## Culturally Responsive Teaching in Self-Contained Urban Classrooms for Students with Intellectual Disability

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Urban classrooms today reflect an incredible range of diversity, with students bringing rich cultural backgrounds, multilingual abilities, and varied life experiences. This diversity, shaped by global migration, economic shifts, and changing demographics, transforms classrooms into vibrant microcosms of multicultural society (Banks, 2015). These dynamic environments enhance learning and foster cross-cultural understanding. At the same time, they call for intentional strategies to support students' language development, affirm cultural practices, and respond to varying socioeconomic contexts in ways that uplift and empower all learners (Nieto, 2013). For educators, this reality highlights the importance of moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and embracing teaching practices that celebrate students' identities, cultivate their strengths, and foster inclusive and equitable learning communities (Gay, 2018).

For students with intellectual disability, the intersection of cultural diversity and disability creates additional challenges. These students often navigate compounded obstacles, including limited access to culturally sensitive resources, misconceptions about their abilities, and low expectations from educators who may need more experience with inclusive practices (Hammond, 2015; Ituma, 2025). This is exactly where culturally responsive teaching (CRT) becomes not just helpful but necessary. CRT offers a framework for creating a learning environment that values and validates students' cultural identities while addressing their individual needs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culture, as defined by Gay (2018), encompasses the values, traditions, communication styles, learning preferences, and contributions of socially identifiable groups. When teachers affirm students' cultural backgrounds and intentionally integrate these cultural elements into instruction, they can bridge cultural gaps, reduce feelings of isolation, and boost students' self-esteem (Gay, 2018).

CRT also helps tailor educational experiences to meet the specific cognitive, emotional, and social needs of students with intellectual disabilities. This approach improves academic outcomes and builds essential life skills, enabling these students to thrive in the classroom and the natural world (Turnbull et al., 2015). By embracing CRT, educators can transform their classrooms into inclusive communities where every student, regardless of background or ability, feels valued and supported to achieve their full potential (Banks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### Understanding Culturally Responsive Teaching

CRT is an approach to education that values and integrates students' cultural backgrounds as an essential part of their learning process (Gay, 2018). By drawing from the richness of students' cultures, CRT creates classrooms where diversity is embraced as a strength, rather than viewed as an obstacle. It prioritizes inclusivity, cultural relevance, and equity, making sure that all students feel seen, respected, and empowered in their learning environments.

CRT plays a critical role for students with intellectual disabilities in urban schools. These students often face multiple challenges, dealing not only with the stigma of their disabilities but also with cultural and linguistic biases that can limit their opportunities for growth (Counts et al., 2018). CRT addresses these overlapping challenges by creating environments that value their identities and offer equitable opportunities for success. It works to bridge gaps and provide the support students need to overcome barriers and thrive, both socially and academically.

Teachers using CRT connect academic content to students' lived experiences, making learning more meaningful and accessible (Ituma, 2025). This can involve weaving students' cultural histories and traditions into the curriculum, using materials and examples that reflect their diverse backgrounds, or adapting teaching methods to better align with specific cultural learning styles. By grounding lessons in the realities of students' lives, educators foster trust, increase engagement, and make learning more relevant and impactful.

In urban schools, cultural and linguistic diversity can intersect with socio-economic inequities, and therefore CRT becomes an essential tool for creating equity. These schools frequently serve students from historically marginalized communities who face barriers such as poverty, limited access to resources, and systemic racism. CRT helps counteract these challenges by building a learning environment that acknowledges and celebrates the unique contributions of every student. For students with intellectual disability, this approach goes further to highlight talents and abilities, ensuring they are not overlooked, but instead, empowered to succeed.

By addressing both the cultural and cognitive dimensions of learning, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) provides educators with the tools to build a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. The cognitive dimension refers to how students process, retain, and apply information—shaped by their prior knowledge, cultural background, and learning experiences (Hammond, 2015). When educators recognize that students may approach thinking, problem-solving, and demonstrating understanding in diverse ways, they can design instruction that aligns with those cognitive strengths. CRT transforms classrooms into spaces where every student can thrive and equips teachers to create lasting change in their schools and communities.

## Practical Strategies for Special Education Teachers

### 1. Learn About Students' Cultural Backgrounds

Understanding students' cultural traditions, languages, and values allows educators to connect academic content to their lived experiences, making lessons relevant and engaging (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers can:

- Conduct student and family surveys
- Attend community events to gain cultural insight
- Incorporate culturally relevant materials such as books, media, and historical examples that celebrate students' heritages and validate their identities (Nieto, 2013)

### 2. Differentiate and Scaffold Instruction

Differentiating instruction is essential to accommodate both cognitive and cultural needs. Strategies include:

- Using multimodal learning opportunities, such as visual aids, hands-on activities, or culturally relevant digital tools (Tomlinson, 2014)
- Breaking tasks into manageable steps to ensure students with an intellectual disability can successfully engage with the content (Vygotsky, 1978)
- Employing collaborative learning groups that include students from diverse backgrounds to encourage empathy and mutual support (Johnson & Johnson, 1989)

### 3. Build Partnerships with Families

Families provide invaluable insights into their children's needs and strengths. Teachers can foster effective family partnerships by:

- Hosting multilingual family-teacher meetings
- Encouraging families to share their cultural practices in the classroom (Epstein, 2002)
- Maintaining open communication channels, ensuring that families feel heard and valued (Hammond, 2015)

### 4. Create Inclusive Classroom Environments

Inclusive practices promote a sense of belonging for all students. Teachers can:

- Display multicultural artwork and celebrate cultural traditions
- Provide spaces for students who may need emotional or sensory breaks (Banks, 2015)
- Shift from a deficit-based perspective to one that highlights students' abilities, fostering confidence and self-esteem (Bandura, 1997)

### 5. Support Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical in CRT for students with an intellectual disability. Teachers should focus on:

- Teaching empathy, emotional regulation, and respectful communication (CASEL, 2020)
- Incorporating SEL activities that reflect cultural and individual diversity to help students build meaningful relationships

### 6. Engage in Reflective Practice

Teachers must actively reflect on their assumptions and biases to align their teaching with CRT principles. Strategies include:

- Keeping reflective journals
- Participating in professional development tailored to the intersection of culture and disability (Scott et al., 2017)
- Seeking peer and family feedback to refine practices

## Conclusion

CRT creates classrooms where all students—including those with intellectual disability—feel valued, understood, and supported (Gay, 2018). It fosters a sense of belonging by affirming each student's identity and recognizing the diverse perspectives they bring into the classroom (Nieto, 2013). By connecting cultural identity with learning, CRT gives students the confidence and skills they need to succeed academically and socially. At

the same time, it encourages empathy, respect, and collaboration among peers, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment (Hammond, 2015).

For students with intellectual disability, CRT goes a step further by bridging the gap between their individual needs and the broader cultural context of the classroom. It ensures their voices are heard and their potential is recognized, giving them the tools they need to thrive (Ituma, 2025). Educators in urban schools who embrace CRT not only improve educational outcomes for their students but also contribute to fostering inclusive and equitable school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These educators become change-makers, breaking down barriers and challenging the stereotypes that so often marginalize students with disabilities (Banks, 2015). Through their efforts, they lay the groundwork for lifelong success and inclusion, helping every student become a meaningful contributor to an increasingly diverse world (Turnbull et al., 2015). ■

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