

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Characteristics of Culturally Sustaining and Academically Rigorous Classrooms

A mirror, a window, and a doorway.

This metaphor embodies the principles of culturally sustaining and academically rigorous classrooms. Effective classrooms provide all students with a mirror in which they can see themselves. The books, topics, and issues they encounter foster insights into their own personal and cultural experiences.

But simply knowing themselves is inadequate. Students also need a window to understand the perspectives of others, especially those whose experiences differ from their own. There is a reciprocal relationship between these first two principles. Knowledge of others deepens self-knowledge, and self-knowledge in turn fosters a desire to know more about others.

Yet this is not enough. Schools must provide a doorway for students to enter new realms of possibility. Hope-filled schools ensure that every student sees promising paths, and that each student is equipped with the skills to complete the journey.

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The Mirror

Today's youth are the inheritors of a rapidly changing world. The quickening pace of innovation means that schools are preparing youth today for professions that do not yet exist. Although we cannot fully predict what technical skills or information will be needed, we know with certainty that knowledge of self equips people with the reflective skills needed to function in society.

Youth with strong literacy skills are able to articulate vital questions about themselves. They can investigate important issues, make decisions, and take action. They gain empathy as they see themselves in the narratives of others. Culturally proficient literacy educators ensure that the mirror they make part of their classroom for each student reflects common human experiences as well as those that are unique and singular.

The Window

The window represents growth and insight. Culturally sustaining literacy educators understand the importance of throwing light on the vastness of the physical, social, cultural, and biological worlds. Confronting the new and the unfamiliar gives students ways to measure the span of the world and to appreciate the diversity it offers.

Literacy educators foster exploration through academically rigorous investigations that benefit local and global communities. Knowing and understanding others is crucial for youth to advocate for the human rights of all.

The Doorway

Perhaps most important, classrooms must provide a doorway of possibilities. Hope-filled schools ensure that every student has access to academically rigorous curriculum and instruction. This means that each student has the opportunity to learn at high levels and possesses the oral, print, and digital communication skills needed to be a literate member of society.

Literacy educators tailor their instruction to accelerate student growth in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These practices occur daily and are marked by the frequency, intensity, and duration needed to accelerate learning. The academic trajectory of every student is carefully monitored so that literacy educators can respond in a timely fashion, propelling student learning.

The mirror, the window, and the doorway work in communion with one another. Take away self-knowledge, and empathy for others withers. Remove academically rigorous literacy learning, and the doorway closes. Hope-filled schools deeply understand that cultural proficiency and academic rigor amplify each other.

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International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel

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Suggested APA Reference

International Literacy Association. (2017). *Characteristics of culturally sustaining and academically rigorous classrooms* [Literacy leadership brief]. Newark, DE: Author.

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