



National Council of
Teachers of English®

CULTURALLY AND HISTORICALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

A Policy Research Brief

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Introduction: Problematizing Curriculum and Instruction

This policy brief aims to problematize the curricular issues that have traditionally framed schools from the 1600s onward. These framings have taught literacy as decontextualized skills, disconnected from students' lives, their consciousness, and their joy. This tradition has resulted in poor achievement, less rigor, and a lack of intellectual advancement, identity development, and developing social and critical consciousness among youth. These problems are especially exacerbated for students and teachers of color, who have received fewer resources, curricula, or pedagogies that are connected to their genius and needs. Further, policy mandates are typically written to exclude the histories, identities, literacies, and liberation of the same students underserved by our educational system. In fact, policy has pushed the teaching of frameworks and theories that were not written by people of color, nor do they honor the lenses of Black and Brown people. When the problems of schools are coupled with the witnessing of injustices and racism in society, one can argue that schools must prepare a type of child who will have the potential to enter the world ready to disrupt and dismantle hurt, pain, and harm and advance social change. In other words, skill instruction is not enough to sustain a society imbued with inequities. In this policy brief, I discuss the problems of decontextualized, skills-only instruction and suggest ways policymakers can move toward more excellent forms of education.

Skills-only education has been prevalent

since one of the first curriculum programs, the *New England Primer*, which was a textbook for teaching children how to read in Europe and within the United States in the 17th and 18th centuries. I use the *New England Primer* here as one example to justify the need for culturally and historically responsive education.

Developed in the 1600s by Benjamin Harris, a British journalist who emigrated to Boston, this primer was

• The text and the nature of the text were not responsive to misrepresentations, injustices, or oppression of the times.

less than 100 pages, and was widespread throughout the United States. It became the foundation for the teaching and learning of reading. Yet, this curriculum centered education from a white male perspective and had several problems, including:

- **Problem #1:** The primer centered whiteness and white representation, including white characters and white culture, neglecting to offer diversity of people of color. The primer did not include Black excellence, Black thought, or Black language. The same can be said for the excellence and cultural ways of Indigenous people and other people of color.
- **Problem #2:** The primer was apolitical and lacked criticality. The text and the nature of the text were not responsive to misrepresentations, injustices, or oppression of the times. The readings did not offer opportunities for children to understand race, gender, class, sexuality, or diverse religions. In this way, it was

decontextualized from the harms found in society, and, therefore, lacked diversity of thought.

- **Problem #3:** The primer did not provide opportunities for all youth to see themselves or to make sense of their multiple identities. Due to the focus of whiteness, it appeared as if this was the only group who mattered.
- **Problem #4:** The primer privileged the English language. Although there were other languages spoken in this location during this time, the primer was only printed in English.
- **Problem #5:** The primer was constructed to promote skills-only education and did not explicitly offer

Although this book was published in the 17th century, we still have the same curricular problems observed in schools today.

- opportunities
- for cultivating
- other literacies
- such as
- debating,
- argumentation,
- or writing.

Although this book was published in the 17th century, we still have the same curricular problems observed in schools today. Literacy can still be taught that is detached from the world or the lives or cultures of students.

When it comes to identity and culture, most schools' curriculum frames culture and identity as either *contributions* (teaching culture in the context as food, holidays, or people only) or *additive* (teaching culture by adding supplemental or optional books or material and leaving the actual curriculum unchanged) (Banks, 1999). Although these types of curricula are common, some classrooms neglect

the teaching of culture and justice altogether or teach culture from a deficit lens.

The Required Shift to Culturally and Historically Responsive Education

In response, historic communities of color have practiced what is called *culturally relevant* or *responsive* teaching, which restores education by teaching goals that move beyond solely skills. Coined as *culturally relevant education* by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, CRE became a model to teach three central pillars: *academic success* (teaching students skills, knowledge, and proficiencies), *cultural competence* (teaching in ways that honor and affirm students' cultures and the cultures of others), and *sociopolitical consciousness* (teaching in ways that connect to the real world, helping students to apply academics to solving problems related to marginalization and inequities) (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995). Others have followed the scholarly trajectory of CRE and have centered students' identities, literacies, and epistemologies as ways to teach them more responsibly and excellently (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Lee, 1995; Gay, 2002; Gutierrez, 2008). Naming this cultural centering in instruction as *Resource Pedagogies*, Paris (2012) writes about how these are teaching and learning approaches that center students' culture, race, language, and other identities as genius and resources and not deficiencies to be overcome. The field of literacy has also observed extensions of CRE to explicitly speak to race, antiracism, anti-Blackness, and LGBTQIA+ (Baker-



Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017; Love, 2019; Lyiscott, 2017). Across all these literatures, authors are expressing the need for the dismantling and rebuilding of schools that teach, assess, and evaluate teachers on the pursuit of advancing students' academic, personal, racial, and critical literacies.

