

# Responsive Practices in Schools: A Multi-Stakeholder Qualitative Synthesis

---

Prepared by

**Keith C. Herman & Wendy M. Reinke**  
**Missouri Prevention Science Institute**  
**University of Missouri**



June 2026

## **Take Home Message:**

**Culturally responsive practices only become transformative when they move from individual intentions to system-wide practices that students and families experience as belonging, fairness, and respect.**

## Abstract

Culturally responsive teaching has emerged as a widely endorsed framework for addressing persistent educational inequities affecting students from historically marginalized communities. Despite increasing attention to culturally responsive practices (CRPs) in research, policy, and professional development, the field continues to struggle with conceptual clarity and measurement of these practices. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual teacher behaviors while overlooking the broader ecological systems in which teaching and learning occur. The present report synthesizes findings from four qualitative studies examining CRPs from the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and district administrators. Together, these studies provide insight into how CRPs are conceptualized, enacted, and experienced across multiple levels of the school system. Findings suggest that culturally responsive education emerges not from a discrete set of instructional strategies but from a constellation of relational, instructional, and organizational practices embedded within broader educational contexts. Building on this synthesis, we describe an expanded contextualized Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model, a multi-level framework linking district context, school leadership, classroom practices, student psychological experiences, and student outcomes. The model highlights relational trust, instructional relevance, and equitable classroom management as central mechanisms through which culturally responsive practices influence student engagement and wellbeing. Implications for theory development, measurement, and implementation are discussed.

---

# 1. Introduction

Persistent disparities in academic achievement, disciplinary outcomes, and access to educational opportunities continue to affect students from historically marginalized racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural communities. These disparities have prompted increased attention to the ways schools can better serve diverse student populations and reduce inequities in educational systems. One framework that has gained substantial traction in both research and practice is culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural identities, life experiences, and community knowledge into teaching and learning processes (Herman et al., 2026).

Advocates of culturally responsive teaching argue that effective teaching cannot be culturally neutral. Rather, teaching practices are always shaped by cultural assumptions about knowledge, communication, and relationships. When classroom practices reflect only dominant cultural norms, students whose cultural backgrounds differ from those norms may experience school as alienating or disconnected from their lived experiences. In contrast, culturally responsive approaches seek to bridge home and school experiences, allowing students to see their identities and communities reflected in classroom learning.

Over the past two decades, school districts across the United States have increasingly adopted professional development initiatives focused on culturally responsive teaching (Herman et al., 2026). Teacher preparation programs similarly emphasize cultural competence and equity-oriented teaching practices. However, despite this growing attention, there remains considerable ambiguity about what culturally responsive practices look like in classrooms. Many frameworks describe culturally responsive teaching in broad conceptual terms, yet teachers and researchers often struggle to identify concrete, observable behaviors that define culturally responsive practice.

One limitation of the current literature is the tendency to conceptualize culturally responsive teaching primarily as an individual teacher characteristic. Although teachers play a central role in shaping classroom experiences, teaching occurs within broader organizational systems that shape how educators interact with students and families. Schools operate within district policies, leadership structures, and institutional cultures that influence both the opportunities and constraints teachers face when attempting to implement culturally responsive practices.

**THE REAL POWER OF RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE—AND ITS GREATEST IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGE—LIES IN MOVING IT BEYOND INDIVIDUAL TEACHER GOODWILL INTO THE EVERYDAY SYSTEMS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES THAT DETERMINE WHETHER STUDENTS EXPERIENCE SCHOOL AS AFFIRMING OR ALIENATING.**

Understanding culturally responsive education therefore requires examining multiple perspectives across the educational system. Students experience classroom practices directly and interpret how teachers respond to their identities and experiences. Parents observe how schools interact with families and whether educators respect and understand

their communities. Teachers attempt to implement culturally responsive practices within specific school environments, and administrators shape policies and professional learning structures that influence classroom practice.

The present paper synthesizes findings from four qualitative studies examining culturally responsive practices from the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and district administrators. These studies were conducted as part of a broader program of research aimed at understanding culturally responsive schooling from multiple stakeholder perspectives. By integrating findings across these studies, we seek to advance a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive practices operate within educational systems.

The goal of this report is twofold. First, we synthesize findings across the four studies to identify common themes regarding culturally responsive practices in schools. Second, we propose an expanded conceptual framework—the contextualized Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model—that links culturally responsive practices to student outcomes through a series of relational and psychological mechanisms.

---

---

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

Culturally responsive teaching builds upon a long tradition of scholarship focused on asset-based approaches to education (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Early research on culturally relevant pedagogy emphasized the importance of supporting students' academic success while affirming their cultural identities and developing critical awareness of social inequalities. This framework highlighted the need for educators to connect instruction to students' life experiences while maintaining high expectations for academic achievement.

Subsequent scholarship expanded these ideas through the concept of culturally responsive teaching (see Herman et al., 2026). Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the use of students' cultural knowledge, communication styles, and prior experiences as resources for learning. Teachers who engage in culturally responsive practices seek to create classroom environments that validate cultural diversity while adapting instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners.

More recently, scholars have proposed culturally sustaining pedagogy, which extends earlier frameworks by emphasizing the importance of sustaining and developing students' cultural and linguistic practices within educational settings (Paris, 2012). Rather than simply incorporating elements of students' cultures into classroom instruction, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to support the ongoing vitality of diverse cultural traditions.

Although these frameworks share common goals, they differ in their emphasis on specific dimensions of teaching and learning. Some frameworks focus on curriculum and instructional strategies, while others emphasize relational practices, teacher beliefs, or broader sociopolitical goals of education. As a result, researchers and practitioners often

struggle to operationalize culturally responsive practices in ways that can be consistently measured and studied.

