

# Toward a Science of Responsive Educational Practice: A Technical Report on the Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) Model

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## **Take Home Message:**

**Educational inequities are reproduced through ordinary classroom interactions—  
and responsive practices offer a practical pathway for changing them.**

## About this Report

This report synthesizes a series of recent studies from the Missouri Prevention Science Institute examining how students, families, teachers, and school leaders define and experience responsive educational practices. Organized around the Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model, the report argues that educational equity is shaped not only by curriculum or policy, but by the everyday interactions, relationships, and classroom conditions that determine whether students feel safe, respected, connected, and capable at school. Drawing on qualitative and implementation-focused research, the report proposes responsive educational practice as a practical, measurable, and systems-oriented framework for improving student engagement, belonging, and outcomes.

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## Executive Summary

The Missouri Prevention Science Institute (MPSI) has developed an emerging body of scholarship focused on responsive educational practices designed to improve student belonging, engagement, behavioral outcomes, and educational equity. Across this work, researchers have sought to move beyond deficit-oriented approaches to student behavior and learning by centering the experiences, identities, and perspectives of students, families, teachers, and educational leaders.

This technical report synthesizes a series of qualitative and conceptual papers focused on culturally responsive and responsive educational practices. The report prioritizes five qualitative studies that foreground the voices of students, parents, teachers, and district leaders in defining what responsive practice looks like in classrooms and schools. These studies are integrated within the RPO model, a conceptual framework that positions responsive educator practices as mechanisms through which classroom environments shape student engagement, relationships, belonging, competence, and academic outcomes.

Across the studies, stakeholders consistently emphasized that responsive educational practice is relational, emotionally supportive, affirming of student identity, and attentive to systems-level inequities. Participants described responsive educators as individuals who build authentic relationships, communicate respect and care, create emotionally safe classrooms, remain reflective about their own biases and assumptions, and intentionally adapt instruction and discipline practices to students' needs and cultural contexts.

The report also examines challenges related to terminology and implementation. While the foundational scholarship draws heavily from culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, the broader framing of “responsive practices” may offer greater conceptual flexibility while maintaining fidelity to equity-centered principles. This framing also aligns with the RPO model and emphasizes practical, observable educator behaviors that support student wellbeing and belonging.

**RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN CONCEPTUALIZED NOT AS ISOLATED TEACHER TECHNIQUES, BUT AS INTEGRATED SYSTEMS OF RELATIONAL, INSTRUCTIONAL, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTS.**

Finally, the report discusses implications for educator preparation, school leadership, implementation science, professional development, measurement, and future research. Findings suggest that responsive educational practices are most effective when conceptualized not as isolated teacher techniques, but as integrated systems of relational, instructional, and organizational supports.

# 1. Introduction

Educational systems across the United States continue to confront persistent disparities in academic achievement, disciplinary exclusion, school belonging, and access to supportive educational environments. Students from racially and ethnically marginalized communities disproportionately experience exclusionary discipline, negative school interactions, and environments that fail to reflect or affirm their cultural identities. At the same time, educators frequently report feeling underprepared to support increasingly diverse student populations.

Within this context, scholars associated with the Missouri Prevention Science Institute (MPSI) have contributed to a growing body of research focused on culturally responsive and responsive educational practices (Herman & Reinke, 2026). This work builds from foundational theories of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), while also emphasizing prevention science, implementation science, and systems-level educational change.

Importantly, the recent MPSI scholarship moves beyond purely theoretical discussions of culturally responsive teaching by examining how students, parents, teachers, and educational leaders themselves define and experience responsive educational practices. The studies included in this report focus heavily on stakeholder voice and seek to identify practical, observable, and malleable educator behaviors that contribute to student engagement, emotional safety, belonging, and academic success.

The present report synthesizes these studies into a unified technical report organized around the RPO model. Particular attention is given to how stakeholders conceptualize responsive educational practices, the implications for implementation and professional development, and the future direction of this line of work.

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## 2. Conceptual Background

### *2.1 Foundations in Asset-Based Educational Frameworks*

The scholarship synthesized in this report draws heavily from several overlapping educational frameworks that seek to move schools away from deficit-oriented views of students and families.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. This framework was developed primarily in response to the educational experiences of Black students and highlights the importance of helping students critique and navigate systemic inequities.

