No More Culturally Irrelevant Teaching

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www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Souto-Manning, Mariana, author.
Title: No more culturally irrelevant teaching / Mariana Souto-Manning, Carmen Lugo Llerena, Jessica Martell, Abigail Salas Maguire, Alicia Arce-Boardman.
Description: Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, 2018. | Series: Not this but that | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017043353 | ISBN 9780325089799
Subjects: LCSH: Culturally relevant pedagogy—United States. | Education, Elementary—Social aspects—United States.
Classification: LCC LC1099.3 .S637 2018 | DDC 370.117—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017043353

Series Editors: Ellin Oliver Keene *and* Nell K. Duke
Acquisitions Editor: Katie Wood Ray
Production Editor: Sean Moreau
Cover Design: Lisa Fowler
Cover Images: boy (both poses): michael jung—stock.adobe.com; *classroom*: Tyler Olson—stock.adobe.com; *mirror*: msharova—stock.adobe.com
Interior Design: Suzanne Heiser
Typesetter: Valerie Levy, Drawing Board Studios
Manufacturing: Val Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
22 21 20 19 18 VP 1 2 3 4 5

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INTRODUCTION

Ellin Oliver Keene

During a recent visit to a city where I was working in schools, I decided to do what I often do when traveling—hunt down an independent children's bookstore. I travel with a suitcase roughly twice the size of what I need and often head home with some gems—recent and vintage titles—to share with students on my next trip. I wonder if one can write off the luggage overweight charges on one's taxes?! Something to think about. . . .

In this city, I found a children's bookshop and headed that direction after school. I noticed the "multicultural" section and began to browse. Sure enough, the titles reflected the issues you're about to read in Section 1. There were books depicting holidays and festivals from several cultures; a book of dolls in "traditional dress" from a variety of countries (mostly European); there were books written by white authors *about* people of color, but only three—three—titles that meet the standards the authors of this book set for materials that are culturally relevant. I mentioned this issue to the proprietor who seemed to misunderstand. She redirected me to the "multicultural" section and asked if she could help.

She *can* help, as we all can. Carmen, Jessica, Abigail, and Alicia, coauthors of Sections 1 and 3 in this book, suggest that, to engage in culturally relevant teaching, we must first consider our *mindset* toward children. It comes down to what we believe, in our heart of hearts, about every child's capacity to think at high levels and engage deeply in learning.

These authors walk their talk. In every word of this book, all five authors consistently use asset-based language, and it made me realize how many times a *day* we use or hear deficit language about children. I urge you to keep track of deficit language—just for a day or two. You'll be shocked.

The authors' mindset of unencumbered belief in children shines through these pages and makes the reader aware of the subtle cultural

biases present in so many classrooms. Their examples made me wince, knowing that I have perpetuated culturally *irrelevant* teaching at different moments in my career, and they caused me to rethink the work I do when I am in classrooms now, no matter the cultural and racial makeup of the school.

In Section 2, Mariana points out that there is no such thing as *acultural* teaching. Every move we make in the classroom has cultural implications, and culturally relevant teaching practices make a difference for students—the research on this is clear. We know, for example, that children's engagement and reading performance improve when they read books and engage in a range of classroom and community practices in which their stories are told and honored (Au 1980). Souto-Manning provides dozens of other studies that support culturally relevant teaching.

Mariana's review of the research caused me to wonder why anyone would avoid culturally relevant teaching. In one especially potent paragraph, she describes a study (Bishop 1990) in which the author:

> explains that children must see themselves in classroom texts so they can affirm their identities and practices and feel that they belong. Reading can become "a means of self-affirmation" if readers find "mirrors in books" (ix), yet, Bishop reminds us that in 1990, "6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them." (ix)

Is it any better now? Over 50 percent of students in American schools are students of color.

Has the move toward culturally relevant teaching reached all of them? Even if Bishop's statistics have improved, we can still assume that we have a long way to go after reading Section 1. It is simply vital that children tell stories, see visuals and artifacts, and, importantly, read and listen to books that represent them and are authored by people who look like them.

Having a handful of "multicultural" picture books is not enough, however, as I hope the aforementioned bookshop owner has discovered. Carmen, Jessica, Abigail, and Alicia explore some wholly original and fascinating approaches that go beyond read-alouds.

