

Culturally Responsive Education: Essential and Connected to SEL

By Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab (www.secdlab.org)



Why is cultural responsiveness important?

For the same reason that when you look into a mirror, you want to see your likeness gazing back at you. When children are in school, their teachers, the staff, their classmates, and the curriculum are the mirrors. They want to see their likenesses reflected back.

When we look into a mirror, it's often with a Snow White-story hopefulness—we like to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and see ourselves as reasonably “fair,” rather than focus on what does not look so good, especially if we can't change it. For kids, it's different. They are much more likely than adults to accept the reflections they are getting from others. They

have less of a capacity to dispute the messages they are getting—the more consistent those messages, the harder it is to think otherwise. And kids often don't realize that these reflections may or may not be accurate—what they are seeing could be more the property of the mirror, than properties of themselves. It's like they are breathing smog. They internalize the bad air around them (Kloos et al., 2021).

No need to continue this analogy further - you can use you own imagination to elaborate. Our students need to see themselves in a positive and constructive light when they come to school. This means ALL students. And they need to see others in that light as well, even if they are not well represented in their classroom or

school. In a global world, students of today will be interacting with people for all nations, ethnicities, abilities, gender orientations, and beliefs. We cannot shield our children- indeed, to do so is actually to leave them more vulnerable (Banks, 2019).

Culturally responsive education (CRE) is intertwined with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in that SEL represents skills that are needed to be culturally aware, curious, respectful, and responsive. As school administrators put both SEL and CRE practices into place, the result will be improved classroom and school climate, improved student and teacher morale, greater academic engagement, and gains in both academics and positive student behavior. These

benefits come in stages and do not happen instantly—but when the path is followed with commitment, they will accrue—and once accrued, your school will not want to turn back.

What are Key Culturally Responsive Education Practices?

1. Students engage in learning activities that are rigorous and use the assets and strengths of their culture and other cultures to demonstrate high cognitive academic and social-emotional skills. They see that people like themselves can and do succeed in multiple arenas and that their potential, unconstrained, is immense.
2. Students are given the opportunity to bring their cultural capital into their classrooms and to broaden their awareness and appreciation of others' cultural capital, including those who might not be well represented in their classrooms or schools.
3. Students are provided opportunities to work in groups with students of various cultures
4. Students develop social awareness of societal conditions that place Black, Brown and poor individuals, locally, nationally, and globally, in disadvantage (Elias & Leverett, 2021; Hammond, 2014).

How are the 5 SEL skill areas essential for equity and CRE?

1. Empathy and perspective-taking foster understanding and appreciation of the points of view of their classmates' cultures and other frames of reference of classmates, and support students in showing caring and compassion for others' circumstances.
2. Emotion regulation and focus allow students to listen longer and more patiently, avoid snap judgments, and to be more thoughtful about their language before speaking to classmates.

3. Responsible, ethical decision-making underlies the process of collaborative efforts in classrooms and groups, of authentically discussing and collectively resolving classroom, school, and community issues, and for responding constructively to the inevitable obstacles that will be faced on the road to equity.
4. Being able to function effectively in groups involves knowing how to work with diverse others, taking leadership and support roles as needed, and being an active contributor in group situations.
5. Self-awareness includes expanding students' feelings vocabularies to be able to understand nuances of emotional in oneself and others. For example, feeling "badly" about what happened to a given group of people is not the same as feeling shocked, saddened, or outraged. And being uncomfortable with or nervous about difference often is much more accurate, and constructive, than feeling repulsed, frightened, or offended (Zins & Elias, 2007).

SEL is not CRE, nor is it equity. However, neither CRE nor equity can occur in the absence of sound SEL competencies (Simmons, 2019). SEL is what helps our valued outcomes to happen. Where CRE and equity are valued outcomes, SEL is necessary.

For school administrators and supervisors, the path forward is not easy. First, of course, are our own attitudes and biases. How determined are we to look at our students' futures, rather than past or present? If the boat needs to be rocked, are we committed to and ready to rock it? As John Lewis asked, are we ready to get into "good trouble, necessary trouble"? Do we need more preparation? Do we need to gather allies first? These are legitimate concerns. You cannot lead from a position of uncertainty (Roegman, Allen, Leverett, Thompson, & Hatch, 2019).

For staff members also, the path to change is not swift. Biases of various kinds are ubiquitous and colorism seems to be a global bias that will not yield quickly. An in-service workshop

will not bring your staff along. Most organizations that engage in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion audits and programs do not see lasting effects, because they usually are not fully ready to confront and address the changes needed. The road ahead requires many supportive "rest stops" if we are to reach our destination.

Recommendations for School Leaders

Three recommendations for school leaders are:

1. Be clear about your commitment to CRE, to building students' SEL as part of improving your building's culture and climate and all student accomplishment in all areas, and that this will be a work in progress for which everyone including all staff members — must be both responsible and involved.
2. Begin to build capacity by developing a knowledgeable leadership team to guide and support this process, while also engaging staff in reading/discussion groups to begin to engage them in this work. Some staff members might want to make CRE and SEL part of their professional improvement plans (Berkowitz, 2021; Elias & Berkowitz, 2016).
3. Encourage teachers to begin to experiment with different kinds of lessons and discussions, as well as reflections on their own practices. This includes helping students rediscover something that was already ON the endangered species list before COVID pushed learning to be remote vs. live: the art of conversation. Guidelines for teachers, including conversation starting prompts for secondary level students, can be found in <https://www.edutopia.org/article/who-do-you-call-rooting-out-implicit-bias>
<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/4-approaches-building-positive-community-any-classroom-maurice-elias>

<https://resources.corwin.com/morningclassroomconversations>

Buddying with other school leaders as you embark on these efforts—to form a community of practice—will accelerate your progress. Engaging with www.SEL4NJ.org (or www.SEL4US.org)

as a potential convener and organizer of these collaborations is a complementary strategy. To learn more about this perspective, and to see additional suggestions for administrator and teacher actions, please check out Addressing

equity through culturally responsive education and SEL. 2021 by Elias & Leverett,

<https://www.nprinc.com/addressing-equity-through-culturally-responsive-education-sel/>

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About the Author



Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychology, Rutgers University, Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab (www.SECDLab.org), and Co-Director, Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools (SELinSchools.org, @SELinSchools)



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