Chapter 1

Culturally Responsive Instruction: Definitions, Research, and Considerations
There’s a good chance that most of you reading this book are white and middle class; more than half of you are likely female. We make those assumptions based on the following facts: 83.5% of teachers in the United States are white, 58% of them are female, and their average salary is $49,600 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

At the same time, only 61.8% of students are white, 16% are black, 16.7% are Hispanic, 1.3% are American Indian/Alaska Native, and 4% are Asian/Pacific Islander. One student in five is likely to be an English language learner (ELL) (Richard-Amato & Snow, 2005). Nearly half of all students (42.9%) receive free or reduced-price lunches (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The poverty rate is actually higher than that because older students are more reluctant to report the need for a free or reduced-price lunch. Furthermore, diversity in the United States is increasing each year. While the impact currently is greatest in urban areas, rural and suburban schools are becoming more and more diverse and will be even more so in the near future. Consider what your future classroom might be like based on the projections in Table 1.1 (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

Table 1.1
U.S. Population Projections, 2005–2050

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Share of Total Population</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2050</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, whether you are in the majority of teachers (83% white) or in the minority (6.9% black, 6.6% Hispanic, and 1.5% Asian/Pacific Islander) (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), it is essential that you plan instruction that is responsive to the cultures represented in your classroom.
What Is Culturally Responsive Instruction?

For this book, we define *culturally responsive instruction* (CRI) as using knowledge of student cultures and modalities to select and apply strategies and resources for instruction, while engaging in self-reflection. There are five components to this definition, which can be divided into two parts: the *teaching* and the *teacher*. The first part, the *teaching*, contains four coherent puzzle pieces: (1) instructional strategies, (2) multiple texts, (3) student cultures, and (4) multiple modalities. The second part is the *teacher*, who engages in reflection about self—that is, who examines his or her own culture, perspectives, and biases. In CRI, it is essential that the teacher self-reflect in these ways, while engaging in teaching that focuses on understanding student cultures (e.g., hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2010; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2005; Sleeter, 2005). Together, the *teaching* and the *teacher* make up the big picture of CRI. Figure 1.1 shows the teaching and the teacher in a concrete

![Figure 1.1](Figure 1.1 Culturally Responsive Instruction Is a Coherent Puzzle of Teaching Components and a Mirror for Teacher Self-Reflection)
image, where the four puzzle pieces make up the teaching and the mirror represents the self-reflection of the teacher.

Culture, then, is the heart of CRI. What comes to mind when you hear the term culture? Most likely, culture brings to mind a particular group of people, but other thoughts may come to mind as well, like beliefs, values, and behaviors shared within a particular societal system. Nieto (2010) notes that “culture is complex and intricate; it cannot be reduced to holidays, foods or dances, although these of course are elements of culture” (p. 9). Although Nieto affirms these as elements of culture, such items as holidays, foods, or dances are commonly thought of as a surface level of culture—what Hidalgo (1993) calls the concrete level, which is at the surface of the three levels of culture: concrete, behavioral, and symbolic.

This surface or concrete level contains examples of what we see when we look at another culture from the outside in. Many times we tend to make a judgment—we look at a group of people, see the clothes they wear or their particular physical characteristics as different from ourselves, and label them. This judgment can lead to a stereotype, or the labeling of a particular group by those outside the group based on prejudgments or assumptions. The concrete level may also contain the artifacts of a culture, which can be seen but not understood (Schein, 1992).

The behavioral level is also seen from the outside in. The behaviors, like nonverbal communication, are visible. This level can also be problematic because of the judgments made and the stereotypes held by those outside the culture who observe behaviors. For example, in some cultures students, as a way of showing respect, look down, rather than looking the teacher in the eye. Not knowing this, a teacher could mistake the behavior for disrespect.

Thinking of culture at its deepest level, the symbolic level, can enhance teachers’ understanding of student knowledge and experiences. The symbolic level informs the behaviors and artifacts that can be seen in a culture. For example, suppose a student is not completing an assigned independent reading task (behavior) and dresses like other students in her neighborhood (artifact). The teacher can conclude that she does not care to read. But when the behavior and artifact are viewed from the symbolic level, the judgment can be turned into questions: Might she not be interested in the text? Or does she have trouble reading the words? Or could she lack the background knowledge needed to understand the text? These questions get to the heart of the student’s knowledge and experiences in order to assist in matching her interest and skills with an individual reading selection. The symbolic level, then, is the level most central to a culture, and teachers can get to
this level when they seek the perspectives of their students by asking questions and finding out what they see, hear, feel, and think.