Ecological perspectives on schooling provide a useful lens for understanding these complexities (Herman et al., 2026). Educational experiences are shaped by interactions among multiple nested systems, including classrooms, schools, districts, and communities. From this perspective, culturally responsive schooling cannot be understood solely in terms of individual teacher behaviors but must be examined within the broader systems that influence educational practice.

Schools are social organizations in which policies, leadership practices, and institutional norms shape how teachers interact with students and families. District priorities influence professional development opportunities and accountability systems, while school leadership shapes the climate in which teachers work. Classroom practices then interact with student experiences to shape engagement, belonging, and academic outcomes.

By adopting a multi-level perspective, researchers can better understand how culturally responsive practices emerge within educational systems and how they influence student experiences and outcomes.

---

---

### 3. Overview of Program of Research

The synthesis presented in this paper draws upon four qualitative studies examining culturally responsive practices from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Each study was designed to capture the experiences and perceptions of a particular group within the educational system, allowing for a richer understanding of culturally responsive schooling.

The first study examined teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching practices (Debnam et al., 2023). Teachers nominated by administrators as exemplary educators participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their beliefs about culturally responsive teaching and the practices they implemented in their classrooms. Analysis of interview data revealed themes related to classroom culture, instructional strategies, teacher reflection, and school-level influences.

The second study focused on students' experiences of culturally responsive classrooms (Aguayo et al., 2024). Through focus groups, students described the characteristics of teachers who made them feel respected, understood, and engaged in learning. Students highlighted the importance of fairness, teacher listening, and representation in curriculum materials.

The third study explored parents' perceptions of culturally responsive schooling (Aguayo et al., 2025). Parents discussed their interactions with teachers and school staff, emphasizing the importance of trust, communication, and respect for family cultures. Parents often described culturally responsive schools as those that actively sought to understand and collaborate with families.

The fourth study examined the perspectives of district administrators responsible for supporting culturally responsive initiatives across schools (Aguayo et al., 2024). Administrators discussed district policies, leadership strategies, and professional learning efforts aimed at promoting culturally responsive teaching.

One additional publication drawing on the student dataset provided a focused analysis of students' recommendations for teacher practices (Smith et al., 2025). Because this analysis used the same underlying dataset as the primary student study, it was treated as supplemental evidence rather than as a separate study in the synthesis.

Taken together, these four core studies and one supplemental study provide complementary insights into culturally responsive schooling across different levels of the educational system. Synthesizing findings across these studies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive practices are conceptualized and enacted in schools.

---

## 4. Method of Synthesis

The present paper integrates findings from four qualitative studies conducted as part of a broader program of research examining culturally responsive practices in schools. The studies explored culturally responsive practices from the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and district administrators and were conducted in overlapping school contexts using related conceptual frameworks. Each study employed qualitative methods to examine how culturally responsive practices are conceptualized and experienced by different stakeholders within school communities.

Rather than reanalyzing the original qualitative datasets, the present paper draws on the published findings and thematic results from each study to conduct a conceptual integrative synthesis. Integrative synthesis approaches are commonly used in program-of-research scholarship to examine patterns across related studies and to generate higher-order conceptual insights that extend beyond the scope of any individual study (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The goal of this synthesis was therefore not to aggregate findings statistically or to conduct a formal meta-analysis, but rather to examine areas of conceptual convergence and divergence across stakeholder perspectives to develop a broader framework for understanding culturally responsive education.

The synthesis process involved three stages. First, we conducted a structured review of the primary findings reported in each study, focusing on themes related to culturally responsive practices, classroom relationships, instructional approaches, and school organizational contexts. This step involved revisiting the thematic domains and representative findings from each study and summarizing the key constructs identified within each stakeholder group.

Second, we engaged in iterative cross-study comparison of these themes to identify patterns that appeared consistently across stakeholder perspectives. Particular attention

was given to identifying areas of conceptual overlap as well as themes that emerged uniquely within specific stakeholder groups. Through this comparative process, several higher-order domains were identified that captured common elements of culturally responsive schooling across studies.

Finally, these cross-study themes were organized into a conceptual framework describing how culturally responsive practices operate across levels of the educational system. In developing this framework, we considered how classroom practices described by teachers related to students' experiences of belonging and respect, how parents interpreted culturally responsive schooling through family–school relationships, and how administrators conceptualized the organizational conditions needed to support culturally responsive teaching. This process resulted in the refinement of the Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model (Herman et al., 2026) to include contextual predictors of culturally responsive practices. The expanded RPO is a multi-level conceptual framework linking district context, school leadership, classroom practices, student psychological experiences, and student outcomes.

This integrative synthesis approach allowed us to move beyond the findings of individual studies and to generate a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of culturally responsive schooling across multiple stakeholder perspectives.

---

## 5. Cross-Study Findings

Several key themes emerged across the four studies. Themes were grouped into five domains: relational practices, instructional relevance, classroom management and discipline, communication practices, teacher reflection, and school context (see Table 1). One of the most consistent findings involved the importance of relationships. Teachers frequently described relationship- building as the foundation of effective teaching, emphasizing the importance of getting to know students as individuals and demonstrating care for their experiences. Students echoed this perspective, describing culturally responsive teachers as those who listen to them, treat them fairly, and show interest in their lives outside of school.

In addition to describing culturally responsive classroom practices, students emphasized several ways they wished teachers would change their behavior, including listening more carefully to student perspectives, treating students fairly across groups, and showing greater respect for students' experiences. These themes were also highlighted in a secondary analysis of the student focus group data that examined students' recommendations for teacher behavior (Smith et al., 2025).

The convergence of themes across two analyses of the same student dataset further underscores the importance of relational trust and fairness as central components of culturally responsive classrooms.