Culturally responsive teaching, articulated by Gay (2000; 2018), focuses on using students' cultural backgrounds, identities, experiences, and strengths to guide instructional practice.

Gay emphasized that teaching cannot be considered universally “good” when it reflects only dominant White middle-class norms.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) further expanded these ideas by emphasizing the need to sustain multilingualism, multiculturalism, and students’ evolving cultural identities rather than merely responding to them.

Across these frameworks, several common themes emerge:

- Students’ identities and experiences matter in learning;
- Relationships are central to effective teaching;
- School systems are not culturally neutral;
- Educator self-reflection is essential;
- Educational inequities are shaped by structural and historical forces;
- Classroom practices should affirm rather than suppress student identity.

## 2.2 From “Culturally Responsive” to “Responsive Practices”

An important conceptual question emerging from this body of work concerns terminology. Much of the foundational scholarship uses terms such as culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive classroom management, culturally relevant pedagogy, or culturally sustaining pedagogy.

However, several considerations suggest value in broadening the framing toward “responsive practices.” First, the qualitative studies synthesized here consistently reveal that stakeholders often define responsiveness through relational, emotional, instructional, and interpersonal qualities that extend beyond culture alone. Students, parents, and educators emphasized emotional safety, empathy, fairness, communication, supportiveness, flexibility, and belonging as central features of effective practice.

Second, the term “responsive practices” aligns well with the RPO model, which focuses on practical educator behaviors and classroom interactions linked to student outcomes.

Third, in contemporary educational and political contexts, the term “responsive” may provide broader accessibility while still preserving the equity-centered commitments foundational to culturally responsive work.

**This report therefore adopts the term responsive educational practices as an umbrella construct while explicitly recognizing culturally responsive scholarship as the conceptual and historical foundation underlying the work.**

### 3. The Responsive Practices to Outcomes Model

The Responsive Practices to Outcomes (RPO) model provides a conceptual framework for organizing the scholarship synthesized in this report (Herman et al., 2026).

The RPO model conceptualizes responsive educator practices as critical components of the classroom context that shape student engagement, competence, relatedness, belonging, and academic outcomes. The model integrates culturally responsive educational frameworks with prevention science and developmental theory (see Figure 1).

Within the RPO model, responsive practices are operationalized through the CARES framework:

- Connection to Curriculum
- Authentic Relationships
- Reflective Thinking
- Effective Communication
- Sensitivity to Students' Culture

The model proposes that educator behaviors influence classroom climate and student experiences through several mechanisms:

1. Students experience greater emotional and psychological safety;
2. Students feel respected, valued, and understood;
3. Students experience stronger teacher-student relationships;
4. Students become more behaviorally and academically engaged;
5. Students experience greater belonging and connectedness;
6. Improved engagement and belonging contribute to improved academic and behavioral outcomes.

**Importantly, the RPO framework emphasizes that responsive educational practices are not merely ideological commitments. Rather, they are practical, observable, and malleable educator behaviors that can be taught, coached, measured, and improved over time.**

The RPO framework also attempts to address longstanding challenges in the field regarding inconsistent operationalization and measurement of culturally responsive practices. By grounding the model in observable educator practices and measurable student experiences, the framework offers a more implementation-oriented approach to responsive educational practice.

## 4. Student Perspectives on Responsive Practices

### 4.1 Centering Student Voice

One of the strongest themes across the MPSI scholarship is the importance of incorporating student voice into the conceptualization of responsive educational practice.

Historically, much of the culturally responsive teaching literature relied heavily on theory, teacher self-report, or observational frameworks developed by researchers and practitioners. The qualitative studies synthesized in this report intentionally shifted attention toward how students themselves define responsive and non-responsive educational experiences.

In the study “Centering Students’ Voices in the Exploration of In-Classroom Culturally Responsive Practices,” Aguayo and colleagues (2024) conducted 23 focus groups with 103 Black, Latine, and White middle and high school students. Students described four overarching themes:

- Inclusive classroom instruction;
- Emotional safety in the classroom;
- Relational quality with teachers;
- Racism and other “isms” in the classroom.

