

Explore Cultural Competence

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C*ultural competence* may seem like a new term to you, but it is hardly a new concept or practice. Most likely, you are acquainted with the terms *multicultural education* and *cultural diversity*. The research and conversations related to multicultural education and valuing cultural diversity have expanded and advanced to the same academic levels as all other aspects of teaching, learning, and schooling. Cultural competence embodies curricular content, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, and classroom management that all educators must know, do, believe, and respect in order to achieve efficacy.

Achieving efficacy means it is your responsibility to ensure that every student learns everything the student is expected to learn and to the best of that student's abilities. Your goal is for all students to learn about themselves as individuals, and each other as members of various groups and all of society. Every student should learn about all other students from the past, in the present, and into the future. In addition, all school families as well as all members of society should feel assured that you will fulfill your responsibilities to teach all students. Everyone is a stakeholder in you doing your job thoroughly. These outcomes can be fulfilled only through your navigation of cultural competence.

EXAMINE FAIRNESS

That's not fair. Everyone interacting with students in elementary school has heard these words. Teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and families have all encountered young students exclaiming these words or conveying the accompanying emotions through their facial expressions and body language.

Fairness embodies a sensation that each of us has experienced since early childhood. As toddlers, we acquired a meaning of fairness that

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seemed to be intricately involved with our entire being. From these early acquisitions, our individual views of fairness guide our cognitive thoughts, physical existence, affective emotions, and social interactions. In other words, fairness transcends all four domains of learning and influences everything we believe, think, say, and do.

Each of us developed a meaning of fairness from our parents, families, friends, and immediate communities—from the people we loved and trusted—that continued to develop with each new experience. Thus, we arrived at school with firm, yet perhaps skewed, foundations of fairness. As young children, we began to apply our individual definitions of fairness to every situation involving ourselves and the people around us. We may not have recognized or appreciated when life was fair, and we may not have comprehended the dynamics or details of each situation when fairness was questionable. Yet, we quickly understood the outcomes when we were involved, and, when warranted, we hastily articulated those three little words, *that's not fair*.

In many situations considered to be unfair, someone—frequently someone with more power and privilege, actual or perceived—has spoken or acted in ways that are judged inappropriate, unreasonable, or unkind. The words or actions may have occurred by choice or by chance. The exchanges and events may have been planned or spontaneous, direct or indirect, overt or covert; unlimited variables are associated with every situation considered as unfair. But when exchanges or events are believed to be unfair, profound short-term and long-term effects result, especially in schools and classrooms.

School administrators and classroom teachers strive to be fair in their words and actions. They teach about fairness, they manage through fairness, and they model their expectations with fairness. Yet the concept and practices of fairness often remain elusive and difficult to demonstrate for everyone at all times and in all situations. Since the ideas of fairness are contingent on cultural competence, the key to being fair is to understand cultural competence and to ensure that cultural competence is fully understood and always present.

DELVE INTO DEFINITIONS

Let's start by defining cultural competence. Culture refers to the set of shared patterns of human activity, that is, values, beliefs, and goals that characterize an individual, institution, or organization coupled with the symbolic structures that give selected activities importance. Competence involves the identified required qualities and abilities necessary for exhibiting responsibility within given contexts. Thus, cultural competence entails the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and expressions (i.e., what we know,

do, believe, and respect) about ourselves, others, and society demonstrated through our thoughts, words, actions, and interactions.

For school administrators and classroom teachers in preschool and Grades K–5, practicing cultural competence equips educators with a framework for making schools more welcoming, engaging, and rewarding. When students feel safe and wanted, administrators and teachers report increased daily attendance, grade level and program completion, and academic achievement rates, along with decreased bullying, withdrawal, and dropout rates.

ESTABLISH FIRM FOUNDATIONS

Ironically, most definitions of cultural competence highlight one's abilities to interact effectively with people of different and other cultures. However, the wording of this phrase elicits several major concerns to deconstruct before you proceed. Then, you can replace your misperceptions with firmer foundations.