A definition of culture that focuses on the perspective of those in the cultural group is offered by Banks (2004). According to Banks, culture contains six elements: (1) values and behavioral styles; (2) language and dialects; (3) nonverbal communications; (4) cultural cognitiveness; (5) perspectives, worldviews, and frames of reference; and (6) identification. Noteworthy in this definition is the word **perspectives**. Culture is neither what we see about students nor what we assume they think. Rather, it is a point of view that guides what students do. Therefore, students’ perspectives are what we need to respond to in our instruction. We need to know their cultural perspectives—their knowledge, experiences, and methods of communicating—in order to meet their individual reading needs.

If culture refers to students’ points of view, what about the term **diversity**? Au (2004) uses the term to refer to “students who differ from the mainstream” with respect to ethnicity, primary language, and social class. In the United States, these students often are African American, Asian American, Latino, or Native American in ethnicity; speak home languages other than English; and come from poor or working-class families (p. 392).

In this book, we will use Au’s definition of diversity, recognizing that “students who differ from the mainstream” include children not specifically mentioned by Au but who would be included in her definition—children of various ethnic or religious groups, immigrants, second-generation U.S. citizens, Native Alaskan children, children from rural Appalachia—in short, any group who “brings cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles” (Gay, 2000, p. 29) that diverge from the way we have traditionally done school in the United States. We will examine instruction for those diverse groups in the context of Banks’ definition of culture. Although the suggestions we make apply to English Language Learners (ELLs), we will also address that population specifically in Chapter 4 because they make up such a large segment of our diverse student population.

**Is Culturally Responsive Instruction Just a New Name for Multicultural Education?**

Multicultural education is a field of study or an umbrella that captures five dimensions that need teachers’ attention (Banks, 1995): content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice
CRI focuses on each of these areas and is a foundation for instruction under the multicultural education umbrella, rather than an add-on.

Historically, multicultural education has been seen as “an activity that happens at a set period of the day [or] another subject to be covered” (Nieto, 2010, p. 75). In this view, diversity is a supplement to the regular curriculum—for example, including in the social studies curriculum a unit on Mexico or introducing notable African American leaders during Black History Month. The rest of the curriculum focuses on mainstream historians and events, where students do not gain experience with cultural inequalities or how cultures are interconnected (Banks, 1997; Nieto, 1996, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). This type of multicultural education focuses on celebrating differences in shallow ways (Nieto, 2010).

CRI, on the other hand, aims to reflect the ideals of democracy in a diverse society using Banks’ five dimensions of multicultural education. It allows students to see from several cultural and ethnic perspectives and is engaging for students and diverse in its teaching and learning dimensions (Sleeter, 2005). In reading instruction, such an approach enables culture, language, and literacy to intersect (Nieto, 2010).

What Does the Research Say About Culturally Responsive Instruction?

Like all human beings, culturally diverse students need to belong (Maslow, 1970). Research has shown that, when cultural differences are ignored in classrooms, diverse students feel a heightened sense of alienation (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Igoa, 1995; Schmidt, 1998, 2002). Frequently, they feel they must abandon their cultural background in order to assimilate into the majority culture. This dissonance has been linked to poor literacy development and high dropout rates (Edwards, 2004; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Nieto, 1999; Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2000; Schmidt, 1998, 1999).

However, when teachers honor what students already know and celebrate who they are as individuals and as members of a cultural group, students achieve at higher levels (Gay, 2000; Tatum, 2000). Research indicates that in addition to obtaining higher grades and standardized test scores, students exhibit better interpersonal skills, a better understanding of interconnections...
among individuals and cultures, and an appreciation for the social nature of learning (Chapman, 1994; Foster, 1995; Hollins, 1996; Hollins, King, & Hayman, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). As you proceed through the chapters in this book, you will encounter more research in support of CRI. In short, decades of research point to the benefits of CRI. So how do you get there?

How Can You Be Culturally Responsive?

The first step to becoming culturally responsive is to pay attention to the symbolic or deep level of culture. This means accepting that the cultures of some of your students are different from your culture without imposing a value judgment of “good” or “bad.” Indeed, getting to know students is a priority in the classroom. However, when faced with a student who has no books or magazines in the home, can you recognize the family’s literacy materials—U.S. mail, bus schedules, church bulletins, and mail-order catalogues—as different from those in your culture but not good or bad? When parents do not come for parent conferences, can you accept as different from your culture, but not good or bad, the fact that in some Latino communities parents consider it an insult to the teacher if they try to teach their own child? When children interrupt in class, can you respect as different from your culture, but not good or bad, the fact that in some cultures children are encouraged to “chime in”?