Students consistently emphasized that responsive teachers created emotionally safe environments where students felt respected, heard, and valued. Participants highlighted the importance of teachers who supported students academically while also demonstrating genuine care for students’ emotional wellbeing.

Importantly, students also described experiences of teacher behaviors that undermined learning and belonging, including humiliation, dismissiveness, favoritism, stereotyping, and racialized treatment.

The findings suggest that students experience responsiveness not merely through curriculum adaptation or multicultural content, but through the day-to-day quality of teacher interactions, classroom climate, and relational trust.

**THE STUDENT-CENTERED FINDINGS CHALLENGE OVERLY NARROW CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING THAT FOCUS PRIMARILY ON CURRICULAR INCLUSION WHILE NEGLECTING INTERPERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF CLASSROOM LIFE**

### 4.2 Student Recommendations for Teacher Improvement

A related study examined how adolescents believed teachers could improve their classroom practices using culturally responsive frameworks (Smith et al., 2025).

Students provided feedback that aligned with many existing culturally responsive teaching frameworks, including the Double Check CARES framework and the Eight Competencies of Culturally Responsive Teaching. However, researchers also identified numerous student recommendations that were not captured by existing frameworks.

Students emphasized:

- fairness and consistency;
- emotional regulation by teachers;
- respectful communication;
- flexibility and understanding;
- reduced public embarrassment;
- greater teacher accountability;
- authentic listening;
- equitable treatment across students.

These findings suggest that students conceptualize responsive educational practice through both culturally grounded and universally relational dimensions. In many ways, students focused less on curricular activities and more on whether teachers created classrooms characterized by fairness, emotional safety, dignity, and respect.

The student-centered findings challenge overly narrow conceptualizations of culturally responsive teaching that focus primarily on curricular inclusion while neglecting interpersonal and emotional dimensions of classroom life.

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## 5. Teacher Perspectives on Responsive Practices

The study “Nominated Exemplar Teacher Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Practices in the Classroom” explored how highly regarded educators conceptualized responsive practice (Debnam et al., 2023).

Researchers interviewed 13 nominated exemplar teachers and identified a range of classroom practices, beliefs, and interpersonal qualities associated with responsiveness.

Teachers emphasized:

- empathy and care;
- strong classroom management;
- relationship-building;
- adaptability and flexibility;
- tailoring curriculum to students;
- self-reflection;
- culturally aware communication;
- maintaining high expectations while remaining supportive.

Notably, the findings suggested that there may not be one universally correct method for implementing responsive educational practice. Instead, responsiveness appeared highly relational, context-dependent, and adaptive.

Teachers also emphasized that effective responsiveness required continual reflection and growth rather than mastery of a fixed set of techniques. This finding aligns closely with the Reflective Thinking domain of the CARES framework.

Importantly, even highly regarded teachers sometimes struggled to operationalize culturally responsive teaching consistently. This reinforces broader concerns within the field regarding definitional ambiguity and the need for clearer, observable indicators of responsive practice.

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## 6. Parent Perspectives on Responsive Practices

Parents and caregivers provide another critical perspective on responsive educational practice.

In the study “Parents’ Perspectives of Culturally Responsive Practices for Teachers and School Administrators,” researchers interviewed Black, Latine, and White parents regarding educator responsiveness (Aguayo et al., 2025).

Three major themes emerged:

- teacher receptivity to parent advocacy and collaboration;
- educators’ interpersonal skills;
- intentional support for student needs.

Parents consistently emphasized the importance of proactive communication, empathy, collaboration, and educator willingness to listen to family concerns.

Many parents described responsive educators as individuals who:

- communicated consistently and respectfully;
- sought to understand students holistically;
- partnered with families rather than becoming defensive;
- advocated for students’ individual needs;
- demonstrated accountability and care.

The findings highlight that responsiveness extends beyond classroom instruction and includes family-school relationships, communication practices, and organizational culture.

Importantly, the parent study also situates responsive educational practice within contemporary political tensions surrounding culturally responsive education. The authors note that anti-critical race theory legislation and politicized discourse may inhibit authentic conversations about equity and student experience.

