Culturally Responsive Educational Therapy

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Educational therapists strive to maximize students' educational growth. In order to do so, it is essential to view learners holistically. This is particularly important for students from marginalized communities whose educations are frequently substandard. Culturally responsive pedagogies, however, can address these inequities and bolster achievement for marginalized students. These approaches prioritize high expectations, promote positive racial/ethnic identities, make learning relevant, and utilize the cultural perspectives of diverse students. Rather than viewing marginalized students' academic struggles as deficits, culturally responsive educators seek out the students' assets and harness the cognitive skills and background knowledge already developed through their cultures. This mirrors the strength-based approach utilized by educational therapists. Important steps in working toward more culturally responsive educational therapy include considering one's own cultural mindset and developing new knowledge and skill sets in culturally affirming methods.

> "Educational Therapists are dedicated to protecting and enhancing the fundamental dignity of every person seeking their services and are committed to developing the highest educational potential of their clients." (AET, n.d.)

Protecting and enhancing the fundamental dignity of our clients and helping them develop to the highest level of their educational potential is a lofty goal. Educational therapists typically strive to attain this goal by focusing on the individual client. We begin by gathering information from parents, school personnel, and allied professionals and by analyzing our own assessments and observations of the client. Based on that information, we select instructional procedures and then carefully observe, measure, and record the client's progress. Throughout the entire process, we endeavor to cultivate a positive therapeutic relationship with the client in order to enhance both academic growth and social-emotional well-being. These are all important elements that can support the development of the client's educational potential. Yet, every client is part of a community and a culture, and understanding these factors can increase our effectiveness with clients, particularly those whose cultures are different than our own.

We often think of culture in terms of observable characteristics, such as the clothing, art, food, or rituals of a group of people, but culture goes much deeper than that. In the context of our work as educational therapists, it is critical to understand that:

> Culture—how one makes meaning of the world based on shared beliefs, norms, cosmology, and so forth—is the software to the brain's hardware. Cultural mental models, understandings, and experiences create cognitive "hooks" or reference points that help to organize our schema into a knowledge network that facilitates our understanding of how things work. (Hammond, 2021, p. 7)

Culture, then, can be a powerful tool in service of protecting and enhancing the dignity of our clients and helping them reach their potential.

Historic Views on Educating Students With Diverse Cultural Identities

It is well-known that the educational outcomes of African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) students in American schools are often poorer than those of White Americans. For years, researchers considered the education of marginalized and immigrant students in the United States through the lens of assimilation logic, which presumed that academic success could be achieved once these students gave up their cultures and became assimilated into the dominant culture. However, this approach proved to be ineffective, often harmful (Ali, 2020; Hanley & Noblit, 2009; Wong, 2019). This view changed over time. Researchers now view students' cultures as "a set of tools, perspectives and capabilities that students can deploy in the pursuit of learning" and have recognized that students are educationally disadvantaged when the learning methods supported by their cultures are dismissed or rejected (Hanley & Noblit, 2009, p. 5). In fact, an extensive literature review concluded that "ALANA students performed best in settings that build on their culture and promoted their racial identities" (Hanley & Noblit, 2009, p. 5). This realization has the potential to significantly improve educational outcomes for underachieving students from marginalized communities.

The perceived enormity of providing instruction linked to unfamiliar cultures and different racial identities, though, can be overwhelming for educators, and without appropriate guidance well-meaning educators may embrace overly simplistic ideas about teaching in culturally responsive ways (New America, n. d.). Fortunately, over the past several decades, scholars and educators, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Zaretta Hammond, have developed frameworks which, though not identical, share several fundamental objectives: the use of approaches that view students' languages, cultures, and identities as assets rather than barriers to learning and that provide opportunities for marginalized students to "see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content taught in school" (New America, n. d., para. 6).