Wait until you get to the section about children bringing their "artifactual histories" into the classroom or the section in which "story acting" is used to help children understand oppression! The authors underscore the importance of narrative; we need to bring the stories of children's lives outside the classroom into our everyday work with children. They go on to address the need for counternarratives. Whose voices provide a different perspective than those we're accustomed to hearing? Whose voices are missing completely? I was captivated by the students' work shared in Section 3 and know you'll be able to extrapolate from these approaches to your classroom.

This is a book about disrupting perceptions and preconceived notions about children and teaching practice. It's the kind of book I treasure and reread precisely because it is disruptive. In this, one of the most deliciously diverse countries in the world, there is an urgency to move toward culturally relevant teaching. This book will light the path of your journey.

SECTION 1

NOT THIS

When Culture Comes to School

CARMEN LUGO LLERENA, JESSICA MARTELL, ABIGAIL SALAS MAGUIRE, AND ALICIA ARCE-BOARDMAN

Alicia was a child whose parents immigrated to the United States from Paraguay and Mexico. As she grew up and attended a public elementary school, Alicia was not exposed to culturally relevant teaching. She only remembers hearing about Cinco de Mayo as a student, a day that was not meaningful to her or her family. Regardless, her peers and teachers *thought* that Cinco de Mayo was an important holiday for her, communicating to her their lack of knowledge about the diversities within and across Latinx communities. Hispanic Heritage Month was never really recognized or celebrated during her

***Latinx* is a gender-inclusive term referring to people with cultural ties to Latin America and of Latin American descent. The term *Hispanic* refers to people from Spanish-speaking countries; it is seen as problematic by many (due to its references to colonization).**

schooling either—not even in shallow or marginal ways. As a result, Alicia felt invisible. She felt that her history, home language, and family culture did not matter.

Alicia grew up to become a public school teacher, as each of us did—Carmen, Jessica, and Abigail—committed to making Latinx students' histories and identities integral in both our classrooms and the life of our schools. We share this commitment with lots of other teachers, we know, but it's also important to recognize that many preschools and schools *do not* acknowledge students' cultures in any distinct way. Others engage in this important work along a continuum, from those who introduce cultural diversity in one-time events at specific times, such as the designated Hispanic Heritage Month or Black History Month, to those who've changed their curriculum to focus on cultural and racial justice, embracing equity at the center of teaching—and everything in between.

What is your school like? Chances are, if you're reading this book, your school may need to begin considering culturally relevant teaching, may have begun thinking about it, or may be enacting culturally relevant teaching at specific times. Regardless of your starting point, the first step to making a change is understanding what needs to change—and why. Let's start our exploration of that question with stories from kindergarten and second grade that illustrate how well-meaning teachers may unintentionally fail to recognize their students as cultural beings.

Scene from a Classroom: An Anthology About White Royalty in an Urban Kindergarten

With her kindergarten students gathered in front of her, Ms. Smith began, "Friends, today we start a new read-aloud. We will be learning about kings and queens." In a Title I New York City public school, Ms. Smith's students were mostly African American and Latinx. The children sat crisscross applesauce on the rug as they were told about

their new unit of study. For the next few weeks they would listen to read-alouds about kings and queens. Almost immediately the children reacted to the news with mixed reactions—squeals of enthusiasm, groans in protest, and silent indifference.

The initial excitement of some children was quickly tarnished when one student's spontaneous comment disrupted Ms. Smith's introduction. The student pointed to the illustration in the reading anthology where she'd noticed that the characters portrayed were all White. She immediately declared, "We gonna learn about princesses like Tiffany," identifying the only White girl in the classroom.

"Uh-uh," another child loudly called out while crossing her arms and shaking her head. "I can be a princess too," she said, swaying her long box braids from side to side.

"You wish! You're not like a princess, you know," Shenetta declared.

This quick introduction to a new read-aloud unit that aligned with the mandated curriculum had made visible who is often present and who is invisible in read-alouds and in curriculum at large. For the next few weeks, Ms. Smith's kindergartners were expected to learn about the responsibilities of a royal family, the advantages and disadvantages of children born into royal families, the royal objects they possessed, and where they lived long ago.

Regaining the attention of her class, Ms. Smith began the lesson by showing the children where Europe is on a world map. They were told they would be listening to a read-aloud about several kings and queens who lived in Europe many years ago. When Ms. Smith began the read-aloud, her students, who ranged in age from four to six years old, were expected to sit quietly and listen. During the reading, the students were shown images of a palace, King Richard II, a crown, and Charlemagne, and they were exposed to new vocabulary words—*servant* and *royal*. The children were not discouraged from asking questions during the reading, but they were not asked to share their thoughts or connections with the class or their "turn and talk" partners. After the reading, the teacher asked multiple literal and inferential questions.