1. *Being different does not describe someone else; everyone is different and from a different culture.* No two people are exactly the same or share all of the same cultural characteristics; each person represents a different culture. Even brothers and sisters represent different cultures as they were raised at different times, in different context, and with different expectations.
2. *Every person is a combination of many different cultural characteristics.* One's cultural characteristics are based on nature and nurture, meaning we are born with characteristics, and we acquire characteristics by chance and by choice throughout our lives.
3. *One person's cultural characteristics are a combination of both static and dynamic cultural characteristics.* Static characteristics always stay the same (i.e., one's race or gender), and dynamic means they constantly change (i.e., one's age or education level). Therefore, foundational items 2 and 3 illustrate that a person's individual cultural characteristics are different within the person and will change over time.
4. *A person can interact effectively with other people only when a person understands his or her own individual culture and cultural characteristics.* Each one of us compares and contrasts other people with ourselves to establish our individual cultural foundation of knowledge. Only through honest self-assessments or introspections that increase awareness of ourselves can we see all of our own characteristics and self-identifiers.

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5. *It is not bad to be different.* The phrase “different cultures” tends to convey that being different describes someone else and not ourselves; the phrase also infers that being different is negative, wrong, or bad. Different cultures are simply not the same cultures as the ones that currently are known and understood. And we are all different cultures.

The first five foundations emphasize your thoughts and beliefs that influence your external interactions with other people. The next five foundations focus on your internal processes that constitute your thoughts and beliefs.

6. *Each person should understand the categories and criteria used to describe one’s self and thus understand and accept different cultures.* People select various words and assign various meanings to those words to describe themselves. In turn, those choices become the basis for describing and interacting effectively with other people.
7. *Each person should be aware of inward reactions toward various other people.* How one reacts to others can reveal levels of cultural competence, for all possess different cultural characteristics.
8. *Each person should be aware of outward acts toward various other people.* How one acts toward other people can influence cultural competence in others, for each of us is an influence and role model to other people.
9. *Each person, and especially teachers, should be aware of effective interactions to communicate and accomplish tasks.* Interacting effectively means something different for every person, and usually our interactions change according to the people, places, times, and events.
10. *Each person needs to be aware of one’s beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, and interactions expressed in private, as well as those expressed in public—both with specific individuals and about specific individuals.* Interacting effectively in one’s private thoughts means something different for every person than it does for interacting effectively in a public presence. Yet, it is said that character is who we are when we think no one is watching us.

Therefore, to interact effectively with people who are both like and unlike us, each of us must examine and understand ourselves completely to investigate our individual meanings of cultural competence, and also consider unlimited contexts and variables.

UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The purpose of cultural competence is to establish developmentally appropriate teaching and learning processes to ensure democratic principles, educational equity, human rights, and social justice. These four critical concepts guided the founding of the United States, and they continue to provide the framework for interacting effectively with one another formally and informally today.

1. *Democratic principles* include valuing each individual's culture and cultural characteristics, ensuring full participation in activities and decision-making procedures. Democratic principles ensure transparency, accountability, and all levels of participation from both the inside and outside of the institution.
2. *Educational equity* emphasizes that students are provided information, access, and opportunity with the necessary tools, equipment, and materials in order to learn and achieve equally to all other students. Students are taught in their languages; all students are treated with respect and dignity. Groups, schools, and institutions guarantee that all members both inside and outside the institution have their democratic principles and human rights protected.
3. *Human rights* entail the rights and freedoms that all individuals and all groups are entitled to receive and to become equal participants. Human rights include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to life and liberty; the freedom of expression; equality before the law; and the right to food, work, and education.
4. *Social justice* means that all individuals and members of groups are respected and protected for their individual beliefs and choices. Teaching for social justice emphasizes antiracist and antibiased practices that deny human rights. Social justice involves interacting cooperatively and supportively to promote a common good, to end all forms of violence, to protect one another, and to take care of the planet Earth.