Attention to the symbolic level of culture cannot happen unless teachers study issues of diversity and engage in self-reflection. In fact, multicultural researchers and educators have long pointed out the need for teachers’ self-examination of value judgments. In her well-known text *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) points out that “the unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be controlled” (p. 39). Although your involvement in this book shows your willingness to engage in and dedication to cultural responsiveness, your continuous awareness of fears, judgments, and even biases that emerge from your own background and experiences will enhance your implementation of CRI in the classroom. Only after such honest soul-searching will you truly be ready to plan concrete ways of
meeting the literacy needs of your diverse students. Here are three ways to begin this searching:

1. **Examine your own culture.** What is your culture? Thinking about “culture” may bring many words to mind—for example, *religion, ethnicity, race, clothing, gender, foods, time, and language.* Expand this list, and then categorize the words according to the three levels of culture described above (i.e., concrete, behavioral, and symbolic). Choose five to eight words from this list that are most important to who you are. What do you notice about this list? What surprises you about this list? Take the list a step further, and draw a circle. Divide the circle into the number of pieces that corresponds to the number of words you chose. Decide the size of each piece based on how important that aspect of culture is to your life. What do you notice about the sizes of the pieces?

2. **Enhance your skill in seeing multiple perspectives.** How do you think? What do you see? What do you feel? What do you do? Ask these questions of another person like a student in your class. How does the student think? What does the student see? What does the student feel? What does the student do? Then compare this perspective with your own, and add other perspectives to your comparisons. How is each student’s perspective similar to or different from yours—perhaps as a teacher, as an adult, or even as a student when you were this student’s age? How is this student’s perspective different from that of another student?

3. **Explore your connections with multicultural terms.** Common multicultural terms include words like *prejudice, discrimination, and stereotype.* Review what each of these terms means below. Then ask yourself these questions: In what ways have I been prejudiced? In what ways might I have discriminated against others? In what ways might I have stereotyped others? In what ways have I changed, or could I change, prejudice, discrimination, or stereotypes?

   - **Prejudice:** A thought that is a conclusion about a person. It is a judgment that is made before gathering information about the background and experiences of an individual.
   - **Discrimination:** A behavior that follows a particular conclusion (i.e., prejudice) about an individual or group.
   - **Stereotype:** A label placed on an individual or group due to a particular conclusion (e.g., prejudice) about that individual or group.
Continuous awareness of your own fears, judgments, and even biases is a necessity for CRI, and recognizing other cultures as being different from your own, but not good or bad, can be tricky at times. Recognizing instruction as good or bad for culturally diverse students is a bit easier because of the research that supports it. The following questions may help you assess the extent to which you are planning CRI:

1. How do you assess student cultures so that you can make appropriate instructional decisions?
2. How do you apply reading strategies that focus on connection to cultures?
3. Do you attend to the learning modalities of your students?
4. Do you use materials that are multicultural—that is, ones that reflect the backgrounds and experiences of diverse students?
5. Do you use materials that are multitextual—that is, ones that are in multiple formats like print, visual, audio, and interactive?
6. How do you motivate your students?
7. How do you address the elements of effective reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension)?

**Conclusion**

In the chapters that follow, we will provide suggestions for assessing your diverse learners and share instructional strategies that have been shown by research to be effective for this population. As you move forward with this topic, you might do well to keep in mind some of the traits Whitaker (2004) listed in *What Great Teachers Do Differently*:

- Great teachers have high expectations for students but even higher expectations for themselves.
- Great teachers know who the variable is in the classroom: *They are*.
- Great teachers consistently strive to improve, and they focus on something they can control—their own performance (p. 127).

In the end, what really matters for your culturally diverse learners is YOU!
I. REFLECTION (10–15 minutes)

ANALYSIS

• What, for you, were the most interesting and/or important ideas in this chapter?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

• What information was new to you or different from your own prior perceptions of culture, diversity, or CRI?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

CLARIFICATION

• Did anything surprise you? Confuse you? Cause you to “squirm” a bit?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

EXTENSION

• What additional questions do you have about CRI?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
• Describe one unforgettable classroom experience with a culturally diverse student.

• Describe your own culture from the concrete, behavior, and symbolic levels.

• Do you have any new insights about the cultural context of literacy?

• How might the information presented in this chapter be applied in your own teaching situation?

II. DISCUSSION (30 minutes)

• Form groups of 4–6 members.
• Appoint a facilitator (timer) and recorder.
• Share responses. Make sure that each person has shared his or her responses to each category (Analysis/Clarification/Extension).
• Help each other with any areas of confusion.
• Answer and/or discuss questions raised by group members.
• On chart paper, the recorder should summarize the main discussion points and identify issues or questions the group would like to raise for general discussion.
III. APPLICATION (10 minutes)

• Have your students create portfolios that include examples of their cultures. What might they include? How can you use what you learn from their portfolios?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

• Based on your reflection and discussion, how might you apply what you have learned about CRI?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________