These findings reinforce the importance of framing responsive educational practice in ways that remain accessible and actionable while preserving commitments to equity, inclusion, and belonging.

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## 7. District Leadership and Systems-Level Responsiveness

Responsive educational practice cannot be sustained solely through individual teacher effort. Organizational leadership and district-level systems play essential roles in implementation and sustainability.

The study “Promoting District-Level Culturally Responsive Practices” examined how four district leaders promoted culturally responsive practices across Midwestern school systems (Aguayo et al., 2023).

The findings emphasized several leadership responsibilities:

- fostering trusting relationships with educators;
- supporting educator retention;
- developing inclusive school cultures;
- integrating equity into district systems;
- supporting culturally responsive professional development;
- engaging communities authentically.

The study utilized the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework and highlighted the importance of leadership self-awareness, inclusive environments, and engagement with community contexts.

Importantly, district leaders emphasized that responsive practice cannot remain isolated at the classroom level. Sustainable implementation requires:

- policy alignment;
- leadership commitment;
- staffing support;
- organizational accountability;
- professional learning systems;
- long-term culture change.

These findings align with broader implementation science literature emphasizing that educational innovations fail when organizational systems are not aligned to support them.

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## 8. Implications for Measurement and Research

One of the recurring concerns across the scholarship synthesized in this report is the challenge of operationalizing and measuring responsive educational practices.

Historically, culturally responsive teaching research has struggled with:

- inconsistent definitions;
- overlapping terminology;
- limited objective measures;
- reliance on teacher self-report;
- lack of validated implementation indicators.

The RPO model attempts to address some of these concerns by grounding responsive educational practice in observable educator behaviors and measurable classroom interactions.

Additional MPSI-related research provides important insights into these issues. For example, observational studies examining teacher-student interaction disparities suggest that objective classroom interaction data may provide indicators of responsiveness (Herman et al., 2025). Research examining opportunities-to-respond (OTR) disparities found that classrooms with larger disparities in teacher interactions demonstrated lower student engagement, weaker teacher-student relationships, and poorer academic outcomes.

Similarly, research examining educational randomized controlled trials following traumatic historical events, such as the Ferguson protests after the killing of Michael Brown, highlights the importance of understanding the broader social and historical context in which educational interventions occur (Herman et al., 2023).

These studies suggest that future responsive educational practice research should:

- prioritize multi-method assessment;
  - incorporate student and family voice;
  - examine contextual and historical influences;
  - develop practical observational tools;
  - investigate implementation fidelity;
  - explore mechanisms linking educator behavior to student outcomes.
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## 9. Implications for Practice and Professional Development

The studies synthesized in this report provide several implications for educator preparation and professional learning.

### 9.1 *Responsive Practice as Relational Practice*

Across students, parents, teachers, and leaders, responsiveness was consistently defined through relationships.

Stakeholders emphasized:

- emotional safety;
- empathy;
- authenticity;
- fairness;
- trust;
- communication;
- listening;
- respect.

These findings suggest that responsive educational practice should not be conceptualized solely as curricular adaptation or cultural knowledge acquisition. **Rather, responsiveness is enacted relationally through daily interactions and classroom climate.**

### 9.2 *Importance of Reflection and Self-Awareness*

Reflective thinking emerged repeatedly across studies.

Responsive educators were described as individuals willing to:

- examine biases;
- reconsider assumptions;
- adapt instruction;
- acknowledge mistakes;
- remain open to feedback.

Professional development should therefore move beyond one-time informational trainings and incorporate ongoing reflection, coaching, and feedback.

### 9.3 *Stakeholder Inclusion*

The findings strongly support incorporating student and family voice into professional development and school improvement efforts.

Students and parents offered perspectives that often extended beyond existing frameworks and revealed dimensions of responsiveness that adults may overlook.

## 9.4 Systems-Level Supports

Responsive educational practice requires organizational support.

Schools and districts should consider:

- leadership alignment;
- coaching systems;
- implementation support;
- educator wellness;
- equitable discipline systems;
- data-informed decision making;
- family engagement structures.

Without systems-level supports, responsive practice initiatives risk becoming fragmented, performative, or unsustainable.

## 10. Future Directions

This body of work points toward several important future directions for the field.