SET YOUR GOALS

Four goals support the overarching purpose of cultural competence (see Figure 1.1). All four involve the reciprocal process of gaining and giving:

- *Information*—to know and understand
- *Access*—to go and enter

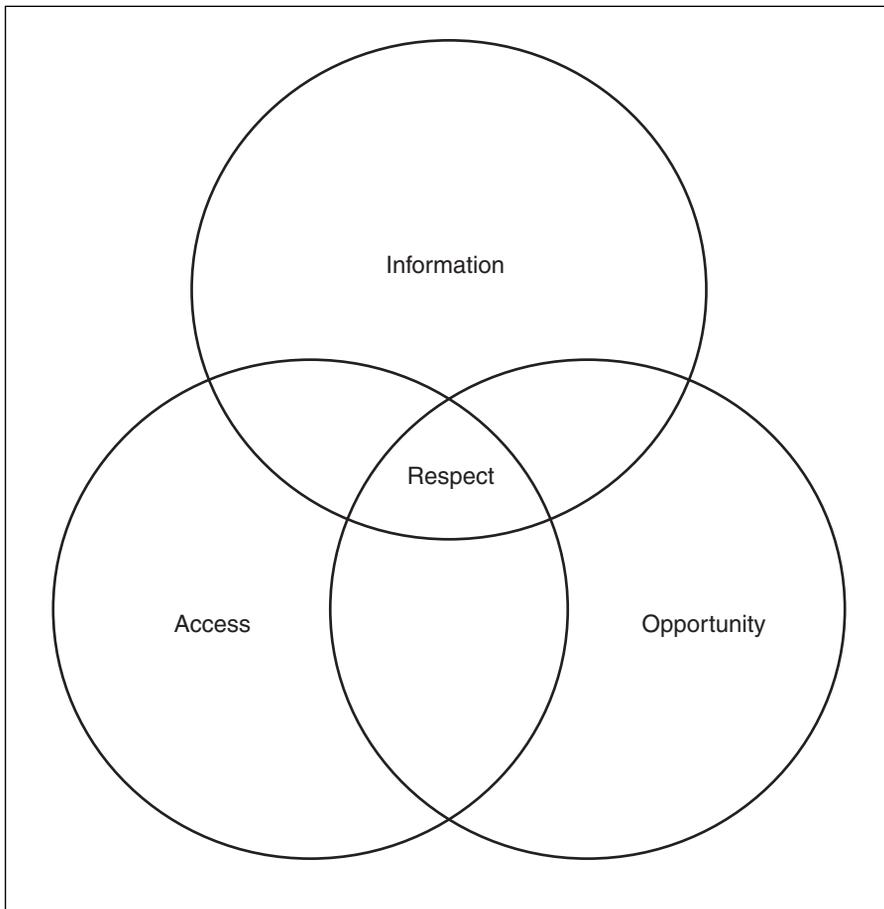
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- *Opportunities*—to do and participate
- *Respect*—to believe and value

Each of the four goals may seem quite simple and straightforward; yet, all of our beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, and interactions fit into one or a combination of the four goals. The four goals involve not only that which we receive, but they also incorporate that which we give. Every person is a part of the reciprocity in both gaining and giving information, access, opportunities, and respect.

For example, when an announcement is made that impacts an upcoming event, the people who do not receive the announcement may claim that the situation is unfair. Most likely, the announcement communicates information that one needs to know, such as that the spelling test will be given on Thursday instead of Friday. Students and their families want to know about this change so they can prepare properly. When

Figure 1.1 Goals of Cultural Competence



someone does not receive information, the person often is likely frustrated, and wonders, “How did other people know that?”

For some students, this change will alter their access, or whether they can prepare beforehand or go somewhere after the spelling tests are scored. For example, perhaps the teacher requires students who do not score well to write missed words repeatedly and a student who does not receive the announcement will be denied access to another event due to a lower score. The announcement thus influences opportunities or one’s ability to do something. Students who receive the announcement may prepare differently than students who do not receive the announcement. In some classrooms, students who score well on their weekly spelling tests receive additional opportunities or privileges such as not being required to take a major review test. When someone is denied access, the person may be angry, and ask, “How did they get to go there or to do that?”

ENSURE RESPECT

The ultimate goal of cultural competence is to ensure respect. When someone misses an announcement and lacks information, access, or opportunities, the person responsible denies the individual respect. For example, if any students were absent when the change of date for the spelling test was announced, then these students have not been considered adequately or perhaps honored appropriately. The onus for the results of the change is transferred to the students who have to make sense of the outcomes for themselves and their families. For most students in Grades K–5, parents and family members closely monitor their children’s progress in school, especially assessments such as weekly spelling test scores. Students and their families are apt to lose respect for their teachers when they do not receive the same information, access, and opportunities as other students receive.

