Intercultural responsiveness

What do we mean by intercultural responsiveness?

When individuals and schools are interculturally-competent, they are able to use attributes such as values, beliefs, understandings, skills and knowledge to appreciate the perspectives of others and work towards inclusion in culturally sensitive ways. In schools, intercultural responsiveness is the process of using these attributes to develop and maintain culturally-appropriate educational practices. Intercultural responsiveness can be seen as intercultural competence in action.

It is not a single response to be used when a family with a diverse cultural background enrols at the school. Instead, it involves the development of plans, policies and practices that have the values of inclusion, equity and access to education for all as their foundation (Lee et al., 2007). Intercultural responsiveness requires a whole-school commitment to these values, and to practices that consider every student’s cultural background, prior experiences, and learning styles. Knowledge and understandings of students and their families are also used to develop and implement strategies to support student learning, mental health and wellbeing.

Why is intercultural responsiveness important?

Intercultural responsiveness is a key part of building a positive school community. It is much easier for families and schools to form collaborative working relationships when school staff understand children’s cultural backgrounds. Schools can become places where families of all cultural backgrounds can connect with each other and receive advice and support if they need it, and this promotes a sense of belonging to the school community. Additionally, if schools are well connected with the broader community, families also feel connected to the community. (Video 3 has more information about building relationships with families with diverse cultural backgrounds.)

Interculturally-responsive teaching practices improve the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds while cultivating their cultural identity (Gay, 2000). Responsive education strengthens children’s connectedness to school, reduces behaviour problems, and enhances their wellbeing (Kalyanpur, 2003).

Children who feel connected to school build positive relationships and feel valued when their cultural background is accepted, acknowledged and understood (Gay, 2000). Being valued helps children to feel they belong and are part of the school community which, in turn, increases their self-esteem and self-worth: significant protective factors for mental health and wellbeing. Children growing and learning in a culturally-diverse community also learn to respect and value differences, which helps them to be part of our intercultural society.

School staff also benefit when schools are interculturally-responsive, as they can be guided in their approaches if inclusivity underlies all school policies and procedures. Guidance like this supports practices that encourage the best academic, mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children (Perso, 2012). School staff are also recognised and acknowledged for their efforts and know that support, advice and professional development will be available as needed.
What do interculturally-responsive schools look like?

Intercultural responsiveness will generally look different from school to school, due to unique and differing needs. What works to build cultural responsiveness at one school may not work for another. Even when two schools appear to have similar enrolments of children and families, each school’s requirements are likely to vary because of individual differences within cultures. For these reasons, strategies used to build intercultural responsiveness are most effective and sustainable when they are developed by each school community to meet the needs of that school community. However, with this in mind, research shows that schools that are culturally-responsive share some common features (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2013).

A culturally responsive school...

- is aware of the cultural background of the families in their school community and the local community
- acknowledges, values and considers the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all of their students, families and school staff
- sees diversity, particularly cultural and linguistic diversity, as a strength and builds their school community through these strengths
- encourages students to know about their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and supports them to develop a positive cultural identity
- supports all students to have a voice and contribute at school, drawing upon their cultural or linguistic backgrounds
- develops policies and procedures that are inclusive of the whole-school community, and has policies and procedures in place to prevent and respond quickly and appropriately to racism and bullying
- creates connections between home and school
- creates an environment where the diversity of the entire school community is represented (eg teaching materials, signage)
- welcomes children’s families into the school and builds relationships to help families to feel they belong, have a voice, and can contribute in meaningful ways
- provides professional development opportunities about cultural and linguistic diversity for staff and supports staff to be culturally-responsive
- connects with local services, organisations and professionals who have specialised knowledge and skills in supporting those with diverse cultural backgrounds
- helps children and families to access culturally-appropriate support and advice as needed through their established community connections.
Building intercultural responsiveness

Building intercultural responsiveness can take time and seem like a big task, especially if your school is at the beginning of their journey. But there are a lot of small things that schools can try. Three key areas can be considered when examining current intercultural responsiveness, and when planning and reviewing (Booth & Ainscow, 2002):

Creating inclusive cultures
This area is about creating a secure, collaborative school community, where everyone (e.g., children, families, school staff, and community organisations) is valued for what they can contribute and achieve. This area helps the school community to develop inclusive values to which everyone is committed. These values are used to develop policies and practices at the school.

Producing inclusive policies
This area is about making sure that inclusion and cultural diversity are key considerations for the development of all school policies and practices.

Creating inclusive practices
This area is about developing practices that are consistent with the inclusive culture, policies, and procedures at the school. Children have a voice and are encouraged to be active participants in their own learning. The school identifies culturally-appropriate resources, materials and services that can be used to support children and their families.

Looking at intercultural responsiveness in the classroom and whole school
There are no rules about how intercultural responsiveness will look in a classroom or school. Policies, procedures and strategies that are developed will reflect the needs of the students who attend the school, their families, and the local community. A number of questions may be considered when building a whole-school approach of inclusion. To help you on your way, several reflection resources are provided on the following pages.
### Reflecting on intercultural responsiveness in the classroom

#### Knowledge of students
- What are the backgrounds of the students in your classroom?
- How might culture influence the learning strengths and styles of the students in your classroom?
- How might you use your knowledge of the home lives and interests of the students in your classroom?
- How do you use each child’s experiences and interests to engage them in their learning?
- How do you make connections between school and home?

#### Knowledge of children’s families
- What are the expectations of the families of the children you teach?
- What expectations do families have of you as their child’s teacher?
- How do the families of the children in your class participate in the school and the local community?
- How might the skills and strengths of families be used in the classroom to support children’s learning?

#### The classroom environment
- How do you ensure the learning resources in the classroom are representative of the cultures of the children in your classroom?
- How is the classroom set up to ensure families feel welcome to come into the classroom?
- What structures are in place in the classroom to ensure all learning styles can be embraced (ie individual work, group work, discovery or passive learning)?

*Adapted from Booth & Ainscow, 2002*
Reflecting on intercultural responsiveness as a whole school

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<th>Creating inclusive cultures</th>
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<tr>
<td>What helps everyone feel welcome?</td>
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<td>How are students encouraged to be accepting of each other and to help each other?</td>
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<td>How do school staff (including office and visiting staff) collaborate with each other?</td>
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<td>How are outside agencies, community groups, and community organisations welcomed into the school?</td>
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<td>How is diversity embraced?</td>
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<th>Producing inclusive policies</th>
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<td>What steps are taken to ensure values of inclusiveness underlie all policies?</td>
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<td>How are new staff provided with information about the values of the school?</td>
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<td>What policies has the school developed on how new students and their families are welcomed?</td>
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<td>What provisions are made in policies for the professional development of school staff?</td>
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<td>What are the school policies around racism and bullying?</td>
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<td>What are the school polices regarding the use of interpreters?</td>
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<td>How is it ensured that children and their families have a voice and are active contributors to children’s learning and mental health?</td>
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<td>How is school staff expertise used to support the cultural diversity in the school?</td>
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<td>How is family expertise used to support the cultural diversity in the school?</td>
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<td>How is the broader community engaged in student’s learning?</td>
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Other resources


References


