

**A GUIDE TO  
EMBRACING THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM  
AS A WHITE EDUCATOR  
IN BOSTON**

**Honors Thesis**

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## Abstract

Effective teaching goes beyond strong lesson plans and curriculum. It's important for educators to have a deeper understanding of a student's culture to maximize learning. This project explores culture, specifically the diverse cultures in a classroom. It serves as a guide for white educators to effectively teach students of diverse cultures in a classroom, with special attention to the students within Boston Public Schools. This project provides strategies and resources for an evolving, necessary topic of cultural responsiveness of white educators in the field of elementary education, specifically in Boston. The layout of this project is a guide. The guide can be read on this document or through a website to accommodate accessibility. This guide draws on research from different reputable sources within the education field, primarily Zaretta Hammond's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. Through my research, I have been able to intake and organize a guide of approaches with supporting resources for white educators with discussion of culture and Boston Public School statistics.

Keywords: Culture, Multicultural, Culturally Responsive, Boston, Individualist, Collectivist.

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Website Link

Desktop Viewing:

<https://catjaela.wixsite.com/multiculturalclass>

Mobile Device Viewing:



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## Introduction

As a teacher in 2023, you will have students from many diverse cultures sitting in the seats of your classroom. Culture is the way one makes sense of the world around them. It's very specific and can be influenced by a number of factors; race and ethnicity are not culture, but they can heavily influence it. There are three levels: surface, shallow, and deep, and it lies on a continuum of individualist beliefs to collectivist beliefs. It's important to know that everyone has a culture.

Boston Public Schools is one of the largest public school systems in the state, and very diverse. In order for teachers in this school system to be most effective, they must understand and embrace the cultures students hold. Boston Public Schools' teachers must embrace the multicultural classroom. To do so, these teachers must practice cultural responsiveness. The goal of being a culturally responsive educator is to build meaningful relationships, avoid deficit thinking, tap into students' funds of knowledge, encourage students to be independent learners, hold a culturally responsive mindset, address implicit biases, engage in reflection, and create a community. This guide serves as a starting point for white educators, specifically in Boston Public Schools or similar inner-city school systems, to become culturally responsive in order to teach their students properly. Much of the information in this piece is based on the research of Zaretta Hammond's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, revolutionary to culturally responsive teaching. This guide provides insight on Boston Public Schools, an in-depth look at culture, approaches for white educators and then resources for white educators that aid the approaches.

## Boston Public Schools

Boston: the historic city on Massachusetts' coast and the birthplace of public education in the United States (BPS Communications Office, 2019). It is one of the largest school districts in Massachusetts, and a very diverse district. Boston Public Schools holds 125 public schools- 7 schools for early learners, 40 elementary schools, 33 elementary and middle schools, 6 middle schools, 4 middle and high schools, 1 K-12 school, 20 high schools, 3 exam schools, 6 special education schools, 5 alternative (at-risk) schools and programs (BPS Communications Office, 2019). The areas that inhabit Boston Public Schools include East Boston, Charlestown, Downtown, Back Bay-Beacon Hill, Allston-Brighton, Fenway-Kenmore, South Boston, South End, Mission Hill-Jamaica Plain, Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Roslindale, West Roxbury, and Hyde Park (School Listings, 2023).

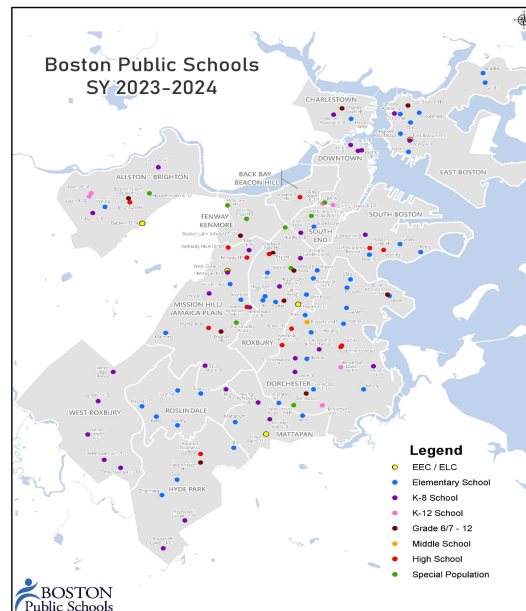


Figure 1. School Listings Boston Public Schools SY 2023-2024. By Boston Public Schools, map, from [bostonpublicschools.org](https://www.bostonpublicschools.org).