**Table 1. Cross-Paper Integration Table**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Teacher Study (Debnam)</b>	<b>Student FG Study</b>	<b>Parent Study</b>	<b>Administrator Study</b>
<b>Relational Practices</b>	Teachers emphasize relationship building, listening, knowing students	Students value teachers who know them personally and respect identity	Parents trust teachers who demonstrate care for their child	Administrators emphasize relational culture across classrooms
<b>Instructional Relevance</b>	Teachers tailor curriculum and integrate student interests	Students report engagement when lessons reflect their lives	Parents value curriculum that affirms culture and identity	Leaders support culturally relevant curriculum initiatives
<b>Classroom Management &amp; Discipline</b>	Teachers describe routines, expectations, and equitable treatment	Students emphasize fairness and consistency	Parents focus on respectful discipline and dignity	Administrators emphasize equitable discipline systems
<b>Communication Practices</b>	Teachers tailor communication styles and engage families	Students value teachers who listen and communicate clearly	Parents stress accessible, respectful communication	Leaders promote family-school partnership structures
<b>Teacher Reflection</b>	Teachers discuss bias awareness, humility, self-reflection	Students notice when teachers acknowledge differences	Parents value teachers who show openness to learning	Leaders emphasize professional learning around equity
<b>School Context/ Organization Support</b>	Teachers describe tensions with colleagues and school norms	Students experience school culture collectively	Parents interpret school climate through interactions	Administrators highlight organizational supports needed

Parents similarly emphasized the importance of trust and communication between families and schools. When parents felt that teachers respected their cultural values and communicated openly about their children’s learning, they were more likely to view schools as supportive partners in education.

Instructional relevance also emerged as a critical theme. Teachers described efforts to connect classroom instruction to students’ interests and cultural experiences. Students reported feeling more engaged when lessons included examples or materials that reflected their communities and identities. These findings highlight the importance of linking academic content to students’ lived experiences.

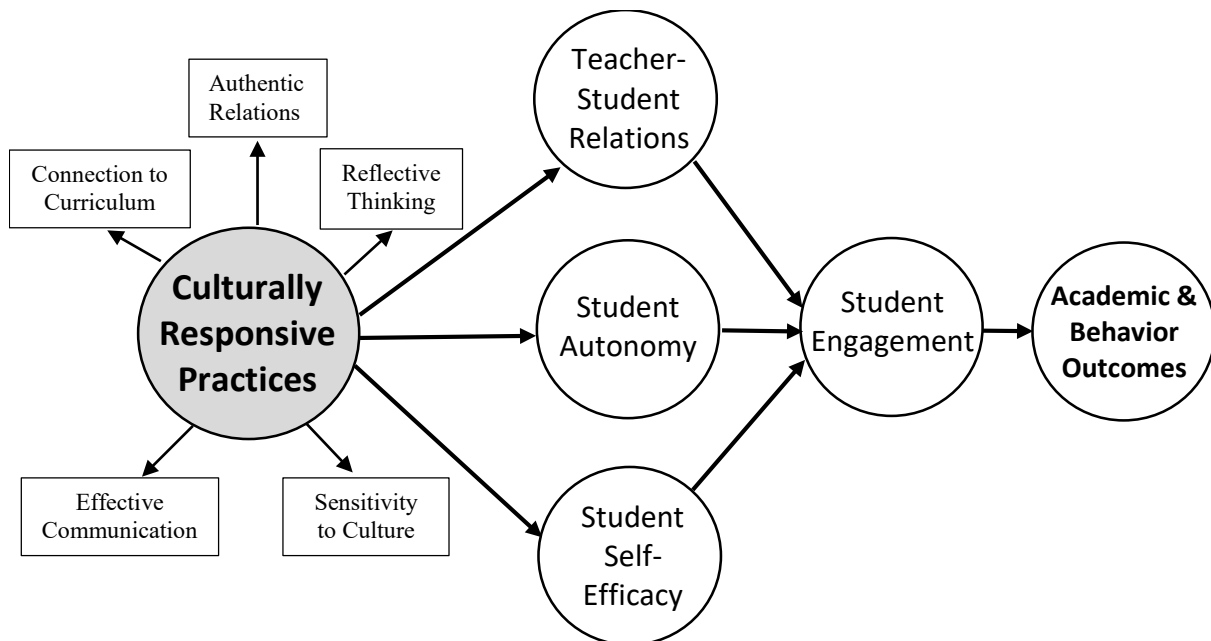
Equity in classroom management practices represented another important theme. Students and parents frequently discussed fairness in disciplinary practices. Students described feeling more respected when teachers applied expectations consistently across students and took time to understand the context behind behavioral challenges.

Finally, organizational context played an important role in shaping culturally responsive practices. Teachers often described attempting to implement culturally responsive approaches within school environments that did not always prioritize such efforts. Administrators emphasized the importance of leadership and professional learning in creating conditions that support culturally responsive teaching.

## 6. Responsive Practices to Outcome Model

The Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model (Herman et al., 2025; Herman et al., 2026) aligns with the synthesis of findings across the four studies. The RPO model proposes that culturally responsive—or more broadly, responsive—educational practices influence student outcomes by shaping the daily classroom experiences that drive engagement, belonging, competence, and motivation. Grounded in the CARES framework (Connection to Curriculum, Authentic Relationships, Reflective Thinking, Effective Communication, and Sensitivity to Students' Culture), the model positions educator behaviors as key components of the classroom context that affect students' psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and self-efficacy. In turn, these experiences influence student engagement, academic performance, behavior, and disciplinary outcomes, making responsive practices a practical and measurable pathway for reducing educational disparities and improving student wellbeing (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The Responsive Practices to Outcome Model**



