

3-2026

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### Recommended Citation

Zapata, M., Dee-Mbappe, D., & Persaud, B. (2026). EMBRACE-ing Cultural Diversity in Educational Service Delivery: A Framework for Building and Sustaining Equitable Learning Environments. *The Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.58729/2167-3454.1236>

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# EMBRACE-ing Cultural Diversity in Educational Service Delivery: A Framework for Building and Sustaining Equitable Learning Environments

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of collaboration in educational service delivery by exploring culturally responsive classroom management practices for education professionals. Educators must understand and critically reflect on their own biases that could impact their interactions with students, families, and colleagues. This is essential not for providing inclusive learning opportunities that address the unique needs of each student. This could lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of student behaviors, further complicating effective management and service delivery. Ultimately, the paper argues that through the use of the EMBRACE (Evaluate, Mentor, Build, Reflect, Adapt, Collaborate, and Empower) framework smooth collaboration between and amongst educators and families can significantly enhance the academic, social, and emotional development of students. This framework provides a roadmap to achieve cultural diversity in the educational setting.

## KEYWORDS

*culturally responsive practices, service delivery, equity, administration, education*

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received September 32024

Revised March 2, 2025

Accepted April 14, 2025

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*I*t is vital to recognize that administrators, educators, special educators, related service providers, and other professionals are part of a shared culture that plays a critical role in instruction, intervention, and clinical practice. It is essential to understand the countless cultural factors that influence instruction and intervention across various settings, particularly when working with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. With the changing demographics of our nation's student population, professional organizations have developed guidelines, policies, and procedures to address cultural diversity (Ching et al., 2019; Ellison, 2018; Hollowell, 2019; Varnado

et al., 2024). These resources aim to guide education professionals in implementing culturally responsive strategies that foster inclusive learning environments (Fraser et al., 2019), as culture is a key component.

Culture in education encompasses a complex system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs (Delgado-Gaitan, 2016, 2018). Erickson and Espinoza (2021) highlight that all areas in education relate to the acquisition, transmission, and invention of culture. Yet, its structural and characteristic nuances are often overlooked in daily use, much like a familiar tool whose details we fail to notice while in use. School culture can significantly impact the effectiveness of educational practices. For instance, a school with a "culture of collaboration" suggests a setting where educators, administrators, and related service providers (RSPs) engage in continuous, reciprocal communication that enhances student services. Conversely, a "culture of niceness" might imply a polite yet less confrontational environment that could hinder addressing challenging but necessary problems for effective student support (Liera, 2019).

According to the most recent publication, Report on the Condition of Education (2024) "of the 49.6 million students who were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (preK-12) in fall 2022, 22.1 million were White, 14.4 million were Hispanic, 7.4 million were Black, 2.7 million were Asian, and 2.5 million were two or more races. 449,000 identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, and 182,000 identified as Pacific Islander" (Irwin et al., 2024, p.2). Additionally, from the school years 2012-13 to the school years 2022-23, there was a 2% increase in the number of students being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This means that 15 percent of students enrolled in public education are students with disabilities. Given the current demographic data of students receiving a public education, arguably, the most important component of a classroom is its culture. Administrators conducting a walkthrough of a classroom might think: How are students feeling right now? Do I model for my teachers what I would expect them to model for their students? A classroom is a robust learning community that is often a microcosm of how school leaders treat their teachers and RSPs. A student's sense of belonging has a direct impact on classroom culture. Gray (2017) mentioned that when teachers help create a feeling of belonging by creating connections between the classroom and community, students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Additionally, students' sense of belonging "can increase their educational success and motivational outcomes in multiple ways" (Gray, 2017, p. 1). The authors of this paper explain that to create this sense of belonging, school leaders, educators, and RSPs alike need a framework to center equitable and culturally inclusive environments.

