



CULTURE-INCLUSIVE LEARNING

Introduction

For centuries, Native Americans have been educated by forced assimilation. Such methods disconnected students from their own culture. One lingering result of this practice is low graduation rates. Of over 10,000 students who attended Carlisle Indian Industrial School, only 158 graduated—a little over 1% (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). In 2021, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that students who identify as Native American have a graduation rate of 74.9%, the lowest of all ethnic groups. To meet these educational challenges, the White House recommends integrating native culture and languages into schools and classrooms in the 2014 Native Youth Report (United States, 2014). According to researchers, doing this will boost students' sense of belonging and identity, connecting them to their heritage and forming a bridge between their home and public worlds (Gregory, 2012). Some research-based insights that can help educators integrate culture into the curriculum include:

- 1. Acknowledge the Cultural Nature of Learning.** Culture is a key element in how humans make sense of the world around them and turn everyday experiences into meaningful events (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; NASEM, 2018). When teachers create a classroom environment that recognizes cultural perspectives from outside the classroom, students are better supported in taking control of their own learning (NASEM, 2018).
- 2. Bridge Cultures in the Third Space.** When opposing cultures come together to exchange ideas and formulate new solutions that consider all perspectives, the experience is referred to as the third space (Bhabha, 1994). In the classroom context, the first space is often considered to be the home environment and its cultural norms. The second space is the school culture and its norms and discourse patterns. The third space is envisioned as a teacher-facilitated environment of discourse and collaboration in which home and classroom concepts are reorganized “through the strategic arrangement of practices that result in transformation of knowledge and identity” (Laughlin, 2020, p. 23). In this third space, students' interest connects their world to the classroom through personal relevance, long-term understanding, and enhanced learning (Kuhlthau et al., 2015).
- 3. Practice Culturally Responsive Teaching.** A key characteristic of culturally responsive teaching is that it emphasizes what students can do rather than what they cannot. Students' cultural knowledge serves as a tool to enrich classroom instruction and provide students with a sense of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Gay, 2004). Culturally responsive teaching showed favorable academic results in multiple studies. For example, Byrd (2016) found in a study of 315 secondary students that the use of culturally relevant teaching practices was associated with greater interest in school, increased exploration of racial and ethnic identity, and higher grades. Other studies suggest that among students of color, culturally responsive teaching leads to higher achievement (Dee & Penner, 2017; Wah & Nasri, 2019; Wiggan & Watson, 2016) and graduation rates (Howard & Terry, 2011).





Teachers report that they are motivated to teach responsively for the sake of their students (Bonner et al., 2018). Studies reveal, however, that teachers' effectiveness varies for this type of instruction depending on context (Kelly et al., 2021), diversity beliefs, and level of self-reflection (Civitillo et al., 2019). Among student populations with high diversity, culturally responsive teaching had positive effects on student achievement beyond standardized testing (Aronson and Laughter 2016). Benefits included increases in students' motivation, interest in content, ability to engage in classroom conversation, perceptions of their own abilities, and confidence in taking standardized tests.

Recommendations for culture-inclusive learning

- Teachers should teach from an asset-based, rather than deficit-based, perspective to promote student wellbeing (Flint & Jagers, 2021; Lopez, 2017).
- Teachers should get to know their students and learn about their backgrounds (Byrd, 2016; Kelley et al., 2015; Tanase, 2022).
- Teachers should identify and acknowledge their personal biases to maintain high expectations and help identify student strengths (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Kieran & Anderson, 2019).
- Teachers should provide students with choices in the products they generate and the tools they use (Tanase, 2022; Bonner et al., 2018).
- Teachers should teach cultural diversity, even when the class is not diverse (Byrd, 2016).
- Teachers should encourage appreciation for diversity as well as acknowledge inequity (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Conclusion

Research reveals that the world beyond school matters as much as the world of the dominant culture. Students are at an academic disadvantage when they are not encouraged to engage their own prior knowledge to build new knowledge in the classroom (Bonner et al., 2018; Wah & Nasri, 2019). One way to counter the disconnect between the home culture of students and school culture is to bring culturally relevant experience to students (Tanase, 2022; Dee & Penner, 2017; Byrd, 2016). Integrating students' culture and cultural identity into the curriculum not only taps into a deep well of prior knowledge but has proven to provide relevance as well as motivation to learn. Culturally relevant curriculum is a bridge between the tribal community, the school, and the world at large (Gregory, 2012).

View our full reference list here: <https://sites.google.com/ou.edu/native-curriculum/research-brief>