By the end of the lesson, the students seemed interested in just about anything *but* the read-aloud. They had been sitting on the rug for over twenty minutes, and they were candid with their feedback. One said, "That was boring!" Another declared, "That was too long!" It was no surprise that many were not able to answer the comprehension questions that followed the reading. In fact, shortly after the read-aloud began, few children were actively listening, despite Ms. Smith reminding them often to have whole body listening while she was reading.

The students' lack of interest in the read-aloud stood in stark contrast to how they listened to books such as Duncan Tonatiuh's *The Princess and the Warrior: A Tale of Two Volcanoes*. With both informational texts and stories, the children were partial to picture books that contained ideas, characters, and themes they could relate to, and the opening read-aloud for their kings and queens unit just hadn't resonated with them. Could something else have connected them more to the reading? Maybe, but there were no discussions about the author and illustrator, no predictions made, no previewing the pictures, and no turn and talks during the actual reading. Students who had breaks built into their schedules (as outlined in their IEPs, or individualized education programs) were quick to remind Ms. Smith that it was time for a break, and children who didn't usually ask for breaks did too. There were certainly no requests for the text to be read again or for it to be added to the classroom library.

What's the Problem?

Imagine that practically every day you go to school, you are asked to read or listen to something that is not representative of who you are, of your family, or of your community. The books put in front of you just don't reflect your interests or your life in any way. Imagine being told to remain silent as these books are shared. For twice as many minutes as your age! Sound absurd? What would you do? Tune out? Daydream? Take a break? Talk with a peer? Misbehave? Does it make you wonder

how children feel in a similar situation? This was Ms. Smith's kindergartners' daily classroom experience, and sadly, this is very common in kindergarten classes.

The curriculum was comprised of many units that did not appeal to—or even consider—the children sitting in front of the teacher. The stories did not portray diverse ways of being and behaving. They did not have diverse characters. Issues immediately relevant to the children Ms. Smith taught were absent—as were their images, cultural practices, histories, and communities.

The unit on kings and queens was closely aligned with mandated standards, but the focus on coverage rather than mastery of skills meant that although Ms. Smith covered the standards, the children didn't necessarily develop skills because they had no investment in the content. Instead of learning about who they are—their heritages and histories—the children in Ms. Smith's kindergarten classroom were learning other people's histories. They did not see themselves reflected in the stories and quickly lost interest.

Ms. Smith was using the reading anthology provided to support the mandated standards, but in fact, almost nothing in the list of skills students were supposed to develop in the unit was tied directly to the particular stories in the anthology (reciting "Old King Cole" and "Sing a Song of Sixpence" are the notable exceptions). For example, by the end of the unit, students were supposed to:

Research shows both the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minoritized populations in reviews of textbooks.

See Section 2, page 18.

Describe what a king or queen does.
Identify and describe royal objects associated with a king or queen.
Describe a royal family.

Nothing in this list suggests a focus on the kings and queens from Europe (those included in the anthology). Stories or informational

texts about royal families the world over and throughout history—like the beloved picture book *The Princess and the Warrior*—might just as well help children develop these understandings. In fact, only the first ten skills in the mandated curriculum have anything to do with kings and queens at all! The other thirty-eight are more general reading skills such as "Describe the characters, settings, and plots in fiction read-alouds" and "Actively engage in fiction read-alouds."

Actively engage in fiction read-alouds. The problem is, as long as all the teaching comes from materials that were selected and developed far away from the students who use them, active engagement is likely to be a challenge. It would be nice if the solution were as simple as swapping anthologies for high-interest picture books, but it's actually more complicated than that. Sometimes even when teachers do select their own materials with their students' cultural practices in mind, problems arise, as you'll see in the next scene from a classroom.

Scene from a Classroom: Picture Books That Lack Cultural Authenticity

Ms. Garza teaches in a suburb of New York City in a school serving a predominantly White middle- and upper-income community, which has recently experienced a surge in Latinx immigrant families. As she gathered her twenty-three dual language second graders on her classroom rug to introduce an author study of Ann Whitford Paul, she opened the book, *Mañana Iguana*, an English text with Spanish words inserted throughout. When the children were ready, she began reading, "'On martes,' Iguana asked, 'Who will help me deliver the invitations for our *fiesta*?'"