It is easy for either a child or an adult to identify with the four purposes of cultural competence. For example, a relevant announcement could occur at a faculty meeting when you are absent. If the announcement at the faculty meeting is not posted online, distributed in writing, or shared by a colleague, you might not receive notification of a change. As a responsible educator, you are expected to investigate if you missed announcements when you are absent. However, if you cannot access the information or attain the opportunities to act upon the information, you may not receive the appropriate respect from students, families, colleagues, or administrators. Likewise, you will begin to lose respect for the individuals responsible for the situation.

So, let us modify the scenario to yet another situation that occurs frequently for adults. A change is announced with little or no input from the

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participants. The change causes other individuals to make significant modifications in their own plans and preparations within a short deadline, accompanied by many details and tasks. The information is shared with just a few people, presuming that “the word will get around.”

Each of these scenarios compromises the four goals of cultural competence. There is inadequate information, access, opportunities, and respect. The modifications result in individuals becoming distrustful and developing perceptions that they are being treated unfairly in ways that fail to uphold democratic principles, educational equity, human rights, and social justice.

ACQUAINT YOURSELF WITH THE VOCABULARY

When denied information, access, opportunities, and respect, students may be encountering bias, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. Although people tend to use these words interchangeably, each word has a distinct definition and use.

Bias means a tendency or the inclination toward having or expressing unreasoned beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, and interactions. When someone behaves with bias, the person shows a preference for or against a particular person or a group of people based on many different actual or perceived cultural characteristics that individuals can or cannot control. Biases can be viewed as positive promotions of a person or group of persons, or negative demotions of a person or group of persons, or both.

Prejudice advances bias through preconceived and unreasoned beliefs, thoughts, words, actions, and interactions. When someone behaves with prejudice, that person has determined an opinion or outcome prior to speaking or interacting with the recipient of the prejudice. Similar to a bias, one’s prejudice may be aimed at a particular person or a group of people based on many different actual or perceived cultural characteristics that individuals, again, may or may not be able to control. However, prejudicial behavior results in positive or negative outcomes that are stronger and longer lasting behaviors than biased behaviors.

Stereotyping leads to treating people, places, things, or events founded on a predetermined simplified mindset by making overgeneralizations about groups of people. Stereotyping is stronger than prejudice and serves primarily to enhance a person’s power and privileges through discriminating against a group of people by denying them information, access, opportunities, and respect.

Discrimination in the positive sense means to distinguish carefully and students are taught to discriminate to identify unique qualities for positive and productive purposes. However, discrimination in the negative sense means to distinguish prejudicially. Cultural competence is denied when an

individual discriminates against a person or a group of people based on a cultural characteristic—actual or perceived—and the resulting outcomes or treatments are inappropriate, unreasonable, or unkind.

Marginalization involves relegating a person or a group of people to a position of less or no power, in which the person or group has little or no participation or power. For instance, the locations of text or pictures on a piece of paper are the areas where your eyes and mind focus. The areas that seem of no consequence are the margins. When a person or group of people is marginalized, the person or group are assigned to the areas of little or no consequence or importance.

Disenfranchisement entails the deprivation or revocation of participation, position, power, or privilege that usually prevent a person or a group of people from a right. Denial of information, access, opportunities, and respect through disenfranchisement produces a stronger and longer lasting effect than marginalization.

LINK CULTURAL COMPETENCE TO LEARNING

When bias, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, marginalization, or disenfranchisement occur in classrooms, the absence of cultural competence significantly influences the four domains of learning: cognitive thoughts, physical existence, affective emotions, and social interactions (Gallavan, 2007). For example, a teacher may have a bias toward clean students and tend to help students who smell or appear clean more often, for more concentrated periods of time, and be more pleasant and reassuring than when assisting students who do not smell or appear as clean. Another teacher may be prejudiced against students whose parents rarely attend parent conferences, communicate with the teacher, or assist at school. This teacher may establish the same expectations for these students as the students whose parents are more visible and available and hold the students unfairly accountable for their parents' actions.

