



## Culturally Responsive Art Education

Sheng Kuan Chung  
Dan Li

### Culturally responsive

teaching is defined as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Culturally responsive art education for art teachers promotes a multicultural learning environment that can motivate diverse students to excel. If taught through their own cultural lens, the ethnically diverse students are more likely to succeed (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016). Culturally responsive art teaching attends to the needs of students, especially those in urban schools, through a relevant curriculum and pedagogy. In this *Advisory*, we explore a culturally responsive approach to art education and advocate for the importance of this methodology for teaching students how to function in a diverse society. Arguably, teachers who adopt their curriculum to meet the needs of culturally diverse students become more confident working in urban schools situated in areas marked by profound economic disparity as well as by higher ethnic, racial, and religious diversity.

Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes student-centered instructions as well as the choice and delivery of ethnically and culturally relevant curricula. It extends students’ literacy development by building on their languages and cultural backgrounds. Specifically, characteristics of culturally responsive teaching include, but are not limited to, acknowledging the importance of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups as part of a formal curriculum and believing that all students are capable of excelling in school (Conrad, Gong, Sipp,

& Wright, 2004). For example, Rosa Hernández Sheets (1995) suggests using a relevant yet unofficial language as the medium of instruction, affirmation, and validation of ethnic identity in fostering self-esteem. The curricular content would emphasize students’ cultural heritage and history and the implementation of learning strategies that match students’ learning styles.

### The Characteristics of Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher

Cherry A. McGee Banks and James A. Banks (1995) describe attributes of culturally responsive teachers as follows. First, teachers should be enthusiastic about understanding different cultural practices, values, and attitudes that are culturally, racially, and ethnically distinct from their own. Second, teachers’ multicultural knowledge of immigration, racism, sexism, cultural assimilation, ethnic groups, stereotypes, prejudice, and institutional racism is helpful in implementing a culturally responsive lesson. Furthermore, teachers must be able to recognize, compare, and contrast examples of various theories related to diversity—such as cultural differences, cultural deficits, genetics, and cultural ecology. Each of these theories has been helpful in explaining poor academic achievement among students from low-income families and students of color (Banks & Banks, 1995).

Culturally responsive teachers additionally understand the political nature of schooling and help students identify their roles in the community, the nation, and the world (Banks & Banks, 1995). Similarly, culturally relevant

teachers build upon students' cultural experiences to help them acquire new knowledge in classroom practices. Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas (2002) emphasize that culturally responsive teachers build on students' personal and cultural strengths, help students examine the curriculum from multiple perspectives, use different assessment strategies that promote learning, and encourage cultural inclusiveness of all students in the classroom.

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A culturally responsive pedagogy requires art teachers to understand the different learning styles of ethnic students and their cultures. It empowers students to become capable learners who appreciate their cultural heritages and lived experiences and utilize their learning styles to develop critical thinking and act on unjust issues. Culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to develop culturally relevant lessons that consider their students' cultural backgrounds, languages, learning styles, and values encountered at home and in their communities (Chu & Garcia, 2014).

To serve diverse students in urban schools, art teachers can implement lessons to equip students with knowledge that goes beyond the subject matter, empowering them to critically analyze visual artifacts presented in the mass media or their daily lives. In doing so, art teachers consider the unique learning styles of their students, their cultural backgrounds, and their lived experiences in curriculum planning. As David C. Berliner and Gene V. Glass (2014) argue, teaching is not merely about transferring knowledge, but also about being able to guide students to develop their critical skills, attitudes, and beliefs. Culturally responsive teaching employs vital pedagogy to empower students to confront various social issues, including gender discrimination, racism, and sexism (Vavrus, 2008). Specifically, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) states that culturally responsive instructional methods entail the following characteristics: "(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). Considering these characteristics in art class, teachers should encourage students to express their cultures and be proud of their cultural traditions. Furthermore, teachers should help students to challenge any visual texts in the media or elsewhere that may misinterpret ethnical groups.

## A Culturally Responsive Art Class in An Urban Environment

One of the authors conducted an art lesson embracing a culturally responsive pedagogy in a Saturday art class located in a major urban city in the United States. The class comprised middle school students from diverse cultural backgrounds. For this lesson, the instructor presented exemplars of multicultural traditions and festivals as visual artifacts to discuss how people from different cultures celebrate their traditions regarding food, daily affairs, decoration, and costume. More importantly, the lesson was designed to empower students to be proud of their cultural heritage while learning to be open-minded about other cultures and their contributions to American society. To do so, the instructor invited several students to use their art to articulate cultural festivities that their families celebrate along with traditional American festivals, and their importance.