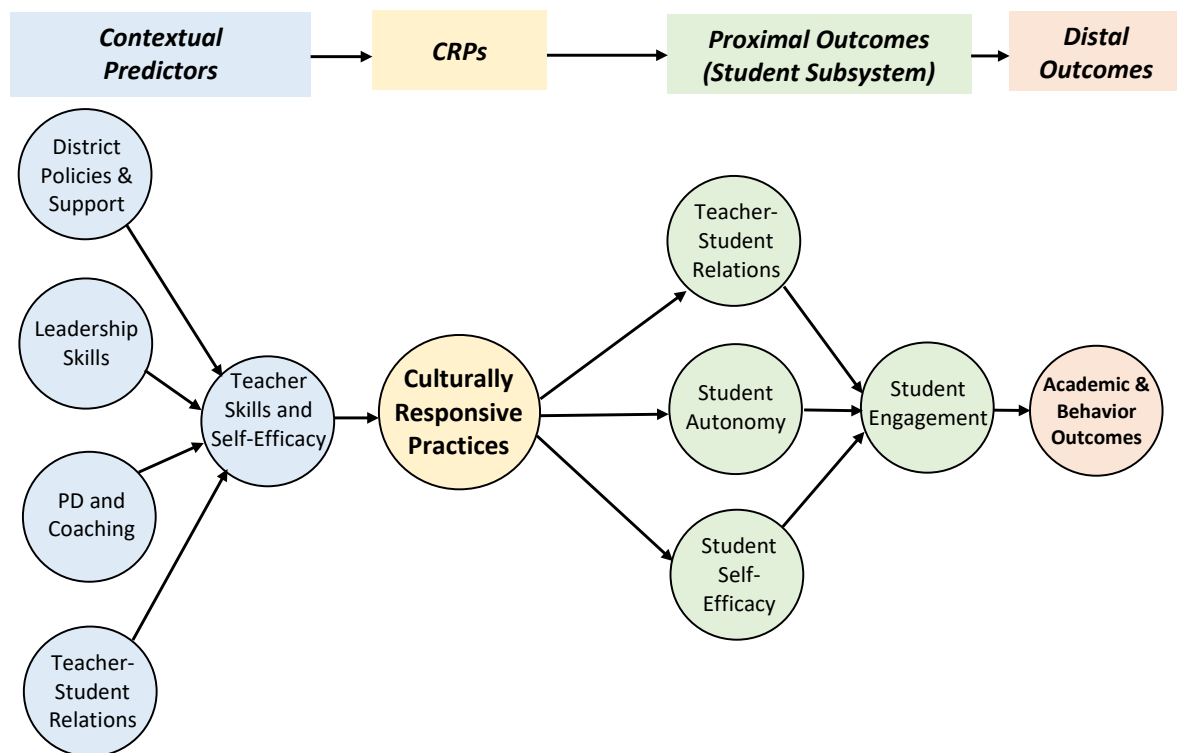
The present findings provide further support for the RPO model and suggest opportunities for expanding the RPO to include precursors to CRP (see Figure 2). An expanded contextual RPO highlights the ways CRPs operate across multiple levels of the educational system. At

the district level, policy priorities and resource allocation decisions shape the conditions under which schools operate. District initiatives focused on equity, professional development, and family engagement can create structures that support culturally responsive teaching.

At the school level, leadership practices influence organizational climate and teacher collaboration. Collegial leadership has been cited as an important leadership style to support health organizational climate and enactment of CRPs (Newman et al., 2025). School leaders play a critical role in promoting dialogue about equity and supporting teachers as they implement culturally responsive practices.

District policies and school leadership also influence the presence and type of professional development (PD) and coaching supports available to teachers. The selection of high-quality PD and the commitment to providing ongoing coaching are essential if teachers are able to access and deliver CRPs effectively.

**Figure 2. Contextual RPO Model**



At the classroom level, the most proximal determinant of CRPs is teacher skill and self-efficacy beliefs about delivering CRPs. CRPs include relational teaching, culturally relevant curriculum, equitable discipline, and reflective teacher practice. These practices shape students' daily experiences and influence how students perceive their relationships with teachers.

Student psychological experiences represent a key mechanism within the RPO model. When students perceive their classrooms as respectful and inclusive, they are more likely to experience belonging, trust, and cultural validation. These psychological experiences contribute to positive educational outcomes, including engagement, wellbeing, and persistence.

## 6.1 Theoretical Contributions of the Expand RPO Model

Although culturally responsive teaching has been widely discussed in educational research, much of the existing scholarship has focused on describing culturally responsive instructional strategies or teacher dispositions rather than explaining how these practices function within broader educational systems. Foundational frameworks, such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), have provided critical conceptual foundations for understanding the role of culture in teaching and learning. These frameworks emphasize the importance of affirming students' cultural identities, connecting instruction to students' lived experiences, and promoting critical consciousness. However, they typically focus on the philosophical orientation and pedagogical commitments of teachers rather than articulating the multi-level processes through which culturally responsive practices influence student outcomes within schools.

**THE RESPONSIVE PRACTICES TO OUTCOMES MODEL REFRAMES CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLING AS MORE THAN “GOOD TEACHING”; IT IS A SYSTEM-LEVEL EQUITY MECHANISM LINKING DISTRICT PRIORITIES, SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, TEACHER PRACTICE, FAMILY TRUST, AND STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING, FAIRNESS, AND CULTURAL VALIDATION.**

The expanded RPO model builds upon these foundational perspectives while extending them in several important ways. First, the model shifts the focus from culturally responsive pedagogy as a set of teacher dispositions or instructional strategies to culturally responsive schooling as a multi-level system of practices and conditions. The RPO highlights how district priorities, school leadership, and organizational climate shape teachers' ability to enact culturally responsive practices in classrooms. In doing so, the model situates culturally responsive teaching within the broader institutional contexts that influence implementation and sustainability.