The above map displays the schools and areas within Boston Public Schools.

Based on the District Report Card of Boston Public Schools done by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the attendance rate in 2022 was 88%, putting the attendance rate below the average of Massachusetts' 91.5%. The chronic absenteeism, meaning the student missed more than 10% of the school year, at BPS was 42.2%, while Massachusetts was only 27.7%. The chronic absenteeism rate of BPS is higher than the average in the state, accompanied by the average number of days absent, where Boston's average is 20.4, and Massachusetts' average is 14.8% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

According to 2022 data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's School and Report Card, there were 46,169 students enrolled in Boston Public Schools (DESE). Of these 46,169 students enrolled in BPS, 21.9% of students had disabilities, and 30.4% were English learners, nearly three times the amount of English learning students in Massachusetts as a whole (11%). 71.2% of students were low income, compared to 43.8% of students in Massachusetts as a whole. In this student population, 29% were Black/African American, 8.9% were Asian, 43% were Hispanic or Latino, 0.3% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.2% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 3.5% were Multi-race Non Hispanic, and 15.2% were White (DESE). Of all 46,169 students that attended Boston Public Schools in 2022, 15.2% were White, or about 7,018. White students encompassed a small population in Boston Schools, whereas in Massachusetts, white students made up 55.7% of the population in 2022.

Student Demographic	Percentage of Students in Boston Public Schools	Percentage of Students in Massachusetts
High Needs	81.5%	55.6%
Low Income	71.2%	43.8%
English Learners	30.4%	11%
Students with Disabilities	21.9%	18.9%
African American/Black	29%	9.3%
Asian	8.9%	7.2%
Hispanic or Latino	43%	23.1%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.3%	0.2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.1%
Multi-Race non Hispanic	3.5%	4.3%
White	15.2%	55.7%

Table 1. Graph based on 2022 data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's School and Report Card of Boston Public Schools.

Many of the demographics displayed above reflect the races within the Boston Public School system. There are no statistics that exhibit cultures within the school system. It is important to know race and culture are not the same, but race, socioeconomic status, and the data points provided are very influential factors on culture.

## Multiculturalism

### **What is Culture?**

Culture is the way that one's brain makes sense of the world (Hammond, 2015). Culture can be thought of as a mental programming; kind of like the software of a computer, culture is the software of the mind. Culture is a broad term used to describe certain patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. It is not genetic, but learned from the environment. Much of the culture one holds develops during adolescence, or within the first 10-12 years when information is being abundantly absorbed. During this time, brain development and rapid learning occur. The learning of culture starts in the home with the family, but extends into school, groups, and other social environments (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Manifestations of culture include symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Symbols, heroes, and rituals are all considered practices of culture, because they are observable to the outside eye. Symbols are the most superficial manifestation of culture. Words, gestures, pictures, and objects all represent symbols within a culture. A hero is a person that holds prized characteristics according to members in a culture. Heroes are essentially role models and can be dead, alive, real or imaginary. Rituals are certain activities that are essential in a culture. This could be something like greeting another person, paying respect, discourse, or ceremonies. Last, values are at the core of culture. They are the "broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede et al., 2010). Values include beliefs of good or bad, moral or immoral, abnormal or normal, and more antipodes.

## **Levels of Culture**

Culture can be distinguished in three levels: Surface, shallow, and deep. The first level, surface culture, represents the aspects of culture that are observable. These are concrete elements of the culture. Examples of surface culture include food and holidays (Hammond, 2015).