After reading *Mañana Iguana,* Ms. Garza demonstrated how she planned for writing her own narrative featuring a Mexican iguana. She anticipated her students would make personal connections between their own experiences with Latinx culture and the characters portrayed by author Ann Whitford Paul. Her goal was to have students develop ideas and eventually produce a narrative featuring Latinx characters for Hispanic Heritage Month.

As she sent her students to write independently, Ms. Garza pointed to a basket labeled "Hispanic Heritage," and she said, "You may choose any book from this basket." The basket contained copies of *Mañana Iguana*, *Count on Culebra, Tortuga in Trouble,* and *Fiesta Fiasco*, all written by Ann Whitford Paul. As the children in the class proceeded to their tables and started to work, Ms. Garza noticed that Ana, Luis, and Yesenia lagged behind. Ana remained on the rug long after her peers moved on, seemingly sad. Her family is Mexican, but she did not seem interested in Paul's books. Yesenia, another child whose family recently emigrated from the state of Guerrero, Mexico, wandered across the classroom, touching a number of objects, but avoiding the "Hispanic Heritage" book basket. Luis, also from Mexico, opened his writing journal and doodled on a page. They were not engaged. They did not see themselves in the book Ms. Garza read.

Irma, a Latinx child whose family emigrated from Chile, turned to her friend, also Latinx, and shared, "Voy a escribir sobre los mexicanos, que son ignorantes y perezosos" [I'm going to write about the Mexicans, who are ignorant and lazy]. Her friend, whose family is Puerto Rican, giggled. Irma voiced the message presented in the book about Mexicans; a problematic single story (Adichie 2009), which perpetuates stereotypes.

What's the Problem?

Someone entering Ms. Garza's second-grade classroom may have believed her class was engaged in culturally relevant teaching and learning. They may have perceived her choice of *Mañana Iguana*, a story in which Spanish words are interspersed with English words, as an effort to validate both English and Spanish. However, the book is problematic in several ways. *Mañana Iguana* tells the traditional story of the Little Red Hen, but the characters are desert animals with Spanish names such as Iguana, Tortuga, and Culebra. Despite the effort to include Mexican characters and demonstrate cultural inclusivity, the book is not an authentic representation of Mexican people

or their culture. The book not only portrays Mexicans as lazy desert animals, but the Spanish words interjected throughout (to make it seem more "Mexican") can be perceived as mocking. When we think of an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum, we think of children being represented in accurate and genuine ways. In her well-intentioned, yet misguided, attempt to engage in culturally relevant teaching practices, the books Ms. Garza selected perpetuated stereotypes. In addition, they led children to conflate Latinx with Mexicans.

The Importance of Windows and Mirrors

The children in Ms. Smith's and Ms. Garza's classrooms could not see themselves, their communities, or their cultural practices in the stories being read. Classroom libraries and resources should honor and reflect students' diversity rather than perpetuate the stereotypes that marginalize them. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) proposes that books and other classroom materials serve both as mirrors, reflecting one's own world, and windows, providing entryways into the world of others. Yet, when all stories and illustrations are windows, as they were in Ms. Smith's class, children do not see that they or their stories belong in the classroom and school.

"Ignoring Culture in the Classroom Disadvantages Students" contains more information about the socioemotional and academic implications of culturally irrevelant teaching.

See Section 2, page 20.

When there are no mirrors and everything is a window, there can be socioemotional and academic implications. Children may perceive one culture as more worthy and believe that those not represented are not valued. They may fail to engage with the curriculum at all. On the other hand, when everything is a mirror and children always see themselves in the stories they read and hear, they may develop an exaggerated sense of themselves and of their place in the world (Bishop 2015) and fail to develop empathy and understanding for different perspectives.

Children are cultural beings with amazing histories and practices, and no two children are the same. Of course, no two classes are the same either, no two schools, no two teachers. But efforts to "normalize" curriculum and "standardize" learning would seem to suggest the opposite. These efforts presume that the knowledge that counts is in the textbooks and other curricular materials. Too often these efforts leave little room for curriculum to be enhanced by the knowledge, experiences, and questions that students bring to the classroom. Too often, the standardization of schooling leaves some children perpetually peering out of windows and others gazing into mirrors.

Curriculum and teaching are always cultural, but they are not always culturally relevant or responsive.