When stereotyping students, a teacher may categorize all of the girls as more quiet and calm whereas the boys are tagged as louder and busier. Therefore, the girls benefit and the boys suffer from the teacher's preconceived mindset. A teacher who marginalizes students who are overweight may spend less time and energy assisting these students. The teacher falsely associates size with ability.

Finally, students who experience disenfranchisement tend to become invisible to the teacher. English language learners and special education students are frequently the recipients of disenfranchisement. This teacher assigns the responsibility for learning to students who have been identified as needing additional intervention.

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In each of these situations, the teacher limits learning in all four domains and models to the other students that some students are not equally worthy. The teacher communicates much bigger lessons to the students than the curriculum intends. Students' attitudes and behaviors frequently change due to a teacher's biases and interactions. The teacher tends to take the changes personally, not realizing that it is the teacher who has cued the student toward unpleasant and unproductive outcomes. Without honest self-assessment, teachers may or may not be aware of the words and actions preventing cultural competence.

DEVELOP YOUR SELF-EFFICACY

Navigating cultural competence requires a strong sense of self-efficacy, or your beliefs that you are capable of managing the events that influence your life (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy, also known as social learning theory, involves your cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes. Through your thoughts, actions, feelings, and choices, you increase your understanding and appreciation of achievement. You learn self-efficacy by watching others achieve success, by participating in events that culminate in success, and by being told that you are successful.

With increased self-efficacy, you increase your classroom-teacher efficacy. Your confidence and proficiency build so you can teach each student more responsibly and thus help all students increase their sense of self-efficacy. Social learning theory, as the name stipulates, is learning about ourselves, others, and society by interacting positively and productively with one another.

Social learning theory is the basis of reciprocity, or the exchange of learning and support between people. You want to identify and model reciprocity in your classroom with your students so they understand that you are learning as much from them as they are learning from you. If you are committed to developing lifelong learners, then self-efficacy, social learning theory, reciprocity, and cultural competence must be evident in your classroom every day. By learning about and with their peers, your students will exchange their academic and social outcomes with other students.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE . . .

Practicing cultural competence is your responsibility. It is not merely a good idea or an option. You are preparing students for future learning and a long life living in a world that does not yet exist. Your task is, then,

to prepare your students in every way possible. A student's time in school is short and each student's attention span is even shorter. You must maximize your teaching energies through your words and actions so that your students experience you as a role model for cultural competence as you infuse it across your curriculum content, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, and classroom management. Resource C provides a selection of websites related to cultural competence.

Extending Activities for Teachers

1. Reflect on your own learning experiences in Grades K–5. What did your teachers do and say that connected with your personal background and experiences? What did your teachers do and say that helped you feel respected and welcome? What did your teachers do and say that may have left you with feelings that you were not respected or welcome?
2. Think again to your time in Grades K–5; when did you become aware that some students were treated differently from other students? How were some students treated differently? Why did these differences occur?
3. What does the term *cultural competence* mean to you? How would you explain it in your own words, and your own example, to a colleague?
4. What can a teacher, perhaps you, do and say in a classroom to demonstrate cultural competence with young learners?
5. What should a teacher, perhaps you, avoid doing and saying in a classroom that would detract from cultural competence?

Extending Activities for Young Learners

Each of these activities should be modified for nonreaders, special education students, and English language learners as developmentally appropriate by using pictures instead of words, providing words for students to select instead of asking students to generate new words, listing possible vocabulary choices on the board, collaborating with learning assistants, and so forth.

1. Ask students to think of a word to describe themselves respectfully. The word should start with the same letter as the student's name. Then ask students to share their name combinations with a

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partner. The partner will introduce the student to the class using the name combination. This activity is ideal for the first day of school.