The Emergence of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Beginning in 1988, researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings conducted a multi-year study in which she observed eight highly effective teachers in a predominately African-American elementary school. Her goal was to determine what these teachers were doing to achieve such positive results when others did not (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Based on her observations, Ladson-Billings developed her culturally relevant pedagogy, which consists of three goals (1) advancing students' learning and academic success, (2) helping students develop positive ethnic and cultural identities, (3) and supporting students' abilities to recognize and evaluate social inequities (California, 2020).

Teacher-educator Geneva Gay, an expert on multicultural education and curriculum, coined the term culturally responsive teaching (New America, n.d.). Gay's approach is based on research, theory, practical experiences, and the personal stories of educators working with underachieving ALANA students (Gay, 2002). This approach includes the use of multicultural content within the curriculum and has a strong focus on multicultural teaching strategies (Gay, 2002; Harmon, 2012; New America, n.d.). In short, culturally responsive teaching uses "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Like Ladson-Billings, Gay focuses on teaching to and through the strengths of these students and creating an environment that "is culturally validating and affirming" (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, drew from her childhood experiences with project-based learning, her own teaching experience, and neuroscience to develop a version of culturally responsive teaching that focuses on developing independent learners who can comprehend deeply and think critically (Hammond, 2014; Hammond, 2016; San Francisco, 2018). In Hammond's view, culturally responsive teaching is not a social justice curriculum or diversity training, it is not the same as multicultural education, and it is not a specific program or a particular set of strategies (Hammond, 2016). "It's about gaining insight into your students as learners and being able to craft cognitive hooks between their funds of knowledge and the standards-based content in authentic and meaningful ways that make learning sticky" (Hammond, 2021, p. 7).

Ladson-Billings, Gay, Hammond, and other advocates of culturally responsive teaching focus on improving learning by maintaining high expectations, affirming positive cultural identities, using teaching methods that utilize students' cultural experiences, and increasing student engagement through meaningful projects and content. Rather than suppressing culture and striving for assimilation, culturally responsive teaching uses culture as a springboard to engage students and make learning relevant.

The Reality of Education in Marginalized Communities

Students in low-income urban areas, who are disproportionately African American and Hispanic, as well as Native American students living in economically depressed rural areas, typically have very different school experiences than students in middle-and-high-income areas (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Quillian, 2017). Since public schools depend on local property taxes, urban schools in poor neighborhoods have fewer resources (Bassetti,

2018). Since many Native Americans living on reservations in rural communities have no other options, they must rely on the significantly underfunded schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Education (The Red Road, n. d.; Woods, 2020). The results of insufficient school funding in both of these settings are strikingly similar. School building are in disrepair and basic infrastructure, such as HVAC, is unreliable. Students may not have textbooks to take home. Educational technology and the bandwidth to support it are often inadequate. Attracting and keeping qualified staff is a struggle. Teachers tend to be less experienced, staff absences are frequent, and high rates of staff turn-over are common (Bassetti, 20218; The Red Road, n.d.). Such conditions can significantly compromise the quality of the education these students receive.

Another concern is that the curriculum in many low-income school districts remains largely focused on the rote learning of basic skills. These students have less experience with higher order thinking or challenging academic work, problem solving, examining significant texts and ideas, or analytical writing. In short, these students have not been given adequate opportunities to learn-how-to-learn (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hammond, 2014). Without a challenging curriculum or access to higher-level courses, students attending these schools tend to have lower academic achievement, are more likely to drop out of high school, and are less likely to attend college (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Noguera et al., 2015; Wong, 2019). Though some people are successful in spite of educational differences, these differences often lead to economic challenges for adults, creating and continuing a cycle of poverty.