Why Does Culturally Irrelevant Teaching Persist?

The snapshots from these two classrooms address the problem of materials; but making our teaching relevant to students involves so much more than *just* materials. As you'll see in Sections 2 and 3, culturally relevant teaching is a complex web of mindsets, plans, and practices that place students at the center of all decision making. At its core, it's teaching that:

- holds high expectations
- supports learning with relevancy
- develops cultural competence
- encourages the critical questioning of injustices.

Few would argue against these important principles, but teachers still have lots of reasons for not engaging in culturally relevant teaching. We know. We've been there. "I don't have time" and "It's not gonna be on the test" have been excuses for us too. But as our schools become increasingly diverse, it's worth questioning what gets in the way of teachers planning for teaching that is relevant and responsive to the students they have in their classrooms.

The Expectations of Mandated, Standardized Curriculum

Over the course of our many years teaching, we've all experienced waves, at times full cycles, of curricula coming through our schools like revolving doors—constantly in motion. One year, we learn a new math curriculum. The next year, we implement a new reading curriculum. The year after, we start a new science curriculum. The following year, we invest in a new social studies curriculum. And, before you know it, we're throwing out the "new" math teacher's editions and opening shiny and colorful boxes of another company's recently developed units.

From *No Child Left Behind* to *Every Student Succeeds Act*. From state-based standards to the Common Core State Standards. With each new initiative, new curriculum and assessments are rolled out by publishing companies, marketed as the silver bullet for addressing the new standards, sold to schools, and expected to be implemented in classrooms. Training sessions are scheduled where "experts" who don't know our practices, our students, or our communities walk into our professional homes and attempt to sell us on a one-size-fits-all approach. Sound familiar?

Like you, we open those boxes and realize they do not include the children we teach—children with disabilities, emergent bilinguals (English language learners), children of color—but what do we do? We believe curriculum should be meaningful, engaging, relevant, and relatable to our students. We want all children to be engaged and to learn. But unfortunately, like you, the expectation that we must stick to the assigned curriculum looms large and often feels insurmountable. Against our better judgment, we find ourselves navigating mandated curriculum that is not relevant to the children we teach, failing to engage our students and wasting valuable teaching time.

The Pressure of High-Stakes Testing

The pressure to do well on standardized tests is another obstacle that can get in the way of culturally relevant teaching. In some schools, teachers are constrained by strict testing mandates, and feel obligated

to follow pacing charts and assessment calendars that leave little room for student-centered engagement.

For those who teach in the grades where students are tested, the pressure can be intense, and using test prep materials may seem like the responsible thing to do. After all, with these materials everything is carefully planned out and beautifully bound in a test prep book, and students generally work quietly and independently to complete the exercises. Even when the content seems very far removed from the students using these materials—writing about the first flight across the Atlantic, for example, or stories narrated by children prancing around in a meadow—it's easy to think, "Well this is what the test is going to be like." Teachers experience a very real tension between getting students ready to take a high-stakes test—which may or may not use culturally relevant material—and preparing them to think critically and engage in meaningful and culturally relevant learning.

The Access to Materials: Our Demographic Reality Versus Our Curriculum

We all have had trouble finding good books and authentic resources. At first, we thought it was because we didn't have the knowledge. But then we realized that wasn't it. It's a far- and wide-reaching problem. Although the number of students of color in the United States has surpassed the number of White students, publishing companies continue to publish curricula that normalize the White experience. Curriculum guides and materials feature very few children of color, children with disabilities, and children from low- or no-income backgrounds.

The problem of access to culturally relevant materials is also acute in the world of trade books. Not accounting for problematic accounts and stories, in 2015 the Cooperative Children's Book Center documented that over 70 percent of children's books published were about White children and families. Sadly, only 7.6 percent were about African Americans, 3.3 percent were about Asians and Asian Americans, 2.4

percent were about Latinx, and 0.9 percent were about indigenous/First Nations people. The remaining 12 percent of books written for children focused on something other than people—such as trucks and animals—roughly the same amount as those portraying people of color. To top it all off, not only are books about people of color harder to find, they're also more expensive. So although it would be easy to disapprove of Ms. Garza's book selection, we recognize that materials can be hard to find and many of them actually foster negative stereotypes.

