematic Overview of Culturally Responsive Curriculum

### 2.1. Origins

For more than 30 years, education scholars have examined teaching practices and developed theories that center the cultural ways of being and knowing for historically marginalized youth. Collectively, these practices and theories are known as asset-based pedagogies in which students' cultural frames of reference and funds of knowledge are viewed as strengths and drawn upon in the learning process. Unlike traditional teaching and schooling practices grounded in the history of assimilation, asset-based pedagogies allow for deliberate efforts toward cultural understandings, critiques of social injustices, and liberatory action (Jackson & Boutte, 2018).

Culturally responsive curriculum can be traced back to the latter half of the 20th century in the United States. This type of curriculum was introduced by African American educators and scholars to address the learning needs of minority students within the US educational system. Closely related to multicultural education and social justice education, this type of curriculum aims to address cultural inequities in education. It aspires to be inclusive and reflective of diverse cultural backgrounds to enhance the learning motivation and achievements of minority students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Wah & Nasri, 2019).

### 2.2. Background

The United States is a diverse country with constantly changing demographics. In 1980, the U.S. was 83.1 percent White, 11.7 percent Black and 6.4 percent Hispanic. Over a quarter of a century later, the U.S. Census documents that 75.0 percent of the population of the United States is White, 12.4 percent is Black or African American, and 15.4 percent is Hispanic or Latino. The noticeable shift in demographics is even more phenomenal among the school-aged population. The increase of ethnic-minority student presence is largely credited to the national growth of the Hispanic population, which exceeded the growth of all other ethnic minority group students in public schools (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Wah & Nasri, 2019).

Many teachers and educational researchers have claimed to adopt tenets of culturally relevant education (CRE). However, recent work describes how standardized curricula and testing have marginalized CRE in educational reform discourses. The concept of the culturally responsive curriculum was largely influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which called for greater equity in education. Scholars and educators began to realize that standardized educational models were not adequately meeting the needs of minority students; this realization prompted educational researchers to explore more diverse teaching models (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

### 2.3. Theoretical Foundations

The concept of culturally responsive curriculum provides a lens for highlighting the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which people inhabit and engage in education (Misco, 2018).

The theoretical basis of culturally responsive curriculum includes social constructivism, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) also stress that aligning educational content with students' cultural backgrounds to foster their sense of identity and engagement. Through the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum, educators seek to create a more equitable learning environment, and promote students' cultural identity and academic success, especially in increasingly diverse societies (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

## 3. Key Features

A culturally responsive curriculum emphasizes the integration of students' culture and life experiences into teaching; cultural diversity; culturally sensitive teacher–student interactions; and an inclusive, equitable classroom atmosphere. This method of teaching involves considering students' backgrounds and needs to help them find meaningful connections between their own cultures and the curriculum's content, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. Teachers must develop a knowledge

and appreciation of diverse cultures, explore how equitable and inclusive practices can be implemented in schools, and imagine strategies for challenging existing barriers. Furthermore, teachers must have the opportunity to understand their evolving identities and how they influence (in)action, counter or perpetuate biases or deficit paradigms, and expose or ignore injustices. When teachers are provided opportunities and spaces to be reflective, interrogate their assumptions, and investigate the realities of their biases, they are better prepared to consider how to promote equitable and inclusive classrooms and better positioned to be agents of change (Samuels, 2018; Shih, 2020). The key features of a culturally responsive curriculum are discussed in the following sections.

### *3.1. Reflection and Respect for Student Culture*

Across North America, classrooms are increasingly including students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds with diverse learning experiences and needs. Currently, there are too many experiences of systemic racism and inequality between mainstream and racialized minority students. Thus, the curriculum integrates students' cultural backgrounds, histories, languages, and life experiences. Students can recognize that their own culture is respected and represented in their education (Aloysius, Deborah, Nancy & Samson, 2024; Shih, 2020).

### *3.2. Localization of Content and Methods*

Culture refers to the customs, languages, values, beliefs, and achievements of a group of people. It has been argued that culture has considerable differences between Western and Eastern country. Students' culture and lived experiences that influence how they understand and make sense of the world or themselves are an integral part of who they are as learners. A culturally responsive curriculum focuses on the tailoring of learning content and teaching methods to meet the needs of local students. This may involve teaching in a local language or using local examples and stories to explain concepts. This approach enables students to absorb knowledge within familiar contexts (Will & Najarro, 2022; Wu, 2023, 2024).