Given the increasing diversity of the U.S. student population, culturally responsive practices are more essential than ever. These practices ensure that instruction, intervention, and support services are equitable, inclusive, and reflective of the student's cultural backgrounds. For decades, research has revealed that many educators in U.S. schools have underestimated the academic potential of students of color, often setting low expectations and perceiving cultural differences as obstacles rather than assets (Delgado-Gaitan, 2016, 2018). As a result, researchers have developed asset-based pedagogies (i.e., teaching methods and practices) for effective instruction that integrate students' lived experiences and cultural identities into the classroom. Culture and lived experiences have significantly influenced how students comprehend, understand, make sense of the world, as well as how they see themselves as a vital part of who they are as learners (Delgado-Gaitan, 2016, 2018). Culturally responsive instructional approaches help educators move beyond biased views that label students of color as 'deficient' and 'deviant,'

fostering a more inclusive perspective on diverse learners. This perspective has contributed to systemic disparities in educational outcomes, reinforcing the need for asset-based pedagogies that recognize and build upon students' cultural strengths. By shifting the narrative from deficit-based to strength-based learning, culturally responsive teaching ensures that all students are seen, heard, and valued in the classroom (Gray, 2017).

Hammond (2024) defines culturally responsive teaching, from a neuroscience-based approach, as an educator's ability to recognize and constructively respond to students' cultural displays of learning and meaning-making by using cultural knowledge as a platform. This approach facilitates a connection between known and new concepts and emphasizes the importance of building relationships and establishing social-emotional connections with students to create safe learning spaces. In practice, this might involve educators engaging deeply with students through activities such as "Who am I?" or conducting annual student demographic surveys to better understand and authentically start building rapport with their students. Educators should consider students' interests and previous knowledge when introducing new concepts to enhance effective information processing. This strategic approach helps strengthen cognitive connections and ensures that teaching methods are accessible and engaging for all students (Pevac-Zimmer et al., 2024). Establishing a positive social-emotional learning environment is crucial for fostering effective educational interactions among students, and between students and educators.

This viewpoint article offers the EMBRACE (Evaluate, Mentor, Build, Reflect, Adapt, Collaborate, and Empower) framework, which emphasizes a proactive and inclusive approach to education. This approach ensures that a variety of educators, administrators, and related service providers can engage in self-reflection, enhance their instructional and administrative practices, and actively empower both professionals and students to recognize and value their cultural identities and experiences.

## **How Can We Have an Impact on the Ever-Diversifying Public School System?**

In the dynamic field of education, the need for culturally responsive classroom management is more pressing than ever. As education professionals alike strive to meet the diverse needs of their students, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that acknowledges and integrates the cultural backgrounds of all learners and stakeholders. The EMBRACE framework—Evaluate, Mentor, Build, Reflect, Adapt, Collaborate, Empower—offers a comprehensive strategy to ensure that educational practices are not only inclusive but also empowering. This approach enables education professionals to fully engage in the rich conversations of cultures represented in their classrooms, fostering an environment where every student feels valued and supported in their learning journey.

## **Unpacking the EMBRACE Framework**

**EMBRACE** emphasizes a proactive and inclusive approach to education, ensuring that administrators, educators, and RSPs not only adapt and assess their methods but also actively engage and empower their students in meaningful and affirming ways. This framework will lend to incorporating students' characteristics, experiences, customs, cultures, and perspectives as tools for advantageous classroom instruction. As cited by Abdalla and Moussa (2024), instructional models established by research scholars such as Banks (1995), Gay (2000), and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2022) provide a practical framework for implementing culturally

responsive pedagogical practices. These frameworks support culturally inclusive teaching methods and encourage interactions that foster positive intercultural exchanges (Hammond, 2024).

Applying culturally responsive pedagogical practices involves designing an inclusive curriculum, developing cultural competence among educators, and promoting positive student-teacher associations (Hammond, 2014; Howard, 2024). As Abdalla and Moussa (2024) mention, Gay (2000) coined the term *culturally responsive teaching*, stating that “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference for students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 20).

Conclusively, culturally responsive pedagogical practices help students from diverse ethnic backgrounds see themselves and their cultures as integral and valued. This promotes inclusivity in academic settings and other educational environments, fostering long-term engagement and success. This EMBRACE framework is most appropriate for instructional school settings for various education professionals.

The EMBRACE framework stands for:

- Evaluate: Expand understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives by evaluating implicit biases.
- Mentor: Provide guidance and support for cultural competence development.
- Build: Construct a supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environment and incorporate positive behavior supports.
- Reflect: Regularly assess and reflect on personal biases and classroom practices.
- Adapt: Utilize culturally responsive teaching and intervention strategies and materials to meet diverse needs.
- Collaborate: Collaborate with other professionals, students, families, and community members to increase cultural humility.
- Empower: Enable all stakeholders to see their cultural identities as strengths.

Now we will unpack the EMBRACE framework in detail. We will provide a roadmap on how to use this framework effectively in the classroom environment.