Second, the model explicitly identifies student psychological experiences as key mechanisms linking culturally responsive practices to student outcomes. While existing literature often assumes that culturally responsive teaching improves engagement and achievement, relatively few frameworks articulate the processes through which these effects occur. The RPO proposes that culturally responsive classroom practices influence student outcomes primarily through students' experiences of belonging, trust in teachers, cultural affirmation, and perceptions of fairness. By foregrounding these psychological

processes, the model integrates insights from culturally responsive pedagogy with research on school climate, student motivation, and developmental psychology. Third, the model incorporates multiple stakeholder perspectives in conceptualizing culturally responsive schooling. Much of the literature on culturally responsive teaching focuses primarily on teacher practices, often overlooking how students, families, and school leaders interpret

**Table 2. Cross-Study Themes Informing the Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) Model**

Domain	Teacher Study	Student Study	Parent Study	Administrator Study	Contribution to RPO
<b>Relational Trust</b>	Teachers emphasized building authentic relationships and demonstrating care for students.	Students described culturally responsive teachers as those who listen and show respect.	Parents emphasized trust and positive communication with teachers.	Administrators highlighted relationship-centered school culture.	Forms the foundation of student psychological experiences (belonging and trust).
<b>Instructional Relevance</b>	Teachers described tailoring lessons to student interests and experiences.	Students reported greater engagement when curriculum reflected their identities.	Parents emphasized culturally meaningful learning opportunities.	Leaders described district efforts to support inclusive curriculum.	Contributes to culturally responsive classroom practices.
<b>Classroom Management</b>	Teachers discussed fairness and reflection on bias in discipline.	Students emphasized fair treatment and consistent expectations.	Parents described respectful disciplinary approaches as indicators of responsive schools.	Administrators described equity-focused discipline initiatives.	Shapes equitable classroom management practices.
<b>Communication Practices</b>	Teachers tailor communication styles and engage families	Students value effective communication and listening skills	Parents stress accessible, respectful communication	Leaders promote family-school partnership structures	Explicit method for showing CRPs to students and parents
<b>Teacher Reflection and Cultural Awareness</b>	Teachers emphasized humility, bias awareness, and ongoing reflection.	Students noticed when teachers were open to learning from students.	Parents valued teachers who sought to understand family culture.	Leaders emphasized professional development around cultural responsiveness.	Supports reflective teacher practice within the classroom level.
<b>School Context/Organizational Support for CRPs</b>	Teachers described varying levels of support from colleagues and leadership.	Students noticed differences in school culture across classrooms.	Parents described school climate as shaping their trust in schools.	Administrators emphasized leadership, policy alignment, and professional learning.	Defines school leadership and organizational climate

and experience culturally responsive environments. By synthesizing findings from studies examining teachers, students, parents, and administrators, the RPO reflects a broader ecological perspective on culturally responsive education. This multi-stakeholder approach highlights how culturally responsive practices are interpreted differently across groups and underscores the importance of aligning classroom practices with school-wide and community contexts. Table 2 integrates themes from the present study into the RPO.

Taken together, these contributions position the RPO Model as a framework that connects culturally responsive pedagogy with systems-level perspectives on school functioning and student development. By integrating insights across stakeholder perspectives and levels of the educational system, the model offers a conceptual foundation for future research examining how culturally responsive practices are implemented, experienced, and sustained within schools.

---

## 7. Positioning RPO Within Implementation Science

Although culturally responsive teaching is widely recognized as an important approach for promoting equity in schools, efforts to support its adoption often focus narrowly on individual teacher beliefs or instructional strategies. Increasingly, however, scholars have argued that educational practices should be understood within broader organizational and systemic contexts that shape whether and how new practices are implemented (Fixsen et al., 2005; Forman et al., 2013). Implementation science provides a useful framework for understanding how innovations are introduced, supported, and sustained within complex service systems such as schools. From this perspective, culturally responsive practices are not simply instructional techniques enacted by individual teachers, but rather practices that are embedded within multi-level organizational systems.

The RPO aligns with core principles from implementation science by emphasizing that classroom practices are influenced by factors operating at multiple levels of the educational system. Implementation frameworks consistently highlight the importance of organizational leadership, professional learning structures, and policy contexts in shaping the adoption and sustainability of new practices (Aarons et al., 2011; Fixsen et al., 2005). Consistent with this literature, the RPO situates culturally responsive classroom practices within a broader system that includes district priorities, school leadership, and the organizational climate of schools. These system-level conditions influence teachers' opportunities to develop culturally responsive practices and shape the extent to which such practices are supported or constrained within schools.

In addition to highlighting the role of organizational supports, implementation science also emphasizes the importance of mechanisms through which practices influence outcomes. Within educational contexts, scholars have increasingly recognized that instructional practices often influence student outcomes indirectly through students' psychological experiences in the classroom, such as feelings of belonging, trust in teachers, and perceptions of fairness (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Wang & Degol, 2016). The RPO model

reflects this perspective by proposing that culturally responsive practices influence student outcomes primarily through students' experiences of relational trust, cultural affirmation, and classroom belonging. In this way, the model integrates insights from culturally responsive pedagogy with research on student motivation and school climate.

Finally, implementation science highlights the importance of stakeholder perspectives in understanding how practices are interpreted and enacted in real-world settings. Educational reforms frequently encounter challenges when policies or interventions are developed without attention to the perspectives of those most directly affected by them. By synthesizing findings across studies of teachers, students, parents, and administrators, the RPO reflects a multi-stakeholder approach to understanding culturally responsive schooling. Each stakeholder group provides unique insight into how culturally responsive practices are defined, experienced, and supported within schools.