A Lack of Cultural Understanding

Sometimes a lack of knowledge about other cultures is what gets in the way of culturally relevant teaching. As a construct, culture is complex and, like language, it varies from state to state, city to city, neighborhood to neighborhood, family to family, and individual to individual. Teachers like Ms. Garza may have good intentions in celebrating the diversity of culture in the classroom, but what they think qualifies as culturally relevant may in fact be perpetuating certain stereotypes. For example, a popular way teachers attempt to celebrate their students' culture is with a potluck. In this activity, families bring a dish that celebrates their culture to share with the class or school. Students may decorate the classroom or school with flags and may even dress in "traditional" clothing (or what some call "costumes"). But, how can one dish represent a whole culture? Although well-intentioned, these practices may serve to perpetuate stereotypes.

Realizing how much or how little you know about your students' cultures can be a first step toward culturally relevant teaching, but it can also lead to other obstacles, as you'll see next.

A Fear of Engaging in Culturally Relevant Teaching

As teachers, we may be reluctant to engage in culturally relevant practices because we realize we don't know enough about our students'

cultures to address them meaningfully. We care about our students and we fear perpetuating stereotypes. We fear doing or saying the wrong thing. The answer to this fear, however, is simple. Becoming "culturally competent" takes time and requires us to position ourselves as learners. We don't have to know everything about every group of people to engage in this work, but we do need to be willing to learn and ready to facilitate learning about cultures in our classrooms.

Cultural competence begins with understanding yourself as a cultural being. The questions on page 40 in Section 2 will help you get started.

Of course, we may also fear that our students aren't old enough or mature enough to understand or discuss the problems connected to culture in our society. We may fear upsetting parents when we engage their children in discussing issues of race or sexual orientation. We may fear that we will be seen as promoting our personal agendas. We may also fear that our *students* will feel uncomfortable addressing these matters, whether they directly affect the communities they live in or not. Any one of these fears can get in the way of culturally relevant teaching, so it's important to acknowledge them.

The Issue of Time

There is only so much time. As teachers, we've all had days that are a blur. The bell rings, you meet with your guided reading groups, you provide feedback on classwork, you make copies, and before you know it, it's dismissal time. You ask yourself, "Where does the day go?" and you hear your stomach rumble. Of course! You forgot to have lunch! While your students were having lunch and recess, you were busy checking homework. We get it. It happens all the time.

For most teachers, one of the main reasons culturally irrelevant teaching persists is a lack of time to prepare. We all struggle with finding time to plan meaningful and engaging lessons that represent our classroom communities. As we pointed out earlier, Ms. Smith could

have easily used different resources to teach her students about kings and queens and still meet all of the objectives of the required unit. But it takes time to find those resources, time to decide how to use them, what questions to ask, what activities to plan. When we're handed an anthology with all that work already done for us, it's hard to put it aside and replace it with something we've developed with our students in mind. After all, replacing it means developing new learning experiences with new materials, and there's only so much time.

In Section 3, you'll learn lots of ways to incorporate culturally relevant practices into your existing curriculum.

Related to the issue of time is the belief that culturally relevant teaching is *one more thing to do* in an already packed schedule. We already have so much to do with the curriculum we are given; there just isn't time to add something more. For it to make sense, we have to see culturally relevant teaching as a reframing or as an overlay—not an addition—to the existing curriculum. We must think of the mandated curriculum as a starting place, not an ending place, and find ways to include new perspectives and materials, making curriculum and teaching more inclusive and representative.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

We have learned from our own experiences with culturally relevant teaching that although these obstacles are real, they are not impossible to overcome. As a matter of fact, once we began shifting our practices, co-planning with colleagues, and reflecting on what was and wasn't working, we found so many simple paths to this way of teaching in our day-to-day work. We also learned that students are always ready for culturally relevant teaching—they're just waiting for their teachers to be ready. Students embrace the dialogue about culture in the classroom, and they are anxiously waiting for teachers to invite them to add their voices, expeirences, and practices to curriculum and teaching.

In Section 3, we'll show you how we have brought culturally relevant teaching practices into our classrooms. Through the stories of our various projects, you'll see how we involved our students' families in our planning and teaching, recognizing them as valuable resources, having worthy knowledge. The examples we share show how we are surrounded by a plethora of human and material resources which are not just limited to our classroom libraries and the knowledge imparted from professional development.

If we want children to develop as successful learners, we must communicate that they belong in our classrooms. They need to see themselves, their cultures, their families, and their communities reflected in the materials and resources they find there. As culturally relevant teachers, we put the children we teach at the center of our practices.