The Impact of School Climate on the Well-Being of Marginalized Students

A less visible reality related to the education of marginalized students is the emotional distress often experienced within their educational settings, past and present. For nearly a century, Native American children were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools where they were coerced into abandoning their languages and cultures (The Red Road, n.d.; Woods, 2020). This has resulted in "high rates of historical trauma," a form of intergenerational PTSD, within the Native American community (Brenna, 2014; Martinez, 2014, p. 201). Though the vast majority of Native students now attend public schools, many report that the school climate there "can be aggressively anti-Indian at times" (Martinez, 2014, p. 202). This is reinforced by a culturally-biased classroom curriculum, the trivializing of important leaders and symbols of Native culture, and by the oft derogatory depictions of Native Americans as sports mascots (Martinez, 2014). Moreover, Native students often sense hostility from classmates and teachers, leading to an adverse school climate (Reyhner & Dodd, 1995).

This perception of an unwelcoming school environment is shared by students from other marginalized groups. Compared to White and Asian students, African American and Hispanic students have reported fewer positive experiences related to safety, respect, connectedness, support, relations with adults, and opportunities for participation in school (Voight, 2013; Voight et al., 2015). These experiences have significant consequences for marginalized students. "Being ostracized for their race and ethnicity can lead students to develop negative racial identities, and the trauma from those experiences can be long lasting" (Reginal, 2021, pp. 1-2). However, schools can mitigate the effects of such stereotype threats by confronting these biases and building identity-safe environments, which result in more positive social-emotional and academic outcomes for students (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Voight, 2013). One way to achieve more welcoming school environments is to train school staff in culturally responsive pedagogies.

The Power of Culturally Responsive Learning Environments

The academic difficulties of students from historically marginalized communities are often viewed from a deficit lens. The negative effects of poverty, racial bias, and underfunded schools may be recognized, but their solutions seem formidable. Culturally responsive teaching, though, can equip educators and educational therapists with approaches that can help them begin to move beyond a deficit mindset and identify the assets of students, including English language learners and students of color, whose strengths and assets are frequently overlooked ("What is," n.d.). This more positive viewpoint has both affective and cognitive benefits for marginalized students.

All of us hold some implicit biases—unconscious attitudes or stereotypes—which may influence the way we perceive others due to attributes such as race, culture, or language ("What is," n.d.). A culturally responsive approach to teaching helps students and educators recognize that others may experience the world differently based on their diverse cultural and racial identities (Spikes, 2018). This can build an appreciation for different perspectives, increase empathy, engender a sense of belonging, and develop positive relationships ("What is," n.d.). Culturally responsive learning environments provide a space in which all students can thrive. Encouraging strong racial and ethnic identities can help students have more positive academic attitudes, higher levels of self-esteem, and a stronger sense of well-being (New America, n.d.).

Culturally responsive instruction also helps lay the groundwork for stronger learning. In order to promote effective and efficient learning, the human brain is "wired" to make connections between what we already know—our background knowledge—and the new skills or information we are seeking to learn. Background knowledge, which is shaped by our culture, serves as a hook on which to "hang" and store new knowledge ("What is," n.d.; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Connecting with students' background knowledge, then, helps support their understanding of the content being taught. Selecting instructional materials and designing assignments that reflect students' cultural experiences promote engagement and meaningful learning. This leads to more positive outcomes such as a greater interest in learning, persistance, and better academic achievement (New America, n.d.).

Educational Therapy and Culturally Responsive Teaching: Common Elements

In the second edition of *The Clinical Practice of Educational Therapy*, Ficksman & Adelizzi (2018) present the multi-dimensional model of educational therapy. This model describes 13 domains of responsibility for educational therapists, four of which—the treatment alliance, the socio-cultural context, deep learning, and autonomy—have significant similarities to culturally responsive teaching. At the heart of this model is the *treatment alliance*, the supportive partnership among the client, educational therapist, family, and allied professionals. Awareness of the clients' *socio-cultural contexts* not only strengthens the therapeutic relationship, it also serves as a basis for better learning. *Deep learning* provides a foundation for higher level thinking skills and increased academic achievement. *Academic autonomy*, the ultimate goal of educational therapy, can be achieved over time as the development of knowledge and skills lead to increased confidence.