Next, shallow culture, represents the unspoken rules of interactions within a culture. Deep culture values are acted upon through shallow culture. Here, you may notice features of nonverbal communication. Examples of shallow culture include the personal space someone leaves between them and another person, their attitude towards elders, and their relationship with friends (Hammond, 2015).

Last, deep culture, represents tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions (Hammond, 2015). Here, mental models can be found. They help us realize any threats, or on the other end, rewards. Deep culture is the seed, the deep root, of our overall culture. Examples of deep culture include spirituality, and relationships with nature and animals (Hammond, 2015).

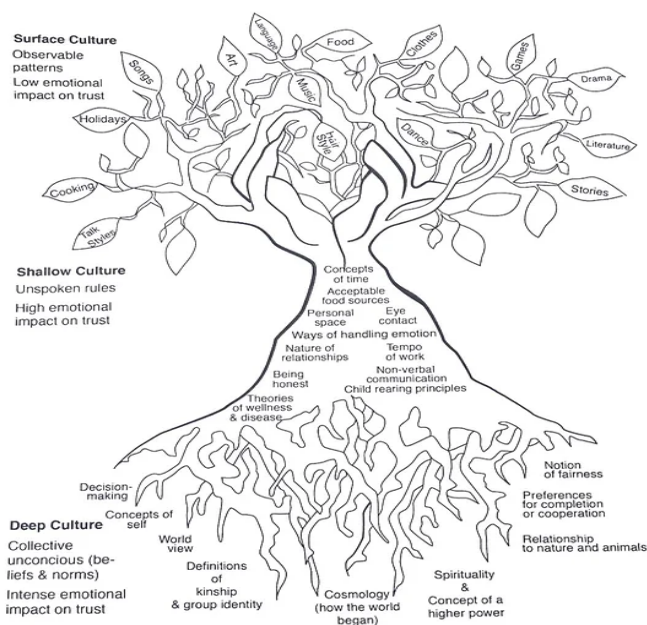


Figure 2. This is a diagram from *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* on surface, shallow, and deep culture, illustrated by Aliza Maynard (Hammond, 2015).

### Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

When examining culture, it can be seen on a continuum from individualist to collectivist; All cultures are different, some being more individualistic or collectivist than others. It is important to see students and their culture on a personal level- using collectivism and individualism is just a way to understand the general culture in your classroom.

Collectivist societies put the focus on the power of the group. It is about the “we” group, or the in-group. The in-group is the family one is born into, potentially including parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives and other housemates. The in-group consists of the people a person generally holds loyalty to for the rest of their life. Relationships, community, and collaboration are all important within a collectivist society (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Individualist cultures focus on the individual. Many people who are born into an individualist culture are born into nuclear families where typically there's one or two parents and siblings in the household. Individualists focus on the "I". Individual achievement and independence are important, and there is practically no dependence on a group (Hofstede et al. 2010).

Psychologist Geert Hofstede made a Cultural Dimensions Index, where countries are evaluated on a 100 point scale with seven dimensions. 100 indicates extreme individualism, while a 0 indicates extreme collectivism. Looking at the extreme ends of the spectrum on Hofstede's scale, places like Guatemala, Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia are among the lowest scores, with less than 15, indicating an extremely collectivist culture. On the other end of the spectrum, the United States scored a 91, along with Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Italy, all scoring above 75. Roughly 20% of cultures in the world are individualistic while roughly 80% of cultures in the world are collectivist (Hofstede et al., 2010). In this country, individualistic culture is dominant; in many African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities, collectivist culture is dominant (Hammond, 2015).

Relating collectivist and individualist cultures to Boston Public schools, African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American students make up almost 80% of the district. Considering this statistic, many students in your class will come from a non-traditional American nuclear family. Assuming this is representative of your class, the majority of students will hold collectivist culture values, and therefore value relationships and support. It's important to keep this in mind when building relationships with students, building classroom culture, and planning lessons.