Before scholars engaged in research related to resource pedagogies, Black historic communities have been centering their genius, identities, and consciousness in their learning and literacy. Roots of CRE can be found in the teachings and scholarship of writers such as Maria Stewart, William Whipper, James Forten, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carter G. Woodson. When studying their scholarship, they practiced academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness in their educational advancement. Rather than defining literacy as skills based only, they saw literacy synonymous to education because literacy was defined in more nuanced ways of reading, writing, thinking, speaking, listening, and sociocultural meaning-making. Also, literacy was the vehicle to the learning of mathematics, science, social studies, health education, and art.

In my study of Black history of the early 19th century, I found that Black people held to five pursuits of literacy/ education which I name as Culturally and Historically Responsive Education (Muhammad, 2020). CHRE becomes a pedagogical model and ideological framework to respond to the curricular problems held in education for decades. Instead of just decontextualized skills

that fail to respond to the social lives or social times we live in, Black ancestors embodied, lived, and taught the following goals:

1. Identities—

Teaching students to know their histories and identities while also learning the truth and knowledge about others

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who are different from their own identities. This also involves teaching students to make sense of their own values and beliefs.

2. Skills—Skills and proficiencies are often measured on assessments. Skills are central to ways in which we have traditionally taught. Skills are the state achievement standards. Each content area has its own descriptions and set of skills that youth are expected to learn and teachers are expected to teach.

3. Intellect—The capacity for knowledge—what we learn or understand about various topics and ideals. Intellect is knowledge into action and involves learning to think deeply about new people, places, concepts, movements, moments, histories, and things worthwhile.

4. Criticality—The ability to understand power, oppression, antiracism, and other anti-oppressions. Criticality calls for teachers and students to understand the ideologies and perspectives of marginalized communities and their ways of knowing and experiencing the

world. This involves teaching topics related to equity, power, control, justice, freedom, (mis)representation, oppression, exploitation, marginalization, empowerment, harm, hurt, or pain associated with self, others, living organisms, or humanity.

5. **Joy**—Advancing students’ happiness and triumphs by elevating beauty, solutions to injustice, and truth in themselves and within other people, stories, and histories. This is not just about celebrating and having fun in the classroom but creating spaces for students to name and embody personal beauty and fulfillment.

Collectively these five goals are called culturally and historically responsive *pursuits* rather than *learning standards*, because pursuits carry the goals of self-reliance, self-empowerment, and self-determination. Pursuits are ever evolving and continue after preK–12 graduation. A standard, on the other hand, has a ceiling and is seen as a dysconscious projections that come from those who design

Culturally and historically responsive education can be used across all disciplinary areas in preK–12 education.

- curriculum
- absent of
- Black and
- Brown lives.
- Additionally,
- the pursuits
- honor and
- extend the

three pillars of CRE with the added pursuit of joy.

Culturally and historically responsive education can be used across all disciplinary areas in preK–12 education. When enacting this model across the

five pursuits, teaching is naturally grounded in literacy development, critical thinking, social emotional learning, and multicultural text selection. In one example of teaching science and disciplinary literacies about sugar, students are taught how skills connect and apply to the world. CHRE pushes for all disciplines to be seen as humanities (not just ELA or social studies).

1. **Identity:** Students will record and analyze their daily sugar intake and compare it to normed data for a healthy heart for their age group.

2. **Skills:** Science: Students will learn about the sugar molecule sucrose and learn how to dissolve sugar through an experiment. Disciplinary Literacy: Students will learn how to read and write a lab report.

3. **Intellectualism:** Students will learn the origins of sugar and learn about the history of sugar in communities of color.

4. **Criticality:** Students will learn how sugar connected to freedom historically. Students will learn about the effects of the overconsumption of unhealthy/processed sugar on the body.

5. **Joy:** Students will learn about healthy and natural sugars and their effects on the body.

In traditional classrooms, teachers may have only taught the state standards or skills and missed opportunities to connect and apply the learning to students’ lives, consciousness, and joy. Teaching across all five pursuits means teaching the whole child. This approach of culturally and historically responsive education teaches



students to have personal development and fulfillment as well as academic achievement. The model does not neglect other pursuits that children need as they grow older and navigate through life. Unfortunately, schools are just teaching one-fifth of the model, or 20 percent. Traditionally we have only taught, assessed, and evaluated the teaching of skills, neglecting other necessary understandings children need. CHRE is not just beneficial for children of color, but all children.