Many dimensions of culturally responsive teaching mirror those of educational therapy. Hammond's *Ready for Rigor Framework*, for example, contains four core practice areas—awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community building (Hammond, 2014). *Awareness* requires educators to recognize the sociopolitical factors that create inequities within the society, to acknowledge that schools play a role in maintaining or challenging those inequities, and to develop an understanding of their own cultural lens as it relates to their expectations and evaluations of student behavior. *Learning partnerships* refer to forming relationships with students based on mutual trust and respect and to leveraging those relationships to help students succeed in challenging academic endeavors. *Information processing* requires educators to understand how the brain learns, how culture shapes the brain's information processing, and to use that knowledge to develop instructional activities that advance higher-order thinking skills. *Community building* focuses on creating socially and intellectually safe learning environments that allow dependent learners to take academic risks and become independent learners.

The Journey Begins: Starting Points for Culturally Responsive Ed Therapy

"The journey to responsiveness happens in two ways: a change in mindset and a change in skillset" (Hollie, 2017, p 20). The first step in developing a culturally responsive practice is a change in mindset, looking at the world in new ways (Hammond, 2014; Hollie, 2015). This requires reflection and self-examination. Hammond's (2014) approach revolves around educators examining their own implicit biases. She makes a number of suggestions for doing so. (1) Begin by making a real commitment to work toward a more responsive practice. (2) Examine your own cultural identity.[1] This is not easy. One's own identity is so strongly ingrained that it seems "normal," making others' cultural behaviors seem somehow deviant. (3) Recognize that viewing behaviors only through your cultural frames of reference can lead to misinterpretations of the actions and intentions of those from other cultural traditions. (4) Identify your own triggers, those things that make you uncomfortable when encountering cultural differences. (5) Practice your own emotional self-management when you are triggered.

A critical aspect of reshaping one's mindset is confronting the deficit thinking in which poor educational outcomes are blamed on perceived deficiencies within the students or on their families' adjudged disinterest in education (Hammond, 2014). One way to counter such biases—and an approach very much in line with educational therapy's strength-based approach—is actively seeking to identify students' assets. This begins with learning about clients' strengths and interests and continues with an investigation into their funds of knowledge, "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" ("How to," n.d.; Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). These funds of knowledge—which may be assessed through such methods as drawings, observations, conversations, interviews, or surveys—can challenge the deficit mindset by documenting the "knowledge, resources, and strengths" possessed by students and families in marginalized communities (Moll, 2019, p. 130). Table 1 shows a few examples of funds of knowledge that could provide meaningful connections (Hammond's "cognitive hooks") to academic topics and give marginalized students a chance to shine.

The second step in developing a culturally responsive practice is a change in skill set. In her 2002 article, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching", Geneva Gay describes five important skills for educators working with diverse students: (1) developing knowledge about the characteristics of your students' cultures[2] and working toward a deep understanding of multicultural education; (2) designing culturally relevant curricula with honest information about race and ethnicity, utilizing culturally appropriate artifacts for instruction, and thoughtfully examining representations of race and ethnicity in popular media; (3) demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community based on respect and expectations of success; (4) becoming adept in cross-cultural communications by recognizing that the communication styles differ and some are more active, participatory, and multimodal than those of the American mainstream; (5) and providing culturally congruent instruction. The majority of the world's cultures are collectivist, focusing on the community as a whole. Students from such cultures have been acculturated to begin by considering the big picture and to process information through active discussion and collaboration. Thus, suitable instructional techniques will likely include elements such as cooperative learning, storytelling, drama, movement, and music (Hammond, 2015). However, it is important to understand that individual students, even those from the same community, may have had unique experiences and personal interests which color the way they learn. The best way,

[1] See page 15 for a printable pdf of the Cultural Reflection Guide for ETs, a set of questions you might consider as you examine your own cultural identity.