### *3.3. Cultivating Cultural Confidence and Identity*

In multiculturalism, assimilation is opposed, so an argument against assimilation has been proposed that actively emphasizes pluralism and has been defined and classified by the attributes of ethnicity, gender, language and culture. Students' academic performance is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including their perceptions of culture. By strengthening students' understanding of their own culture, this type of curriculum fosters cultural identity and confidence, enhancing students' competitiveness in a globalized world (Abdullah Al Fraidan, 2024; Shih, 2022b, 2024).

### *3.4. Multicultural Education*

The rapid development of information technology in the past two decades has accelerated the pace of globalization. Encompassing a wide range of distinct political, economic, and cultural trends. Curriculum designers can incorporate learning content from various cultures to help students appreciate and understand cultural diversity and to promote inclusivity and cross-cultural awareness in their education (Liu, 2011; Shih, 2020, 2022b).

### *3.5. Professional Development for Teachers*

Implementing a culturally responsive curriculum requires teachers to possess cultural sensitivity and relevant knowledge. Schools should therefore encourage professional development in cultural responsiveness and inclusivity to ensure an inclusive classroom (Will & Najarro, 2022).

This curriculum model is particularly well-suited to educational contexts in Taiwan. It can give students a more holistic education in a multicultural environment while strengthening their sense of identification with their local culture. For schools in Taiwan, implementing a culturally responsive curriculum can promote social equity and cultural inclusivity, enriching students' diverse learning experiences (Shih, 2020, 2022b).

## 4. Benefits

The benefits of implementing a culturally responsive curriculum are discussed in this section.

### 4.1. *Enhancing Students' Self-identity and Cultural Belonging*

A diverse classroom is a challenge for many educators. This diversity often requires modifications in teaching methods and strategies. When a student sees their culture reflected in the curriculum, it validates their identity, enhancing their sense of self-worth and reinforcing the value of diversity within their educational environment. This acknowledgment not only boosts their confidence and pride in their heritage but also fosters a more inclusive classroom culture, such that every student feels they belong and are respected. This approach, often part of culturally responsive teaching, promotes empathy among peers as students learn about each other's cultural background, building a foundation for the development of mutual respect and deeper, meaningful learning (Omar Muna Ali, 2024).

### 4.2. *Stimulating Students' Learning Motivation*

Learning within a familiar cultural context can indeed stimulate students' learning motivation. When the content that students learn in the classroom relates closely to their own life, students tend to develop a sense of familiarity and interest, which increases their learning engagement. This approach enables them to connect learned knowledge with everyday life, sparking their curiosity and motivation to explore a topic further. Additionally, by integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the classroom, teachers can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, making students feel respected and valued, which further enhances their motivation to learn (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2010).

### 4.3. *Fostering Cultural Diversity and Inclusiveness*

By understanding their own culture as well as that of others, students can develop respect for and come to accept multiculturalism. In practice, a culturally responsive curriculum requires teachers to exhibit cultural sensitivity and actively collaborate with the community. A curriculum designed with the help of local resources and cultural knowledge not only aligns with educational goals but also carries rich cultural significance. Such a curriculum can transform students into socially responsible and culturally aware citizens in today's globalized, multicultural educational environment (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2010).

## 5. Implementation

A culturally responsive curriculum goes beyond merely acknowledging diversity; it actively incorporates students' cultural contexts into all aspects of learning. This approach creates an environment in which students feel valued and understood and experience deeper engagement and meaningful connections (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2010). In practice, this involves the following.

### 5.1. *Curriculum Content*

In today's classrooms, cultural diversity shines as a cornerstone. We, as educators and guardians of knowledge, stand at a pivotal point where the inclusion of diverse cultures not only enriches the learning environment but is imperative for fostering a truly global perspective in our students. Embracing varied backgrounds and experiences broadens understanding and prepares learners to thrive in a multicultural world. Integrating topics, examples, and materials that reflect a variety of cultural backgrounds, including the traditions, histories, and perspectives of the students are presented in the classroom. For instance, literature selections could span multiple cultures, or historical events could be analyzed from diverse viewpoints (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Connolly 2024).

### 5.2. *Teaching Strategies*

For decades, researchers have found that teachers in public schools have undervalued the potential for academic success among students of color, setting low expectations for them and thinking of cultural differences as barriers rather than assets to learning. In response, scholars developed teaching methods and practices—broadly known as asset-based pedagogies—that incorporate students' cultural identities

and lived experiences into the classroom as tools for effective instruction. The terms for these approaches to teaching vary, from culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy to the more foundational culturally relevant pedagogy. Adopting instructional methods that resonate with students' learning styles and cultural norms. This could mean using collaborative projects that mirror communal values or discussion methods that allow for storytelling, an essential component in a variety of cultures (Heffernan, Hazzan & Dauenhauer, 2022; Will & Najarro, 2022).