**Teaching is not merely about transferring knowledge, but also about being able to guide students to develop their critical skills, attitudes, and beliefs.**

The student artworks unveiled various cultural traditions. The stories depicted by the students include traditional American festivals, such as Christmas, Independence Day, Easter, and Halloween, as well as other ethnic festivals, including the Mexican Day of the Dead and Cinco de Mayo, and the Chinese Lunar New Year Festival. Culturally responsive art teachers encourage students to explore their own cultures and to be open-minded about other cultures that are unfamiliar to them. To reach this goal, students created relevant art through printmaking and shared the cultural traditions presented in their art.

One student, Sophia, depicted a traditional Chinese Lunar New Year Festival (Figure 1). Her print features a traditional Chinese building with its unique style of roofing and glazed tiles. In front of the building, there is lion dance scenery depicting a man maneuvering in the lion costume. The free-flowing display of fireworks and lanterns indicates the festivity of the event. According to Sophia, during the festival, people play with fireworks, dance, sing, and write their best wishes on the lanterns, which they then release to the sky.





Figure 1. Traditional Chinese Lunar New Year Festival.

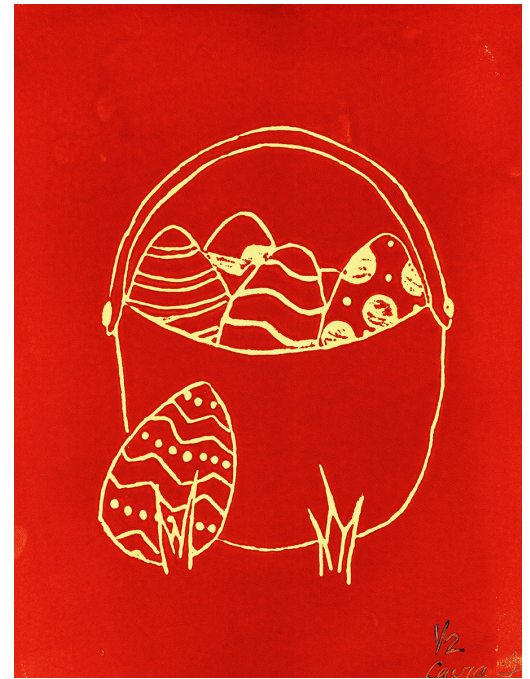


Figure 2. Easter holiday.



Figure 3. The Mexican holiday, Cinco de Mayo.

Becky's artwork shows a traditional American celebration, Easter holiday (Figure 2). Becky decorated each Easter egg with elaborate and intricate decorative patterns. She mentioned that Easter is a holiday for Christians to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a culturally responsive art class, teachers would encourage students from diverse cultural backgrounds to share their cultural traditions, including the mainstream American tradition.

Olivia's artwork depicts a Mexican holiday, Cinco de Mayo, which shows a girl dancing to fantastic music in her beautiful dress (Figure 3). Cinco de Mayo is one of the most important civic holidays celebrated in Mexico today. Each year, Mexicans commemorate the date when troops under the leadership of General Ignacio Zaragoza defeated the French at the Battle of Puebla and thus broke Napoleon III's dreams of establishing a permanent French colony in Mexico (Sommers, 1985). Olivia thought that her art served as a reminder of the cruelty of the war battle and encouraged viewers to cherish the peace they enjoy today. Mexican people continue celebrating this traditional festival in memory of those who sacrificed their lives to fight for the independence of Mexico.

In this lesson, the instructor invited students to share and appreciate diverse cultural festivals or traditions that they depicted in their prints. Culturally responsive art teaching promotes cultural tolerance via art appreciation and understanding. The artmaking process offers students a venue to express their cultural festivals, food, and costumes. Students use their visual language and art skills to present the joyful moments of these holidays in their artwork. The sharing session especially encourages students to share their cultural traditions with their classmates and to learn from each other.

## Conclusion

In an urban multicultural classroom, art teachers should guide students to explore their unique artistic expressions, societies, and cultures and to develop understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of other cultures. Culturally responsive art education can increase art teachers' awareness of the complexity of teaching in an urban setting, including work with diverse students in an environment that may lack resources and have high teacher turnover rates. In a culturally responsive class, art teachers are not the sole content authority. In fact, they listen to their students and empower each other on a learning journey so that they may grow together. The goal of culturally responsive art education is for teachers and students to work collaboratively to promote a more just and multicultural society. ■

## Author Notes

All students' names in this article are pseudonyms.  
Photos by Dan Li.

Sheng Kuan Chung, Professor of Art Education,  
University of Houston. Email: skchung@uh.edu  
Dan Li, Doctoral Candidate, University of  
Houston. Email: dli26@uh.edu

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