2. Give each student a large picture of a star. Ask them to list one of their own special qualities or strengths in each of the points of the star. Students can share their stars in small group discussions. Then stars can be posted on a bulletin board or slid into a clear pocket on the front of the student's notebook. This exercise helps students recognize their individual special qualities and practice sharing their strengths with other students. This activity also is ideal for the beginning of a school year.
3. Write the word *respect* on a large sheet of paper posted on the board and discuss the meaning and actions associated with it. Ask the class to generate words and phrases that they think are appropriate for their class, and list the words and phrases under the heading. Continue adding to the list as more examples are recognized in schoolwork or class interactions. When students want to describe events that they think are examples of a lack of respect, be sure to guide the students to articulate the events as goals illustrating respect.
4. Ask students to sit in a large circle. Give each student a clipboard with a blank piece of lined paper attached to it. Ask students to print names at the top of the paper. Then have them pass their clipboards clockwise. Each student will write a few words about the student whose name is printed at the top of the sheet of paper leaving two blank lines between each entry. You may feature a few students at one sitting, and also play quiet music in the background. After all lists are written, cut the statements in the blank spaces and place the strips into an envelope labeled with each student's name. Then give students their individual envelopes at a later date and direct them to read one statement at your prompt.
5. Give each student a 3" × 5" sticky note and ask them to each record one event that they think is not fair. Then ask students to place their notes on the board or on a large piece of paper. With the class, begin to sort the notes into categories that you and the class construct together based on the information recorded on the notes. Your task is to distill the notes into a few examples. Then you and the class can discuss the examples and decide if you agree or disagree that the events were not fair. From this exercise, you and the class can determine if you can do something about the perceived lack of fairness and the action that you can take.

Elizabeth has been teaching fourth grade for nine years at the same school. Until recently, she always felt accomplished in her teaching and comfortable with her students and their families. Then the school district attendance zones were redrawn, and the student population changed in many ways. Previously, her school had a predominantly White, European American, upper-middle and middle-class, Christian and Jewish population; most students came from suburban neighborhoods with two-parent families living in houses. Elizabeth identified with her previous student population, as she is a White, European American, upper-middle-class, Christian woman married to a White, Middle Eastern, upper-middle-class, Jewish man.

The new student population has been drawn from a large tract of apartment buildings occupied by predominantly Black and Hispanic, middle- and lower-class, Christian and Muslim, primarily single-parent families. Elizabeth is anxious about the changes and knows the adjusted student population will impact her in every way.

Eager to be an effective teacher for all of her students, Elizabeth contacts her friend Alex, an Asian American man, who teaches in another school district with students and families similar to the ones who now attend her school. Elizabeth asks Alex if she can visit his classroom and talk with him about the culture of the school and community.

After spending the day with Alex, Elizabeth finds the courage to talk with him about her discomfort being around students and families unlike her. Elizabeth also shares that several new teachers have been hired at her school, all of whom are Black and Hispanic. Elizabeth reveals that she feels uncomfortable culturally with her new colleagues as well.

Alex reassures Elizabeth that, most likely, she simply has not been around many different kinds of people. Her childhood did not include a variety of cultures so she had few opportunities to develop her understanding of cultural capital.

Alex explains that cultural capital includes all of the cultural characteristics used to describe a person as an individual and as a member of various groups. The degree of capital, or value, relates to characteristics based on the sociopolitical economics of the times. For example, Elizabeth has few experiences with Black and Hispanic students and families, so she has generated limited cultural capital that she can use in her professional practices.

Alex continues by saying that perceptions associated with cultural capital are evidence of both equities and inequities generated in schools and throughout society. Teachers need to be aware of their own biases that are associated with their perceptions of cultural capital. Biases may be expressed directly (overtly) or indirectly (covertly) in what teachers say and do. Alex adds that school administrators and school board members express biases too and that Elizabeth must become aware of the dynamics to help all students and their families.

Alex shares with Elizabeth that, most likely, she is concerned that she will offend someone or embarrass herself as she accumulates her cultural capital. He

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tells her not to avoid people and urges her instead to approach situations based on the shared purpose and let the relationship evolve naturally.

Alex also reflects on his own experiences and how he uses “teacher self-talk.” He pretends that he is teaching his learning experiences and units of learning to himself. He checks to see that the classroom environment feels safe and welcoming. He asks if he can clearly identify with the curriculum and see himself in the textbook, materials, and resources. He notes if the instruction invites him into the learning process and actively engages him to learn about himself, other people, and society. He looks for opportunities in the instruction for making meaningful connections to his personal background and experiences, and for the forms of assessment to showcase his accomplishments in ways in which he is confident.

Initially, Elizabeth believes that Alex may have more insight given that he is an Asian American; then, Elizabeth realizes that Alex’s journey is the same path that all culturally competent teachers must travel.