### 5.3. *Assessment Methods*

Student populations have become increasingly diverse in the past decades. Flexible and varied assessment approaches are implemented to accommodate different ways of demonstrating knowledge. The assessments go beyond standardized testing and might include oral presentations, creative projects, and group-based tasks that reflect cultural methods of knowledge-sharing (O'Neill & Padden, 2021).

### 5.4. *Teacher–Student Interaction*

In order to embed cultural change toward a more diverse and friendly campus, formal structural change led from the top-down is as important, if not more important, as creating informal networks that start at the faculty level. Trust is essential to building and maintaining mutually respectful relationships. Trust is built through culturally sensitive communication and a genuine show of respect for students' values and traditions. Teachers who are responsive to students' cultural signals and express genuine interest in their backgrounds contribute toward creating a supportive learning environment (Heffernan, Hazzan & Dauenhauer, 2022; Shih, 2022a; Wilkins, 2018).

## 6. **Embracing Culturally Diverse School Curriculum Practices in Taiwan**

Taiwan was governed by Japan for 51 years before the end of World War II. The Taiwan's higher education system was established during this period to support Japan's policies of colonization and expansion. In Taiwan, addressing cultural differences in school curriculum practices has become imperative. The classroom represents a microcosm filled with various social activities and in which meanings are shaped not only by cultural influences but also through the unique experiences of the individuals within the education system. The implementation of school curriculum represents a multifaceted cultural expression that requires attention to both cultural responsiveness and differentiated instruction (Banks, 1988; Ho, 2005; Lin, 2013; Wang, Chiang, Hsueh, Shih & Wu, 2024).

Schools in Taiwan are recognizing the need to develop culturally responsive curriculum that reflect the multicultural context of society. This development involves understanding the ideological foundations of curriculum and transforming knowledge in ways that empower students. Additionally, differentiated instruction is a means of responding to students' diverse backgrounds, readiness levels, languages, learning styles, and interests to create an inclusive and student-centered learning environment. The objective for teachers is to design adaptive learning experiences that maximize the potential of every student, making the curriculum more relevant and impactful (Banks, 1988; Ho, 2005; Lin, 2013).

Culturally responsive curriculum practices in Taiwan seek to bridge the gap between school knowledge and the daily lives of students, regarding cultural differences as assets that enrich learning and foster reflective engagement. In Taiwan, schools are viewed as cultural mediators, and meaning is considered to be created in the classroom through both cultural influences and individual experiences within the education system. School curriculum practices are expressions of culture and encompass diverse activities. Cultural responsiveness and differentiated instruction represent the two core concepts of culturally responsive curriculum practices. Taiwan's Indigenous children are culturally and linguistically different and socially and economically marginalized compared to their Han Chinese peers. For decades, education assimilated Indigenous people into the mainstream society by undermining their languages, cultures and traditional spaces. Since the 1990s, multicultural policies have been cast as the remedy for the inequalities and injustices they experienced and, since 2016, Taiwan has started the process of reconciliation and transitional justice (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Chou, 2011; Nesterova, 2019; Shih, 2020).



### 6.1. Cultural Responsiveness

As the goal of the international community every modern citizen should have knowledge about their culture. Cultural responsiveness emphasizes the development of multicultural curricula, guided by underlying ideologies and the transformation of knowledge into actionable curriculum practices. Gay (2000) argued that school curricula should be regarded as tools that can help students cultivate and strengthen their current and future abilities, attitudes, and experiences. In culturally responsive curriculum activities, culture is viewed as a dynamic concept. Such activities aim to engage students and connect learning to their real-life experiences (Gay, 2000; Shih & Wang, 2022).

### 6.2. Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is influenced by the theory of multiple intelligences, brain research, and multicultural education. It advocates a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach. For teachers, the primary goal of differentiated instruction is to design learning experiences that maximize the potential of all students by considering their background knowledge, learning readiness, language, learning styles, and interests. This approach requires teachers to be flexible and to adjust the curriculum and the presentation of information to meet the needs of learners, rather than expecting students to adapt to a predetermined curriculum (Gheysens, Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, 2023; Goldstein, 2009).

In the 21st century, the world has become more globalized, and diverse culture should be emphasized. In Taiwan, especially with diverse student backgrounds and increasing immigrant populations, such as Vietnamese immigrants, a culturally responsive curriculum could be pivotal in fostering both respect and solidarity within schools. It enables students to celebrate their unique backgrounds and relate their learning to real-life experiences, enhancing their educational experience (Shih, 2020; Wang, & Shih, 2023).