Why CHRE Is Essential for Advancing Literacy Education

As long as inequities and oppressions exist in the world and society, we need literacy instruction that nurtures

Our violent, oppressive, and tumultuous times demand that we teach students in equitable ways.

- students' identities
- and criticality in
- equal value to
- the teaching of
- skills. Skills-only
- reform efforts
- have not been
- successful given
- how achievement

has not been assessed well, nor has achievement data improved across 25 years. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Our violent, oppressive, and tumultuous times demand that we teach students in equitable ways. Although CRE has been practiced and researched across the past 200 or so years, it has never been mandated or required in schools or policy. In the next section, I suggest five policy changes that are needed to support teachers and leaders for CHRE—to not just prepare

educators in progressive ways but to also prepare youth for the demands of the world.

Policy Recommendations

When it comes to resource pedagogies and CHRE, one must ask, how is this work not expected, required, or compulsory in such a diverse nation of schools? In fact, how has there been legislation passed that have centered anti-Blackness, mediocrity, and falsehood?

We must consider policy changes knowing that we are working within an educational system that has been created to dishonor the same group of people that CHRE comes from. Below I outline different areas of the system that hold promise

and possibility for policy, which calls for legislators, state leadership, district leadership,

If the state learning standards are flawed, subsequently the curriculum is written in flawed ways.

school boards, unions, parent groups, superintendents, and youth groups to call for transformative mandates.

Policy Recommendation #1: Replacing Standards

Schools are governed by state standards that are provided to leaders and teachers. If the state learning standards are flawed, subsequently the curriculum is written in flawed ways. Educators need standards or pursuits written to address not just skill development but identity, intellectualism, criticality, and joy.



Policy Recommendation #2: Mandating a CHRE Curriculum

The second policy recommendation is to adopt protocols for selecting and adapting curriculum for schools and classrooms. Most curriculum does not address criticality or identity. The mere addition of multicultural books does not mean the curriculum is culturally and historically responsive. There needs

We need different protocols for entrance and exit criteria for teacher education programs.

- to be pursued or
- standards written as
- learning objectives
- to address the five
- pursuits, and then
- the pursuits need
- to be assessed and
- tracked across time
- to measure the

progress from each student.

Policy Recommendation #3: Collect Data from CHRE Assessments

Often schools and districts collect data related to students reading, writing, and math levels, yet schools fail to collect assessment data related to a child's identity, intellectual growth, criticality, and consciousness, or joy. These are just as important to nurture alongside of skill development and so-called levels. If CHRE is to be taught across the standards and curriculum, it is important that assessments align.

Policy Recommendation #4: Rewriting Teacher and Leadership Evaluations

Across schools in the United States teachers are being evaluated on their ability to advance students' academic success and are not evaluated on students' progress of identity, joy, or

criticality. In order to require teachers to engage in culturally and historically responsive teaching, we have to hold them accountable and support them toward these ends through evaluative measures.

Policy Recommendation #5: Providing CHRE Teacher Education

Finally, as the last policy suggestion, we need different protocols for entrance and exit criteria for teacher education programs. I suggest that programs be grounded in culturally and historically responsive education rather than holding one course in diversity or multiculturalism. In addition, there needs to be classes where future teachers do the self-archaeological work unpacking their ideologies, bias, and internalized oppression. Programs need to center the genius of teacher candidates and help them learn how to nurture and cultivate the genius of

their future students. This requires preservice candidates to learn how to design

- **If all children do not**
- **experience freedom and**
- **liberatory learning in**
- **curriculum, the system**
- **must be transformed.**
-

pedagogy in artistic and creative ways.

Concluding Statement

States and districts have the autonomy to write, adopt, and mandate their own standards, curriculum, assessments, and evaluations to strive toward equity. Equity is not just mere access to something educational, nor is it solely greater representation. Access is one step forward toward equity,



but it involves the centering of justice, liberation, and freedom. If all children do not experience freedom and liberatory learning in curriculum, the system must be transformed. Not just pedagogical pursuits of curriculum and instruction that moves beyond skill development, but teaching that is connected to humanity. Culturally and historically responsive

education must not just be something added to school programs; it must be the school approach to educating all children. We carry too much genius and resources in this nation to foundationally carry the same practices that have not helped our children. Culturally and historically responsive education offers promise and direction for educational evolvment.

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