### ***Evaluate: Expand understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives by evaluating implicit biases.***

We must first *Evaluate* and expand our understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives by evaluating implicit biases. Awareness is the first step. Then, we must act. In order to act we must evaluate the knowledge we hold about the world around us and work to unlearn problematic mindsets that exclude members of historically marginalized groups. To do this, we look at cultural capital. Cultural capital, as described by Yosso (2005), involves the knowledge, behaviors, and skills that students bring from their cultural backgrounds, which are crucial assets in their learning journey. Recognizing and leveraging this cultural capital is fundamental for enhancing student engagement and success (Heyne et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2019; Milner, 2020, 2022). Education professionals can increase their knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds by facilitating small group conversations about identity, sharing aspects of their own multifaceted identity to model what it could look like for students, and even administering student demographic surveys at the beginning of the year or at the start of each unit in class. Importantly, drawing upon cultural capital is more than partaking in cultural

festivals, sharing ethnic/cultural dishes/foods, or celebrating certain holidays, it is building on the students' strengths and connection to their families (Milner, 2020, 2022).

***Mentor: Provide guidance and support for cultural competence development.***

We define *Mentor* as an individual who provides guidance and support for the development of cultural competency. A key aspect of effective collaboration is the ability to build rapport and develop cultural competence among team members, both in and out of the school setting. We recommend that all education professionals establish rapport by creating a sense of connection, mutual understanding, and trust, which are essential for fruitful collaborative relationships. Moreover, cultural competence is crucial for interacting respectfully and effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that educational practices are inclusive and considerate of all students' cultural contexts. These skills are particularly important in the educational space, where understanding and respecting diversity can significantly impact the effectiveness of the learning environment.

School administrators must ensure education professionals use a culturally responsive approach to classroom management to support the mentorship and development around the educator's cultural competence. Culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) is crucial for addressing the diverse needs of students, ensuring that educational practices are equitable and sensitive to cultural differences (Monroe, 2015; Saleem et al., 2022; Sprow & Meister, 2015; Tang et al., 2016). CRCM is necessary for academic and social success, as it provides an infrastructure to shape educators' attitudes and perceptions. CRCM aims to promote equitable practices that embrace student diversity and enhance student learning. Education professionals must create a safe haven that is equitable and responsive to the student needs (i.e., cognitively, socially, and emotionally).

***Build: Construct a supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environment and incorporate positive behavior supports.***

To *Build* rapport with families, we recommend constructing a supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environment and incorporating positive behavior supports. Strong, supportive relationships with students' families are critical for fostering an engaging and effective educational environment (Farkas, 2018). Education professionals should take the time to prioritize communication and collaboration with families to build trust and support students' educational journeys (Rengi, 2023). They can build relationships with families to facilitate community, shape behavior in school, and enhance classroom performance. For example, we must include family input in grade-level meetings to increase family engagement. Ultimately, school administrators' commitment to continuous professional development in these areas will define the quality of education and support that education professionals can provide. This can foster an educational environment where diversity is celebrated and all students can thrive.

***Reflect: Regularly assess and reflect on personal biases and classroom practices.***

The next step is to *Reflect* and self-assess. To support the critical *reflection* process, school administrators must ensure that education professionals have the opportunity to regularly assess and reflect on personal biases and classroom practices. To ensure students are seen, heard, and understood within the context of their cultural backgrounds and identities, professionals must explore their own implicit biases first, before engaging with their students. Implicit biases are subconscious stereotypes that influence our perceptions, actions, and decisions, potentially leading to unequal treatment based on various identity factors such as race, gender, or disability (Eberhardt, 2019). These biases can significantly affect professionals, impacting their ability to effectively manage classrooms and understand cultural differences. The Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by Greenwald et al. (2019), previously explored by Forscher et al. (2019), serves as a tool for education professionals to identify and reflect on their biases, thereby enhancing their cultural responsiveness in educational settings.

The critical examination of implicit biases and the implementation of culturally responsive practices are essential for education professionals to effectively serve an increasingly diverse student population. By engaging with tools such as the Implicit Association Test and embracing strategies that enhance cultural responsiveness, education professionals can better understand and address the unique cultural backgrounds and needs of their students (Greenwald et al., 2019). This proactive approach not only promotes equity and inclusivity within the classroom but also ensures that all students have the opportunity to succeed academically and socially.