## 7. Reflections and Conclusion

### 7.1. Reflections

To explore the meaning or value of human life, the most basic orientation is nothing more than two thinking priorities: one is the maintenance of life itself (that is, the basic survival problem); the other is the pursuit of life beyond basic survival. But these two issues are obviously related to the relationship between people and the living environment. Moreover, our living environment is deeply intertwined with culture. Culture shapes how we interact with our surroundings, influences the spaces we create, and provides meaning to the places we inhabit. This connection encompasses tangible elements, such as architecture, art, and traditional practices, as well as intangible ones, including values, beliefs, and communal behaviors. For instance, the design of homes, public spaces, and even urban layouts often reflects cultural priorities, like fostering family connections, spiritual practices, or community interaction. Similarly, cultural norms influence how people adapt to natural elements, like climate or geography, through clothing, food, and housing. The living environments also contribute to the transmission of culture. As environments evolve, we can also become arenas where diverse cultures converge and interact, fostering innovation and mutual understanding (Shih, 2020; Ye & Shih, 2020).

Culture shapes the experiences of individual life. Hence, in today's increasingly diverse classrooms, educators face the challenge of meeting the needs of students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive curriculum has emerged as a powerful approach to address this challenge by recognizing and valuing the cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives of students. An overview of the significance of culturally responsive teaching and sets the stage for exploring its principles, practices, and impact on bridging the achievement gap. In

addition, in order to embed cultural change toward a friendly society for us, culturally responsive curriculum is important (Heffernan, Hazzan & Dauenhauer, 2022; Mehta, 2024; Tam, 2014).

When designing culturally responsive curriculum in Taiwan, it is essential to integrate local culture and students' life experiences, making the teaching content more relevant to their daily lives and cultural backgrounds. For example, the curriculum can incorporate Taiwan's diverse cultures, including

Han Chinese, indigenous peoples, Holo, Hakka cultures, and the cultural resources from new immigrant families. This approach allows students to recognize and respect different cultures (Ho, 2005; Lin, 2013).

In practice, we can design teaching activities based on cultural stories, allowing students to engage with and discuss stories from various cultures to understand cultural values and connect them with their own experiences. Additionally, artistic creation can be used to enable students to express their understanding of culture, such as through painting, music, and dance, reflecting and showcasing their awareness of their cultural backgrounds. This kind of curriculum not only promotes cultural understanding but also encourages students to value and preserve both their own and others' cultural heritage. For instance, a curriculum focused on indigenous culture can invite elders from the community to share traditional wisdom, such as oral histories or traditional crafts. Students can also visit tribes to experience cultural customs and enhance their cultural awareness. For new immigrants, a cultural sharing day can be organized where students and families from diverse backgrounds introduce their traditional festivals and foods, fostering cultural exchange and understanding. Such culturally responsive curriculum can help students develop cultural sensitivity and empathy, fostering an inclusive attitude toward diverse cultures and nurturing them to become future citizens with a global perspective and local identity (Ho, 2005; Lin, 2013; Shih, 2020).

## 7.2. Conclusion

### 7.2.1. Teaching Practices with a Cultural Difference Perspective

Around the world, the twenty-first-century classroom is based on growing cultural diversity. Proponents of a cultural difference perspective challenge traditional viewpoints by emphasizing that knowledge should be understandable and relevant to students' lives and experiences beyond school. They view cultural responsiveness as a dynamic cultural approach and consider differences as learning assets, emphasizing the value of actions and reflective practices derived from everyday life. This educational philosophy highlights the importance of recognizing cultural diversity in curriculum design and using flexible and innovative teaching strategies to promote the holistic development of students (Gudmundsdottir, 2001; Kazanjian, 2019; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012).

### 7.2.2. Providing All Students with Equitable Access to Learning

The diversity in today's classrooms offers a rich opportunity for students to engage with multiple perspectives, fostering a sense of empathy, respect, and cultural awareness. For educators, this multicultural environment demands approaches that not only acknowledge but celebrate differences, providing all students with equitable access to learning. Creating inclusive and equitable learning environments involves implementing strategies such as culturally responsive teaching, where curriculum and instruction are reflective of the students' diverse backgrounds. This approach also recognizes the value of each student's unique experiences, encouraging teachers to incorporate content that connects with students' lives and identities. To achieve inclusivity, teachers can use differentiated instruction tailored to varying cultural backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. Activities promoting collaboration, empathy, and open dialogue help students' understanding across cultural lines, fostering a stronger, more inclusive community within the classroom. Additionally, addressing and challenging stereotypes or biases openly can create a safe space for students to express themselves without fear of discrimination (Gay, 2002; Ho, 2005; Lin, 2013).

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