First, additional research is needed to clarify the boundaries and dimensions of responsive educational practice. Although the broader framing of “responsive practices” may increase accessibility and conceptual flexibility, researchers must also preserve the explicit attention to race, culture, inequity, and historical marginalization foundational to culturally responsive scholarship.

Second, more rigorous measurement tools are needed that combine:

- direct observation;
- student voice;
- family perspectives;
- implementation fidelity;
- contextual analysis.

Third, implementation science approaches should continue to examine how responsive educational practices are sustained across schools and districts.

Finally, future scholarship should continue prioritizing stakeholder voice and avoid conceptualizing responsiveness exclusively through researcher-defined frameworks.

## 11. Conclusion

The Missouri Prevention Science Institute’s body of work on responsive educational practices contributes meaningfully to the evolving scholarship on equity-centered education, prevention science, and implementation.

Across the qualitative studies synthesized in this report, students, parents, teachers, and district leaders consistently emphasized that responsive educational practice is relational, emotionally supportive, reflective, equitable, and adaptive.

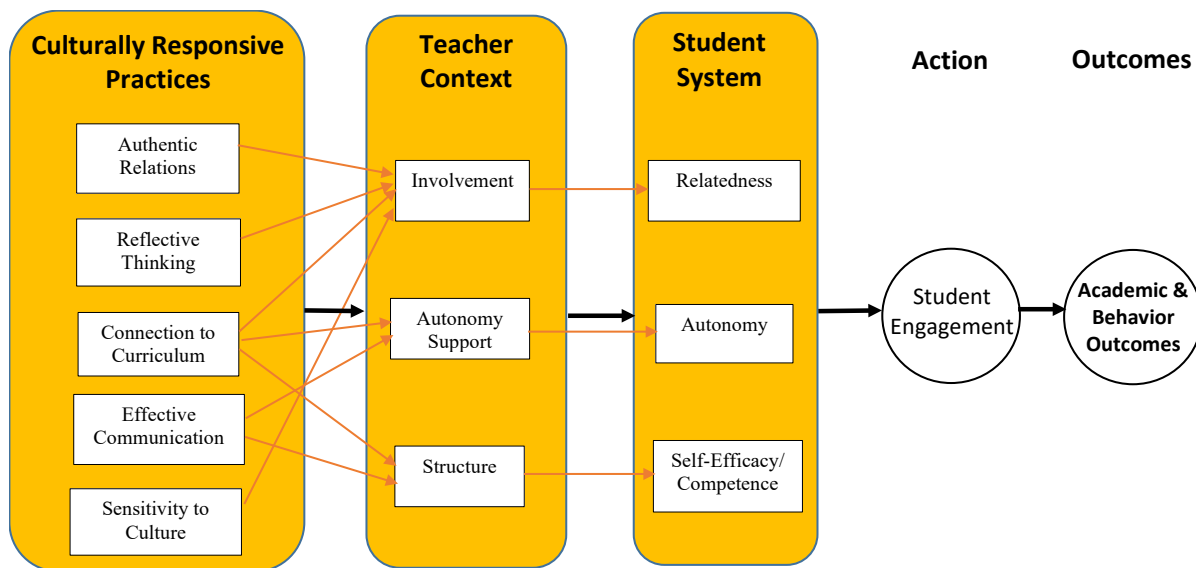
The RPO model provides a promising framework for integrating these perspectives into a coherent conceptual structure that links educator behavior, classroom climate, student engagement, belonging, and outcomes.

Importantly, the findings suggest that responsive educational practice cannot be reduced to isolated techniques. Rather, responsiveness emerges through the ongoing interaction between educators, students, families, schools, and communities.

The broader framing of responsive educational practices may offer a practical and conceptually flexible pathway for future implementation efforts while remaining grounded in the historical and scholarly foundations of culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Ultimately, the MPSI scholarship underscores a central principle: students learn best in environments where they feel emotionally safe, respected, understood, connected, and valued.

Figure 1. Comprehensive RPO Theory of Change



Note. Gold lines depict hypothesized links between specific culturally responsive practices (CRPs) and specific teacher contexts and student subsystems. Black lines depict the hypothesized links among the broad constructs of the theory.

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