The RPO model expands existing scholarship on culturally responsive education by situating classroom practices within a broader implementation framework. By highlighting the interaction of district priorities, school leadership, classroom practices, and student psychological experiences, the model offers a systems-oriented perspective on how culturally responsive schooling may contribute to improved student engagement, belonging, and academic outcomes.

---

---

## 8. Implications for Research

The RPO model highlights several important directions for future research. First, researchers should continue developing measurement tools capable of capturing culturally responsive practices in classroom interactions. Observational measures and student-reported experiences may provide more accurate insight than teacher self-reports alone.

Second, future research should adopt multi-level designs that examine how district policies, school leadership, and classroom practices interact to shape culturally responsive schooling. Such approaches can help identify organizational conditions that support effective implementation.

Finally, additional research is needed to examine the psychological mechanisms through which culturally responsive practices influence student outcomes. Understanding how belonging, trust, and cultural validation shape engagement may provide insight into the processes through which culturally responsive teaching promotes academic success.

---

---

## 9. Implications for Practice

Promoting culturally responsive schooling requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the educational system. Professional development initiatives should support teachers in developing culturally responsive instructional practices while also encouraging reflection on biases and assumptions that influence classroom interactions.

School leaders play a critical role in fostering organizational climates that support culturally responsive teaching. Leaders can encourage collaboration among teachers, promote dialogue about equity, and allocate resources for professional learning.

Schools should also strengthen partnerships with families and communities. Engaging parents and caregivers as partners in education helps ensure that school practices reflect the values and experiences of the communities they serve.

### Distinguishing Culturally Responsive Practices from “Good Teaching”

A recurring debate within the literature on culturally responsive education concerns whether culturally responsive teaching represents a distinct set of practices or whether it largely reflects principles of effective teaching more broadly. Many commonly cited culturally responsive practices—such as building positive relationships with students, differentiating instruction, and establishing clear classroom expectations—are also widely recognized as hallmarks of effective teaching across educational contexts (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; McLeskey et al., 2017). As a result, some scholars and practitioners have suggested that culturally responsive teaching may simply represent “good teaching” applied in diverse classrooms.

Findings across the studies synthesized in this paper suggest a more nuanced interpretation of this relationship. Teachers frequently described culturally responsive practices using examples of widely recognized instructional strategies, including classroom management routines, relationship-building behaviors, and differentiated instruction. However, closer examination of these practices reveals that **culturally responsive teaching often differs not in the presence of specific strategies, but in how those strategies are enacted and interpreted within culturally diverse classrooms.**

For example, establishing classroom expectations is a fundamental component of effective classroom management. Within culturally responsive classrooms, however, teachers may approach this practice by incorporating students’ perspectives in defining expectations, acknowledging differences in communication styles, and ensuring that disciplinary practices are implemented equitably across student groups. Similarly, while building relationships with students is widely recognized as an important element of effective teaching, culturally responsive relationship-building may involve deeper efforts to understand students’ cultural identities, family contexts, and community experiences and to incorporate this understanding into classroom interactions and instructional decisions.

In this sense, culturally responsive practices can be understood as contextualized forms of effective teaching that intentionally attend to students’ cultural identities and life experiences. Rather than representing an entirely separate set of pedagogical strategies,

culturally responsive teaching may be better conceptualized as a culturally attuned orientation toward teaching practices that are already recognized as effective. This perspective aligns with scholars who argue that culturally responsive teaching involves adapting instructional and relational practices to ensure that they affirm students' identities, reduce inequities in classroom experiences, and support meaningful participation in learning (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The RPO model reflects this distinction by emphasizing that culturally responsive education involves both core instructional practices and the equity-oriented lens through which those practices are implemented. Within the model, practices such as relationship-building, instructional relevance, and classroom management are conceptualized as mechanisms that shape students' experiences of belonging, trust, and fairness. When enacted with cultural awareness and attention to equity, these practices contribute to classroom environments that support engagement and learning for students from diverse backgrounds.

By clarifying the relationship between culturally responsive teaching and effective teaching more broadly, the RPO provides a framework for understanding how commonly used classroom practices may either reinforce existing inequities or contribute to more inclusive and supportive learning environments, depending on how they are implemented.

---

## 10. Implications for Addressing Disparity Gaps

Persistent disparities in school discipline, academic engagement, and educational opportunity continue to raise concerns about equity within U.S. schools. Students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, particularly Black and Latino students, are disproportionately represented in exclusionary disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2011). These disparities are often attributed to a combination of structural inequities, institutional policies, and interpersonal dynamics within classrooms. Increasingly, scholars have pointed to classroom interactions and teacher practices as critical contexts in which these inequities may either be reinforced or mitigated.

Culturally responsive teaching has frequently been proposed as one approach for addressing inequities in student experiences within classrooms. However, much of the existing literature has focused on describing culturally responsive instructional strategies rather than articulating how such practices might influence broader patterns of student engagement and discipline. The RPO model contributes to this conversation by highlighting the role of students' psychological experiences within classrooms as key mechanisms linking classroom practices to student outcomes.

Within the RPO, culturally responsive practices—such as relationship-building, culturally relevant instruction, and equitable classroom management—are proposed to influence student outcomes in part through students' perceptions of belonging, trust, and fairness in the classroom. Research on school climate and student engagement suggests that when students perceive teachers as respectful, fair, and responsive to their identities and

experiences, they are more likely to demonstrate engagement, positive classroom behavior, and academic persistence (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Wang & Degol, 2016). Conversely, when students perceive classroom environments as unfair or culturally disconnected from their experiences, these perceptions may contribute to disengagement, conflict, and disciplinary sanctions.

By emphasizing these psychological processes, the RPO suggests that culturally responsive practices play an important role in shaping the relational dynamics that influence student engagement and disciplinary experiences. Importantly, the model does not imply that culturally responsive teaching alone can eliminate structural inequities within educational systems. Rather, it highlights how classroom practices operate within broader organizational and policy contexts that also influence student experiences.