## Approaches for White Educators

As a white educator, you want to provide a safe space for the diverse cultures your students hold. Your goal as a culturally responsive educator is to foster and encourage the growth of independent learners. You should establish a trusting relationship with each student, utilize students' funds of knowledge, have a culturally responsive mindset and engage in reflection, address your implicit biases, and build an inclusive community. There are many approaches for a white educator to be culturally responsive to students in the classroom.

### **Relationship**

Culturally responsive teachers are aware that the relationship between the student and the teacher is as important as the curriculum. As mentioned earlier, the majority of students in Boston Public Schools come from cultures that practice collectivism, such as African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American students- Therefore, relationships are an integral part of their lives. Positive relationship building is one of the first steps you can take to be a culturally responsive teacher. To obtain this positive relationship, you must build trust with the student and show that you care about them personally. Smiling at a student, giving them a high five, a head nod, or any relatively simple gestures can help build this positive relationship. Hammond describes what is known as a learning partnership, which is when the teacher builds a meaningful relationship that helps move a dependent learner to an independent learner. The main objectives in this partnership include affirmation, mutual respect, and validation. (Hammond, 2015).

The equation *rapport + alliance = cognitive insight* is what Hammond describes as the three essential components of the learning partnership. First, establish rapport and affirmation,

which will establish trust with the student. Then, establish an alliance with the student which involves a pact, the teacher as an ally, and the student being a driver in their own learning (Hammond, 2015). Last, assist the student in holding an academic mindset (Hammond, 2015). Together, these components build trust, establish the learning partnership, and create a positive relationship between the teacher and the student.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Funds of Knowledge encompasses the idea that “people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González and Moll, 2002). Funds of knowledge include political, historical and personal situations. Ultimately, the funds of knowledge students hold help develop skills in school. Examples of funds of knowledge students may hold include the language they speak at home, doing the dishes at home, knowing how to cook chicken because a parent is a chef, and more. In some cultures, school is not the number one priority in the household- this affects a student’s attendance. Understanding students’ funds of knowledge means understanding their background and using that to their benefit while learning. Utilizing students’ funds of knowledge makes learning more engaging and meaningful to them. Understanding your students and their background creates a more meaningful connection with your student and their family. Provided in the resources section at the end of the guide, there is a fillable handout for teachers to better understand their student’s funds of knowledge. (Kier Lopez.)

### **Mindset and Reflection**

Being a culturally responsive teacher isn’t just supplying relevant books and lesson plans, it’s about your mindset. In order to appropriately teach students of diverse cultures, you must fulfill a mindset- be present and mindful. In your pursuit to become a culturally responsive

teacher, don't just consider the tangible aspects, but also your own headspace, feelings and beliefs that could affect your classroom and students.

One way to adjust your mindset to be an effective teacher of diverse cultures is to engage in frequent reflection. Reflection can be completed in various modalities- independent thinking, conversation with colleagues, or free writing. Designating time to reflect on your practice will allow you to address and fix habits that may need to change.

### **Implicit Bias**

As a white educator, my race only aligns with 15.2% of the students in Boston Public Schools, which influences my relatability with a lot of students. Everyone, including teachers, holds implicit biases in some shape or form. Implicit bias is about unconscious thoughts, attitudes, and feelings someone holds. Implicit biases are unconscious and involuntary. Confirmation bias is an unconscious tendency to notice information that lines up and confirms with our pre-existing beliefs. Implicit bias can be to blame for teachers' varying expectations of students. There are ways to combat your implicit biases. First, you can discover and address your implicit biases. One being the Implicit Association Test, or IAT. It is a free online test that helps you understand your implicit biases by assessing the links between concepts. This test brings conscious awareness to your unconscious associations (Take a test, 2011). The link to this test can be found in the resources section of this guide.

Second, you can alter your implicit biases. To change your implicit biases, you can engage in intergroup contact. For example, purposefully, meaningfully engaging with someone of a different race or ethnicity of yours. When you get to know someone that differs from you on one of those levels, your brain can make new, positive associations (Staats, 2015).