***Adapt: Utilize culturally responsive teaching, intervention strategies and materials to meet diverse needs.***

We must *Adapt* our teaching strategies to ensure our students' identities are affirmed and their learning is meaningful. School administrators must ensure that their education professionals have the skill to adapt their instructional practices. This way they can feel comfortable utilizing culturally responsive teaching and intervention strategies by adapting student materials to meet the diverse student population. Classroom-based interventions are a vital component of collaboration in education, focusing on supporting students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs directly within the classroom environment. Various instructional models, such as station teaching and alternative teaching, can be adapted to exemplify practical intervention methods that can significantly enhance educational outcomes.

***Collaborate: Collaborate with other professionals, students, families, and community members to increase cultural humility.***

To *Collaborate* we need to connect with others. We employ collaboration with professionals in education, students, families, and community members as a tool to increase cultural humility. Collaboration is a cornerstone of success across various domains, including education, where it fosters a synthesis of diverse skills, knowledge, and perspectives. Collaboration is defined as a dynamic and structured partnership with shared goals and resources (Mitchell et al., 2020). Other researchers have emphasized its distinct nature from mere cooperation or coordination, underscoring its potential to profoundly impact student academic and social achievements (Milner, 2020). Effective collaboration among professionals is vital for tailoring educational strategies to support students with unique needs. This synergistic approach to collaboration not

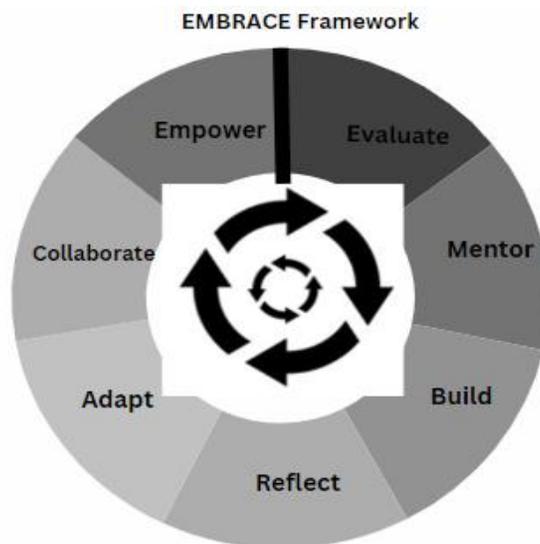
only enhances innovative solutions and outcomes but also cultivates a supportive and inclusive environment for all stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Collaboration in the school setting is a dynamic and multifaceted process that requires commitment from all involved parties. The successful implementation of collaborative strategies significantly benefits student learning and development, underpinning the need for continuous professional development. As collaboration remains central to the advancement of education, it is imperative that education professionals strive to enhance their collaborative efforts, ensuring that every student receives the comprehensive support they need to succeed.

***Empower: Enable all stakeholders to see their cultural identities as strengths.***

School administrators must **Empower** their education professionals to make decisions based on student needs. To do this, school administrators must create the conditions to **Empower** education professionals to see their cultural identities as strengths. Cultural responsiveness is essential in education, where every student’s cultural background is recognized and valued (Ford et al., 2014; Gay, 2002, 2018). By integrating culturally responsive strategies throughout the educational process, from curriculum planning to classroom interactions, educators can foster a learning environment that promotes inclusivity and respects cultural diversity. When educators provide instruction utilizing a culturally responsive approach, they recognize and nurture strengths that encourage success to promote open-mindedness in the context of a supportive environment, celebrating cultural differences amongst students (Ford et al., 2014; Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching strategies must be infused into every stage of students’ learning processes, from curriculum development to evaluation. Culturally responsive pedagogy is in every learning opportunity within the school that takes ancestral and contemporary cultures, beliefs, and traditions of students into consideration (Gay, 2010, 2018; Govender, 2017; Hopf et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2022; Rengi, 2023).

**Figure 1. EMBRACE Framework**



## EMBRACE Roadmap

The EMBRACE framework is designed to help professionals develop cultural awareness and skills to create an inclusive environment. This roadmap explains a structured approach to understand and implement the different principles through self-reflection, skill-building, collaboration, and continuous improvement. By following this framework, professionals are well-equipped to support diverse learners, engage families meaningfully, and contribute to an equitable learning environment. Here is the step-by-step roadmap to follow EMBRACE.