The model also underscores the importance of aligning classroom-level practices with school and district-level efforts to promote equity. For example, professional learning initiatives focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, coaching models that provide feedback on equitable classroom management, and leadership practices that prioritize inclusive school climates may help create conditions that support culturally responsive classrooms. By situating classroom practices within these broader organizational contexts, the RPO offers a framework for understanding how culturally responsive schooling may contribute to more equitable educational experiences for students.

---

---

## 11. Future Directions for the RPO Model

Although the RPO offers a framework for understanding how culturally responsive practices may influence student experiences and outcomes, several boundary conditions and limitations should be considered when interpreting the model. First, the model is derived from a synthesis of qualitative studies conducted within a particular set of school contexts. While these studies included multiple stakeholder perspectives—teachers, students, parents, and administrators—they were conducted within specific districts and regions. As a result, the themes informing the model may reflect contextual features of these school environments, including demographic composition, organizational structures, and local policy priorities. Future research is needed to examine whether the relationships proposed in the model generalize across different geographic, cultural, and policy contexts.

Second, the model is primarily intended as a conceptual framework rather than a tested causal model. Although the pathways proposed in the RPO are informed by existing research on culturally responsive teaching, school climate, and student engagement, the relationships among the model's components have not yet been empirically tested within a single integrated study. In particular, additional research is needed to examine whether culturally responsive classroom practices influence student outcomes through the psychological mechanisms proposed in the model, such as belonging, trust, and perceptions of fairness. Longitudinal and multi-level research designs may be especially valuable for testing these proposed relationships.

Third, the model focuses primarily on classroom and school-level processes, and therefore does not fully capture the broader structural and societal forces that shape educational inequities. Factors such as school funding disparities, residential segregation, and broader policy environments influence educational opportunities in ways that extend beyond classroom practices. While culturally responsive teaching may play an important role in improving students' classroom experiences, it should be understood as one component of a broader set of efforts needed to address systemic inequities in education.

Finally, the RPOM represents an effort to integrate perspectives across multiple stakeholder groups, yet each of these perspectives captures only part of the broader educational landscape. Students, families, teachers, and administrators may interpret culturally responsive practices in different ways, and these interpretations may vary across cultural communities and school contexts. Continued research that engages diverse stakeholder perspectives will therefore be essential for refining and extending the model.

Taken together, these limitations highlight the importance of viewing the RPO as a conceptual starting point for future empirical research rather than as a definitive explanation of culturally responsive schooling. By identifying key constructs and potential mechanisms linking culturally responsive practices to student outcomes, the model provides a framework that can guide future studies aimed at testing, refining, and expanding our understanding of culturally responsive education.

---



---

## 12. Future Directions for Research

The RPOM provides a framework for understanding how culturally responsive practices operate across multiple levels of the educational system and how these practices may influence student outcomes through students' psychological experiences in the classroom. In addition to synthesizing existing findings, the model also highlights several important directions for future research focused on measurement development, intervention design, and implementation strategies.

First, the model underscores the need for more precise measurement of culturally responsive practices in classroom settings. Much of the existing research relies on teacher self-report measures assessing beliefs, attitudes, or perceived self-efficacy related to culturally responsive teaching. While these measures provide valuable insight into teacher perspectives, they may not fully capture the observable instructional and relational practices that shape students' classroom experiences. The studies synthesized in this paper highlight the importance of identifying discrete, observable practices, such as relationship-building behaviors, culturally relevant instructional strategies, and equitable classroom management approaches. Future research should therefore focus on developing and validating observational measures capable of capturing these classroom practices and linking them to student experiences and outcomes.

Second, the RPO suggests that culturally responsive practices influence student outcomes in part through students' psychological experiences, including feelings of belonging, trust in teachers, and perceptions of fairness and respect. Although these constructs have been

studied extensively in research on school climate and student engagement, relatively little work has explicitly examined them as mechanisms linking culturally responsive teaching to student outcomes. Future studies should examine these mediating processes more directly, using multi-informant and longitudinal designs to better understand how classroom practices shape students' experiences over time.

Third, the model highlights the importance of organizational and leadership supports in fostering culturally responsive schooling. Teachers do not implement practices in isolation; their efforts are influenced by school leadership, professional learning opportunities, and broader district priorities. Consequently, interventions aimed at strengthening culturally responsive practices may be most effective when they incorporate both individual-level and organizational-level strategies. Examples may include coaching models that provide feedback on classroom practices, professional learning communities focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, and leadership initiatives that align school policies with equity-oriented goals.

Finally, the RPO emphasizes the value of incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives in future research and intervention development. Teachers, students, parents, and school leaders each bring unique insights into how culturally responsive practices are enacted and experienced within schools. Engaging these stakeholders in the design and evaluation of interventions may help ensure that efforts to promote culturally responsive schooling are both contextually relevant and responsive to the needs of school communities.

Taken together, these directions highlight the potential for the RPO to guide future work aimed at strengthening the measurement, implementation, and impact of culturally responsive practices in schools.

---

## 13. Contribution to the Field

The present paper contributes to the growing literature on culturally responsive education by synthesizing findings across multiple stakeholder perspectives and proposing a conceptual framework that situates culturally responsive practices within a broader educational system. While prior scholarship has provided foundational descriptions of culturally responsive pedagogy and emphasized the importance of affirming students' cultural identities in instruction (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012), much of this work has focused primarily on teacher beliefs, instructional strategies, or philosophical orientations toward teaching. Comparatively less attention has been given to how culturally responsive practices operate across levels of the educational system and how these practices influence student outcomes through specific mechanisms.