Third, exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars can shift your implicit bias. This exposure can change your existing beliefs of your implicit bias. An example of a stereotypical exemplar is a female nurse. Therefore, an example of a counter-stereotypical exemplar is a male nurse. One unique approach to alter your students' implicit bias is to decorate the room with pictures that illustrate counter-stereotypical exemplars (Staats, 2015).

Data collection is a strategy to mitigate your implicit bias. For example, keeping track of grades on assessments, and notes on behavior patterns, etc. Data can display accurate trends. Data regarding academics as well as data regarding discipline can be reviewed. Looking at data about discipline, you can see certain trends or patterns so that you can hold yourself accountable (Staats, 2015).

### **Community**

Creating a community is a really important part of being a culturally responsive teacher because an inclusive community will allow students to feel comfortable and be the best learner they can be. The culturally responsive classroom community is not just about the decorations used that encompass histories of cultures, but also the intangible environment. A culturally responsive teacher acknowledges the classroom as a space for students to explore their identities through discourse, language, and emotional support (Hammond, 2015).

Students holding collectivist culture values cherish beauty and harmony, so clutter and crowdedness could disrupt their learning. Some tangible items that can add to your students' authentic cultural classroom experience include representative prints of contemporary and traditional artists, artwork donated or loaned from parents, use of cultural colors or styles throughout the classroom, community art, authentic artifact textiles and handcrafts, naturalistic-nature-like elements, and diagrams made by people of color (Hammond, 2015).

## Resources for White Educators

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain website: <https://crtandthebrain.com/> - The dominant source for this guide is *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond. This book explains the Ready For Rigor framework of understanding culturally responsive teaching. It is broken up into three parts that explore Awareness, the Learning Partnership, and Building Intellectual Capacity. This book includes a lot of figures and opportunities for inquiry and deeper thinking. Zaretta Hammond is a widely respected culturally responsive leader. She is a former teacher, trained facilitator in anti-bias processes, and has worked as a curriculum designer, a professional developer and more. The link takes you to the Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain website which includes information about Hammond, her book, her blog and other information provided by Hammond (Hammond, 2022).

IAT: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html> - This is a link to the Project Implicit tests. This website includes implicit bias tests on race, Native Americans, skin tone, disability and a handful more. Taking a test only takes about 5-10 minutes, and results can be seen immediately following the test. It's useful to identify your implicit biases in order to address them and be a better culturally responsive teacher (Take a Test, 2011).

Learning For Justice: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/about> - This resource was founded in 1991 as Teaching Tolerance. This website includes free resources such as articles, guides, lesson plans, films, webinars and frameworks to help learning and reflection for students and educators (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023).

Funds of Knowledge Video and Handout:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/funds-knowledge-video> - This link contains a video explaining Funds of Knowledge and a handout to accompany it. The handout highlights some key research concepts about Funds of Knowledge. On page 2, there is a fillable sheet for educators to use to help them explore students' Funds of Knowledge, broken down by category (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2022).

Massachusetts DESE: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading:

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/> - This resource is from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website, titled *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading*. This website is beneficial because it is from DESE, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which coincides with a lot of the resources used by a Massachusetts public school teacher. This source talks about supporting culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, culturally responsive learning environments, linguistically sustaining practices, culturally sustaining practices, and resources for professional development that include classroom profile series (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023).

## Conclusion

Boston Public Schools is a district home to diverse students- All of these students carry their own culture. Culture can be seen on a spectrum from individualist to collectivist and 80% of students in Boston have cultures that practice collectivism, meaning strong relationships and community are prioritized. White educators want to ensure a safe learning environment where students can feel comfortable to grow into independent learners. This is impossible to do without embracing students' cultures. As a culturally responsive educator, you want to build a strong and trusting relationship with each of your students, use their funds of knowledge in their learning experience, engage in reflection, and build a welcoming and supportive classroom community. There are many resources for educators to better their capacity, a handful of which are listed above. Educator's passion is fueled through their students, and in order to foster the healthiest growth of a student, you must be a culturally responsive educator with the mindset and tools to teach all students.

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