[2] See Recommended Resources on page 17 for suggestions on learning about variations in culture.

Table 1
Some Funds of Knowledge

Type	Examples	Examples of academic connections
Agriculture	Horseback riding, animal management, soil and irrigation systems	Background information for novel set on a farm
Business	Market values, appraising, accounting, building codes, labor laws	Real-life applications of economics topics
Household management	Budgeting, cooking, household maintenance	Computing with money (decimals), measurement equivalents, fractions, following directions
Construction	Carpentry, roofing, masonry, painting, design and architecture	Measurement and geometric topics in math
Medicine	First aid, midwifery, herbal knowledge, folk veterinary cures	Science unit on plants or on medicine through the ages

Note: Adapted from "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes & Classrooms" by L. C. Moll, C. Amanti, D. Neff, & N. Gonzolez, 1992, *Theory Into Practice*, (31)2, pp. 132-141. Copyright 2001 by Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

then, for educators to address this is to get to know individual students well.

The Journey Continues: Routes to Culturally Responsive Ed Therapy

Some educational therapists have had opportunities to be trained in culturally responsive practices; those who have not will find multiple options for doing so—college classes, professional development programs, workshops, webinars, books, articles in professional publications, YouTube videos, and websites. Particularly powerful methods include joining a professional learning community (perhaps an AET study group) or consulting with skilled practitioners. Of course, researching the ongoing work of respected leaders in the field, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, Zaretta Hammond, and Sharroky Hollie, each of whom has something unique to offer, can add depth and breadth to our understanding.

Themes to Guide Culturally Responsive Educational Therapy

Educational therapists often express concern that incorporating culturally responsive approaches into therapy would require learning about many individual cultures. This, however, is not the heart of cultural responsiveness. The following themes from research on culturally responsive pedagogy, offered by Hanley & Noblit (2009), can serve as guidelines for educational therapists working with diverse clients.

1. *Involve the Family.* Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that cultures can vary over time and within a racial group; thus, it is important to invite community participation. Educational therapists working with clients from unfamiliar cultures can learn more about clients' needs, cultures, and communities by communicating with their families.

2. *Use culture to promote racial identity.* Culturally responsive programing utilizes key aspects of the home culture to support positive racial identities and promote resilience. Educational therapists can use elements of the client's home culture to enhance motivation and develop culturally-informed instructional practices.

3. *Use culture and racial identity as an asset.* Programs based on cultural responsiveness provide affirmation for students' racial and cultural identities. Such assets can become part of the strength-based approach used in the educational therapy setting.

4. *Be prepared to acknowledge the structural inequalities in the society.* Culturally responsive programs recognize the racial and ethnic inequities that exist within society. Awareness of such inequalities may help educational therapists appreciate the potential of a pedagogy that is geared toward insuring high achievement and strengthening resilience for marginalized students.

5. *Develop caring relationships.* Educators in culturally responsive programs are trained to recognize that caring behaviors differ by culture. Caring relationships are an integral part of educational therapy (Ungerleider, 2011). Thus, it is important for educational therapists to become familiar with cultural variations in expressing care.

6. *Assume success.* Instead of attending to problems and deficiencies, culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on building success. Similarly, educational therapists seek to leverage clients' strengths in order to insure successful outcomes.

7. *Promote active learning, problem-based instruction, and student involvement.* Culturally responsive programming places a high value on active learning, real-world problems, and projects involving the integration of various curricular areas. Given the flexibility of one-to-one sessions, educational therapists can use these methods to nurture client motivation, develop critical thinking, practice decision making, and promote high expectations.

8. *Acknowledge the challenges.* Culturally responsive pedagogy challenges educators to recognize that children from marginalized communities are placed at a disadvantage by an educational system that is designed to promote the dominant Anglocentric worldview rather than by some ostensible racial, ethnic, or cultural deficiencies. This recognition can provide awareness—and research-backed pedagogical tools—to educational therapists working with clients from diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.

