CULTURAL AWARENESS
Building Cultural Awareness

Whether from our own experiences or from books, movies, and the news, we all likely have a grasp on what it means to be aware of other cultures. But what does it mean, in practice, to have cultural awareness? Take a moment to consider the term “cultural awareness.” Can you come up with a precise definition? What actions can ensure that we are creating culturally aware spaces for all students to learn and for all families to feel welcome? While cultural awareness is dynamic and contextual (Goode, Dunne, & Bronheim, 2006), there are steps that we can take to ensure that all learners feel validated, valued, and included throughout all aspects of their educational journey.

As studies project that the United States will become a majority-minority nation by 2043 (Sarraj et al., 2015), the necessity of instilling cultural awareness in our students is undeniable. Developing cultural awareness ties directly into fostering social and emotional skills: cultural awareness has been shown to increase empathy, strengthen the ability to cooperate across differences, and create a more inclusive environment for all students (Landry, 2018; Sarraj et al., 2015). It can also help to increase one’s sensitivity to the nuances of other cultures and make space for diverse mentorships and collaborations. With increasing cultural awareness comes an increasing ability to overcome challenges in communication, making space for more clarity and understanding across cultural differences. Cultural awareness has the potential to not only mitigate biases and exclusion, but also encourage open-mindedness and inclusivity that makes all students feel safe, confident (Drexel, n.d.), and ready to learn.
What is Cultural Awareness?

To understand what it means to be culturally aware, it’s important to understand exactly what culture is. We all come from a culture that informs the way that we are “programmed,” shaping how we interpret social cues, behaviors, and relationships. Culture can change over time and space, and different aspects of our culture impact us more than others (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunne, 2007). Understanding how culture impacts all of us and informs everyone’s perception of the world is a key step toward building cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness is when one is “cognizant, observant, and conscious of similarities and differences among and between cultural groups” (Goode, Dunne, & Bronheim, 2006). It runs along a spectrum, ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency; environments that are culturally competent indicate that an organization and its personnel are able to communicate effectively for diverse audiences (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunne, 2007). Cultural awareness also refers to one’s self-awareness of their own culture and how it shapes their perceptions of the world (Georgetown, n.d.). Developing cultural self-awareness requires that we shine a light on an aspect of our culture that we deem as natural and then questioning how that aspect may be different for people of other cultures. Consider, for example, the utensils we use or the way we show affection.

As we begin to “unpack the different layers and nuances of culture” and examine how it impacts us, we are striving to avoid assumptions (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunner, 2007), seeking meaningful interactions with people of different cultures, and deepening our understanding surrounding culture’s dynamic and acquired nature (Georgetown, n.d.).
How to Increase Cultural Awareness

As we engage with diverse students and colleagues, keeping in mind how important culture is can help us to show continuous respect and care for someone’s background and perspective.

A key principle for building cultural awareness is employing an impartial, multicultural curriculum that incorporates cultural pluralism (Sarraj et al., 2015). Educators should resist the urge to gloss over or homogenize differences and focus on affirming the value of multiculturalism. This involves cultivating a mindset that is “inclusive of many different life patterns and... involves attitudes, beliefs, values, and policies that affirm inclusivity of cultural... differences” (Sarraj et al., 2015). Multicultural education aims to increase cultural awareness and change behavior, which translates into broad efforts at inclusion that impact all aspects of the classroom, curriculum, and community (Manning & Baruth, 2004).

Utilize the following strategies to increase cultural awareness in your students and yourself:

• Create a mission statement for your classroom or school that articulates the importance of cultural awareness (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunne, 2007). Consult student groups and other educators for input to ensure that the statement is a collective, inclusive mission that represents the needs and interests of the entire school community.

• Read diverse literature. Multicultural children’s literature has been shown to help students challenge racism, validate diverse student experiences (Amour, 2003), and develop an awareness of social justice issues (Valdez, 1999). Encourage students to step into a different character’s shoes and draw parallels and distinctions between their culture and the culture in the story.

• Use mindfulness to build students’ awareness of their initial reactions to those who are different from them, even if they may react in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Ask them what they noticed about their reactions and have them reflect on how their norms might appear to someone from another culture. This helps students draw their attention to the inherent subjectivity of culture.
• Clearly define values, principles, and acceptable behaviors to encourage respectful cross-cultural collaboration (Goode, Dunne, & Bronheim, 2006). Offer students verbiage and sentence stems to prepare them for constructive communication and ensure they have the tools to succeed at cooperating across differences.

• Facilitate group work and classroom conversations surrounding the value of diversity. Students can learn about diverse perspectives through these experiences, and having the chance to reflect on how they interacted with different ideas allows them to draw their own connections and conclusions (Drexel, n.d.).

Cultural awareness is a process. It develops over an extended period of time (Goode et al., 2006) and requires actively growing one’s knowledge about other cultures and reflecting back on how one’s culture shapes one’s own beliefs and opinions. It’s even possible that individuals display various levels of cultural awareness within their own culture. Regardless of the cultural awareness students enter with, we can create environments that affirm all students’ experiences, openly acknowledge and validate different cultures, and welcome respectful, critical dialogue. When we do, we embed dignity and understanding in the classroom, which is crucial for all learners to thrive.
References