**Evaluate:** Expand understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives by evaluating implicit biases.

1. Provide professional development on cultural responsiveness, bias awareness, and equity.
2. Conduct self-assessments (Harvard's Implicit Association Test) to identify implicit biases.
3. Use educator, student, and family surveys to understand their cultural and linguistic diverse backgrounds.
4. Implement ongoing discussions in professional learning communities about bias and its impact on teaching.
5. Review policies and curriculum for implicit biases and make necessary revisions.

**Mentor:** Provide guidance and support for cultural competence development.

1. Establish mentorship programs: Connect or pair experienced culturally responsive educators with new staff and create a weekly checkup to determine what challenges were faced during the week.
2. Facilitate monthly discussion groups on best practices in cultural competence (e.g., use case studies and possible solutions).
3. Offer peer-assisted training or workshops on classroom strategies for supporting culturally and linguistically diverse learners.
4. Provide resources on cultural and linguistic diversity, including books, podcasts, etc.

**Build:** Construct a supportive, inclusive, and emotionally safe learning environment and incorporate positive behavior supports.

1. Develop school-wide behavioral expectations that are inclusive and considerate of cultural communication differences.
2. Establish classroom expectations collaboratively with students to reflect inclusivity and respect.
3. Implement social-emotional learning (SEL) programs with a socio-cultural lens.
4. Use trauma-informed practices to support students from diverse backgrounds.
5. Incorporate visual and linguistic diversity in classroom materials that allow educational professionals to create meaningful and affirming learning environments.

**Reflect:** Regularly assess and reflect on personal biases and classroom practices.

1. Maintain a reflection journal to track biases and evolving perspectives.
2. Facilitate discussion-based feedback sessions with students.
3. Schedule monthly reflections with colleagues to discuss challenges and improvements (i.e., go over the feedback from students with colleagues and discuss possible solutions).
4. Use classroom video recordings for self-evaluation and professional development.
5. Create an anonymous suggestion box for staff to share their experiences.

6. Create an anonymous suggestion box for students and families to share their experiences.

**Adapt:** Utilize culturally responsive teaching and intervention strategies and materials to meet diverse needs.

1. Adapt curriculum-based content to reflect inclusive and diverse cultural perspectives.
2. Incorporate multilingual resources and offer bilingual learning support.
3. Adjust teaching methods based on students' backgrounds.
4. Ensure all interventions are respectful of dialectal variations, regardless of the language.
5. Use universal design for learning (UDL) principles to make lessons accessible to all (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2024).

**Collaborate:** Collaborate with other professionals, students, families, and community members to increase cultural humility.

1. Host family engagement nights focused on language and culture.
2. Establish community partnerships with cultural groups, businesses, and local organizations.
3. Develop family engagement groups to ensure all stakeholders are included in decision-making.
4. Facilitate student-led cultural activities to celebrate diversity. Those activities can align with the cultural calendar of the school (i.e., Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, etc.).
5. Use collaborative goal-setting among professionals and families to support student success and family engagement.

**Empower:** Enable all stakeholders to see their cultural identities as strengths.

1. Encourage students to share their linguistic and cultural experiences in learning activities.
2. Incorporate a focus on students' linguistic strength into language development instruction.
3. Provide professional development that centers students' diverse linguistic backgrounds.
4. Advocate for representation in leadership roles that reflect diverse backgrounds.
5. Develop student and family-led activities that promote cultural pride and identity.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the EMBRACE approach provides a robust framework for school administrators, educators, and RSPs committed to fostering an inclusive and effective educational environment. By using the EMBRACE framework, education professionals can significantly enhance the academic and social outcomes of their diverse student populations. As we move forward in an increasingly multicultural world, EMBRACE-ing these principles is not only beneficial—it's essential for cultivating educational spaces where all students can thrive and succeed. Adopting the EMBRACE framework is a decisive step towards creating a more equitable and responsive educational system that celebrates and utilizes the strengths inherent in cultural diversity.

In the near future, a pilot study will be conducted in the Washington, D.C. area to explore the impact of the EMBRACE Framework for professionals to use in targeted in-service training. This study will investigate how culturally responsive practices enhance field experiences for

professionals, focusing on the effectiveness of evaluation, mentorship, build, reflection, adaptation, collaboration, and empowerment in the field. The findings will provide valuable insights into how culturally responsive practices can strengthen mentorship, promote equity, and support the development of inclusive professionals.

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