Educational therapy and culturally responsive teaching both grew out of a determination to improve the academic skills and life trajectories of students who were not making optimal progress. Though educational therapy focuses on individuals with learning differences, and culturally responsive teaching centers on students from marginalized and immigrant communities,

both recognize the importance of providing a safe environment, developing caring relationships, recognizing student strengths and assets, and advancing academic success. As AET defines its role in social justice, we can learn to draw on the principles of culturally responsive teaching to complement and strengthen the practice of educational therapy for clients from diverse cultures.

Culturally Responsive Teaching ≠ Critical Race Theory

Culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory share initials—CRT—which has led to some confusion. Culturally responsive teaching is a research-based instructional approach that allows teachers to leverage the cultures, languages, and life experiences of their students in order to create more effective instruction ("How to," n.d.). This approach helps educators build their own capacity to work effectively with diverse students and their families (Hammond, 2016). Critical race theory originated in the 1970s as an analytical tool for law students to think critically about the role of race in the legal system (New Jersey School Boards Association, 2021). Over time, it has expanded to include the examination of social institutions as they relate to other identities, such as gender, class, and disability. Critical race theory is a concept used by scholars to analyze and interpret data. It is not and never was intended to be a curriculum to be taught in K-12 schools (Pennsylvania School Boards Association, n.d.), and it is not the same as culturally responsive teaching.

Click image for full-size PDF of the Cultural Reflection Guide for ETs.

Cultural Refection Guide for ETs

Culturally relevant educational therapy prompts us to learn more about the ways that individuals from different cultures view the world and interact with others. Since our own worldview is strongly influenced by the culture(s) in which we were raised, it can be helpful to consider our own cultural perspectives. Below is a series of questions designed to help you reflect on your cultural influences.

1. When you were growing up, did you live in a rural, small town, suburban, or urban area?
2. How would you describe your family's economic status as you were growing up? What did this mean for your quality of life?
3. What do you know about your ancestors and their earliest connections to this country? How would you describe the story of your family in America?
4. What language(s) did you speak at home? How did your family identify ethnically and/or racially?
5. Was religion an important part of your life?
6. What were some of your important family traditions—holidays, foods, rituals?
7. What family stories were passed down to you?
8. What were some "sayings" that guided your family as you were growing up? What did they mean to you?
9. Which physical, social, or cultural attributes were admired in your community? Which were not?
10. How were you encouraged to express your emotions? Were individuals of different genders expected to to express emotions differently?

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Recommended Resources for Learning About Variations in Culture

Benson, E. (2003, February). Intelligence across cultures. *Monitor on Psychology, 34*(2), 56. https://www.apa.org/monitor/feb03/intelligence

> This thought-provoking article from an APA publication examines how different cultures define intelligence and why differences in cognitive styles in various cultures make it difficult to define and measure "intelligence."

CultureGrams® from ProQuest LLC

> For ETs seeking information on unfamiliar cultures, CultureGrams is a respected resource available through subscribing libraries and schools. CultureGrams' World Edition "goes beyond basic facts and figures with local perspectives on more than 200 countries and territories, detailing daily life and culture, including history, customs and lifestyles."
>
> ProQuest website—https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/culturegrams/

For an overview of CultureGrams, click here.

Ungerleider, J. (2017). Enhancing collaboration in educational therapy: A conflict resolution approach. *The Educational Therapist, 38*(2), 11-14.

> Though the title might not suggest it, Ungerleider's article includes valuable information on "cultural differences in communications styles, expectations, and values" as these issues relate to "building strong collaborative relationships" in educational settings (pp. 11, 13).

https://www.aetonline.org/images/Members-Only/AET-Journal/2017/2017-Fall/04_GemFromTheArchive_EnhancingCollaborationInEducationalTherapy–AConflictResolutionApproach_JohnUngerleider.pdf

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