



California
Center for
School Climate



AUDIO GALLERY

The California Center for School Climate

EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHTS

This is Part 2 of a two-part brief designed to capture insights from educators' experiences in schools. Through our programming, the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) team seeks to highlight and build upon the successes, challenges, and recommendations discussed in the educator audiocast series.

This audio gallery is a product of the CCSC, a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and trainings on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California. Learn more about this work and listen to all the audiocasts in this series at ccsc-gallery.wested.org.



WestEd 
WestEd.org



LISTEN TO THIS AUDIOCAST // ccsc-gallery.wested.org

THE POWER OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE, STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Since the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) launched in January 2022, one of its core principles has been that partnering with students, educators, caregivers, and community partners is a crucial component to creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. At the end of the 2023 school year, the CCSC Audio Gallery Team sent out a call for nominations for educators and school site staff members committed to cultivating positive school climates across California. Nominees were then chosen to be a part of group discussions with school-based staff with similar roles and approaches.

Culturally responsive and sustaining education is a pedagogical approach that centers students' knowledge, experiences, and cultures to promote their engagement and learning. Educators who bring a culturally responsive and sustaining lens to their instruction build on students' backgrounds as key assets in the classroom to encourage intellectual risk-taking and emotional connection to academic content.¹

A culturally responsive and sustaining approach to education is especially important for students who experience oppression and marginalization in different aspects of their lives—perhaps even at school—and who might already be primed to be on alert for social and psychological threats based on experience.² Teachers committed to offering healing learning spaces are especially attuned to the different needs of young people. These teachers are aware of the role that trauma and oppression can play in shaping students' histories as learners, without seeing them as victims.³

A growing research and evidence base links culturally responsive and sustaining practices to positive student outcomes.⁴

Learning From Three Teachers Committed to Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education

In Part 2 of our educator audiocast series, we spoke to three teachers about their commitment to culturally responsive and sustaining education. Although they work with different student populations, adult special education teacher Francia Pinillos, middle school Spanish and U.S. History teacher Renee Thomas, and high school ethnic studies teacher David Flores all take a humanizing, student-centered approach to their instruction.

“Being culturally responsive is knowing your students . . . and offering a space where they can tap in to better understand who they are, where they come from, and what that means to them and how it influences who they are and who they want to become in the future.”

—David Flores

A key part of being a culturally responsive and sustaining educator is practicing critical self-awareness. This involves reflecting on how one’s multiple and intersecting identities inform and impact how one acts and forms relationships.⁵ In our conversation, Francia, Renee, and David modeled this sort of critical self-reflection by discussing how their own cultural and racial identities affect their relationships with students and their families.

Francia described the power of being a Spanish-speaking teacher for parents who may have never been able to have a conversation with their children’s teachers in their native language: “When my students’ families can talk to me in Spanish, sometimes they’ve cried because this is the first time.”

Renee reflected on the impact of her identity in a different way. As the only African American teacher at a primarily White and Latino school, Renee prioritizes building close relationships with her students across lines of difference. She has been thrilled by her students’ enthusiasm to learn about different cultures and ways of being, saying, “They want to learn about my culture and their culture and other cultures, and they’re excited and enthused about it.”

Acknowledging and celebrating students’ strengths and drawing on their lived experiences and cultural and familial ways of knowing as legitimate funds of knowledge are key skills of culturally responsive and sustaining educators.⁶ Francia, Renee, and David shared different approaches they use to draw on students’ funds of knowledge, including connecting students to their larger communities. David described the “community cultural wealth” he sees in his students, including navigational skills from riding the bus around town, linguistic capital from code-switching, and financial literacy from paying bills.⁷ Francia’s students learn outside of the traditional classroom space, meeting at different bus stops all over San Diego to learn life skills through internships, observations, and discussion.

“The best way to teach real life skills is being out in real life. . . . We start our day out in the community and we end our day out in the community.”

—Francia Pinillos

While culturally responsive and sustaining education is a pedagogical approach, ethnic studies is a discipline that is similarly rooted in bringing an asset frame; cultivating relationships; and considering the roles that power, identity, and history play in an ecosystem.

All three teachers are engaged in facilitating or attending professional learning series on ethnic studies pedagogy. They recognize the power of ethnic studies to nurture students' positive self-identity, agency, and belonging. Renee emphasized how ethnic studies can help students develop a strong sense of themselves and their place in the wider world, which she defined as the precursor to empathy.

“Before you can have empathy, you have to have a strong sense of self.”

—Renee Thomas

Francia, Renee, and David's reflections highlight the power of culturally responsive and sustaining education to create healing, supportive learning environments for students of all ages.

References

- ¹ Muñiz, J. (2019). *Understanding culturally responsive education*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/culturally-responsive-teaching/understanding-culturally-responsive-teaching>
- ² Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Corwin Press.
- ³ Ginwright, S. (2018, May 31). *The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement*. Medium. <https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>
- ⁴ Bottiani, J. H., Larson, K. E., Debnam, K. J., Bischoff, C. M., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2018). Promoting educators' use of culturally responsive practices: A systematic review of inservice interventions. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(4), 367–385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117722553>;
- Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127–166.
- ⁵ Talusan, L. (2022). *The identity-conscious educator: Building habits and skills for a more inclusive school*. Solution Tree Press.
- ⁶ Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.982l873k2ht16m77>
- ⁷ Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>



LISTEN TO THIS AUDIOCAST // ccsc-gallery.wested.org

Consider while you listen . . .

A key skill of culturally responsive and sustaining educators is critical self-reflection. What is your social identity (i.e., your group categorization in relation to characteristics such as race, gender, sexual identity, etc.)?

To what extent do these social identities differ from those of your students, colleagues, and community members? In what ways might your identities affect your relationships?

Francia, David, and Renee all bring an asset frame to their work with youth. What are the strengths that students in your community already possess? **How might you draw on your students' identities, experiences, and ways of knowing as assets? What else might you need to learn and explore about your students to deepen your relationships with them?**