The RPO advances the field by integrating insights from four qualitative studies examining culturally responsive practices from the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and district administrators. By bringing together these perspectives, the model moves beyond teacher-centered conceptualizations of culturally responsive pedagogy and highlights the broader ecosystem within which culturally responsive practices are interpreted and

enacted. This multi-stakeholder perspective underscores that culturally responsive schooling is shaped not only by individual teacher practices but also by school leadership, organizational climate, and district-level priorities.

A second contribution of the RPO is the explicit identification of student psychological mechanisms linking culturally responsive practices to student outcomes. While existing literature often assumes that culturally responsive teaching improves student engagement and academic outcomes, fewer frameworks articulate the processes through which these effects occur. The RPO proposes that culturally responsive classroom practices influence student outcomes through students' experiences of belonging, trust in teachers, cultural affirmation, and perceptions of fairness in classroom interactions. By highlighting these mediating processes, the model bridges research on culturally responsive pedagogy with scholarship on school climate, student motivation, and developmental psychology.

Finally, the RPO situates culturally responsive practices within a multi-level implementation framework, emphasizing that the adoption and sustainability of culturally responsive teaching depend on organizational supports within schools and districts. This systems-oriented perspective aligns with implementation science research demonstrating that instructional innovations are shaped by leadership practices, professional learning structures, and institutional norms (Fixsen et al., 2005; Forman et al., 2013). By integrating culturally responsive pedagogy with implementation science perspectives, the RPO provides a conceptual foundation for future research examining how culturally responsive practices can be effectively supported and sustained within schools.

Taken together, these contributions position the RPO as a framework that connects culturally responsive teaching research with broader scholarship on school systems, student development, and educational equity. In doing so, the model offers a foundation for future empirical studies aimed at testing the pathways through which culturally responsive practices influence student experiences and outcomes across diverse educational contexts.

---

## 14. Conclusion

Culturally responsive schooling emerges not from isolated teaching strategies but from the interaction of relational, instructional, and organizational processes across educational systems. By synthesizing findings from multiple stakeholder perspectives, this paper advances a multi-level conceptualization of culturally responsive practices.

The Responsive Practices to Outcomes model offers a framework for guiding future research and supporting the implementation of culturally responsive schooling. Understanding culturally responsive teaching as a system-level phenomenon may help educators and researchers move beyond isolated strategies toward more comprehensive approaches to equity in education.

## References

\*papers included in synthesis

Aarons, G. A., Hurlburt, M., & Horwitz, S. M. (2011). Advancing a conceptual model of evidence-based practice implementation in public service sectors. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 38*(1), 4–23.

\*Aguayo, D., Good, M., Diem, S., Herman, K.C., Burke, J., Davis, T., London, C., & Reinke, W.M. (2023). Promoting district-level culturally responsive practices. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 59*, 471-506.

\*Aguayo, D., Herman, K.C., Debnam, K., McCree, N., & Reinke, W.M. (2024). Centering students' voices in the exploration of in-classroom culturally responsive practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 105*.

\*Aguayo, D., Santiago, R., Boddie, D., McCree, N., Gunasekaran, S. D., Venkat, S., Reinke, W. M., & Herman, K.C. (2025). Parents' perspectives of culturally responsive practices for teachers and school administrators. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 34*, 2333-2347.

\*Debnam, K., Aguayo, D., Henderson, L., Reinke, W.M., & Herman, K. C. (2023). Nominated exemplar teacher perceptions of culturally responsive practices in the classroom. *Journal of Teacher Education, 125*, 104062.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, National Implementation Research Network.

Forman, S. G., Coddling, R. S., Reddy, L. A., Sanetti, L. M. H., Shapiro, E. S., Gonzales, J. E., Rosenfield, S. A., & Stoiber, K. C. (2013). Implementation science and school psychology. *School Psychology Quarterly, 28*(2), 77–100.

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106–116.

Gregory, A., & Ripski, M. B. (2008). Adolescent trust in teachers: Implications for behavior in the high school classroom. *School Psychology Review, 37*(3), 337–353.

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2006). Student-teacher relationships. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 59–71). National Association of School Psychologists.

Herman, K.C., Bradshaw, C., Reinke, W., & Debnam, K. (2026). Understanding, measuring, and promoting culturally responsive instruction and discipline: The Responsive Practices to Outcomes Model. *School Psychology Review*.

Herman, K.C., Dong, N., Reinke, W.M. & Bradshaw, C. (2023). Accounting for traumatic historical events in social, behavioral, and educational randomized control trials. *School Psychology Review, 53*, 96-112.

Herman, K.C., Dong, N., Reinke, W., Selders, K., McCree, N., & Aguayo, D. (2025). Interaction disparities of students with disabilities as indicators of culturally responsive

practices (CRPs): Pathways from CRPs to classwide engagement and academic performance. *School Psychology Review*.

Herman, K. C., Wiedermann, W., & Reinke, W. M. (2025) Conceptual and methodological advances for understanding contextual, identity, and cultural effects in intervention research: The Contextually Informed Research model. *Journal of School Psychology, 113*, 101505.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). *Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 74–84.

McLeskey, J., Barringer, M.-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M. C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D. (2017). *High-leverage practices in special education*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center

Newman, C., Kaihoi, C., & Bradshaw, C.P. (2025). Disentangling self-reported and external observations of culturally responsive teaching: The role of organizational health and collegial leadership. *School Psychology Review*.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.

Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Chung, C.-G., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). *Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85–107.

\*Smith, L., Debnam, K., Aguayo, D., Pandey, T., Reinke, W. M., & Herman, K.C. (2025). How can teachers improve? Using culturally responsive frameworks to examine adolescent perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 40*(5), 1229-1259.

Wang, M.-T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review, 28*(2), 315–352.