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*A Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessment:
Translating Research to Classroom Practice*



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By Aneesha Badrinarayan (Education First), Susan Lyons (Lyons Consulting), Alejandra Miranda (University of Minnesota), Alexandra Klyachkina (Chicago Public Schools) & Peter Leonard (Chicago Public Schools)

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A Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessment: Translating Research to Classroom Practice

By Aneesha Badrinarayan (Education First), Susan Lyons (Lyons Consulting), Alejandra Miranda (Cambridge), Alexandra Klyachkina (Chicago Public Schools) & Peter Leonard (Chicago Public Schools)

Introduction: Why Center Culturally Conscious Assessments?

At its core, culturally relevant teaching and learning is about helping learners notice and use the assets of their own and others' lived experiences to anchor robust new learning. While there has been considerable scholarship on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995, Ladson-Billings 2021), there has been far less research and guidance about how to pursue assessments that similarly reflect the cultural, social, and linguistic contexts within which students have developed their understanding and practice. This is particularly true for assessments that need to operate across many different implementation contexts, such as those that might be embedded within high-quality instructional materials or district-wide assessment systems. In Badrinarayan et al. (2025), we introduce a framework for culturally conscious assessment developed through a partnership with Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In this companion article, we describe some of the major implications of this framework for educators and leaders in schools and districts.

There are several reasons why districts may be interested in pursuing culturally conscious assessment systems. Some aim to improve validity and fairness by more accurately measuring student learning in culturally meaningful ways. Others focus more on the assessment experience for students—aiming to create humanizing experiences for students within the assessment process, ensuring they feel seen and valued. The framework described below addresses both perspectives, allowing systems to prioritize features based on their specific goals.

Understanding the Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessments

Motivated by a 2019 survey showing that nearly half of CPS teachers lacked a set curriculum, CPS launched the Curriculum Equity Initiative to ensure all students have access to high-quality, culturally relevant and responsive instructional and assessment materials in English language arts, math, science, social science, and Spanish language arts. Through this process, leaders within CPS recognized the need to define how students' culture and language should be explicitly addressed in assessments to support their instructional experiences. CPS defines culturally conscious assessments as:

Assessments in the Skyline System¹ are culturally conscious in that they provide all students the opportunity to recognize and leverage their languages, histories, communities, and lived experiences as meaningful assets when demonstrating learning, engaging in feedback cycles, and as part of evaluation processes in all academic disciplines.

CPS partnered with researchers (the first three authors of this piece) to develop a framework for culturally conscious assessment features within the Skyline curriculum. The framework provides criteria and indicators to help educators and developers evaluate and improve the cultural consciousness of assessment tasks.

The Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessments (Figure 1) draws from decades of scholarship around how students learn and make their thinking visible, and how culture and language influence this. It synthesizes this research with practical experiences to propose four central criteria, suggesting that assessment tasks that intentionally and explicitly support culturally responsive teaching and learning goals should:

- Prioritize authentic representation and perspective-taking.
- Value individual student identities, ideas, and experiences as central to disciplinary meaning-making.

¹ The Skyline System refers to Chicago Public Schools' universal, standards-aligned curriculum (Skyline), which includes built-in, high-quality assessments at the lesson, unit, and interim levels.

- Engage students as members of communities with shared experiences and culture that are vital for disciplinary meaning-making.
- Position students as critical agents.

These criteria interpret key features of many culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining frameworks—such as the importance of building cultural competence in both one’s own culture as well as that of others, student opportunities to consider issues of social, political, and economic systems in the experiences and ways of knowing of different communities, and valuing of students as individuals with dynamic relationships to the cultures of many communities they are part of—into criteria that are further elaborated by a set of indicators that offer a series of “look fors” in assessment tasks. While the framework does not expect every task to illustrate all indicators, each assessment should reflect one or more indicators. Over the course of all the assessments students experience in a course of study, and over their multiple courses of study across domains, we would expect a system of assessment that attends to these features comprehensively to be providing students with rich and robust culturally conscious assessment experiences.



Figure 1: Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessment Tasks

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Implications for Classroom Practice

As the research team evaluated samples of CPS assessment tasks across grade levels, assessment types, and subject areas, several practical patterns stood out as particularly compelling for teachers and leaders. These included:

- 1. Cultural consciousness is about more than acknowledging students’ backgrounds.** Many efforts to bring culture into assessments only scratch the surface. They might include a name, image, or activity that reflects a student’s background, but often focus on one aspect of identity—like race or ethnicity—without considering how those identities interact with other experiences and together shape how students see and make sense of the world (NASEM 2018,

Nasir et al., 2020). After looking closely at what it means to teach and assess in culturally relevant and responsive ways in both research and practical examples, it is clear that honoring students’ rich cultural and language assets means going beyond surface-level references. Truly culturally conscious assessments help us recognize the wide range of experiences that shape who students are—and invite us to think about how those experiences influence how they understand, reason through, and respond to the situations we present them with on an assessment. The framework shared here is meant to help teachers and developers do just that, with specific features they can build into tasks, such as opportunities to practice perspective taking and metacognitive reflection, and ways to build student perspectives and experiences into their negotiation of disciplinary ideas and reasoning.

2. Lean into how culture and language authentically enrich your area of teaching. Culturally conscious assessments look different in science, English, math, and social studies. For example, a social studies task (Figure 2) might incorporate features like perspective taking by asking students to really consider the stories and lived experiences of themselves and others, while a science task (Figure 3) might incorporate the same indicator by asking students to evaluate how a design solution might work in a particular community or for particular needs. Both tasks ask students to explicitly consider the lived experiences of others—a hallmark of many bodies of research on culturally responsive and relevant teaching and assessment, and an indicator in CPS’s framework—while leaning into the specific knowledge and practices of their specific domains.



Figure 2: In this 3rd grade social sciences example, students create an action plan for Chicago (their home city).

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Figure 3: In this 7th grade science assessment, students develop designs for food warmers to support local community efforts.

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Similarly, culturally conscious assessments will differ based on grade span and developmental level. For example, a kindergarten task will necessarily address culture and language in ways that are different than a middle or high school task. Early elementary tasks often place greater emphasis on the intersection of students’ individual and community experiences, focus on asset-

based approaches to both home and disciplinary language, and encourage students to notice their own experiences and those of others. As students get older, tasks can more explicitly invite more sophisticated ideas about and engagement with the criteria described here.



Figure 4: In this lesson-level kindergarten math assessment, adapted from the English Learners Success Forum, students are tasked with making sense of and communicating relative lengths.

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Importantly, educators might find that some indicators very naturally integrate with their current curriculum and teaching practice, while others appear to be more of a stretch. This framework provides a structure to encourage educators to make more explicit those opportunities that are already entwined in their classrooms, while also exploring opportunities for how they might expand their lessons to incorporate less frequently integrated features of cultural consciousness.

- 3. Consider how students' cultural and linguistic assets can help bolster disciplinary meaning-making.** As we examined a sample of CPS's assessments, we routinely found that while a task might include opportunities for students to reflect on their own lived experiences or consider ways they personally connect to the material included in the task, this was often separate or decoupled from the meaning-making students were being asked to engage in on the assessment. For example, a task might include a prompt about making connections to their own perspectives early in the task as a scaffold for entry, but the synthesis, analysis, or sensemaking required for successfully accomplishing the task might not create space for students' ideas and experiences to be part of the valued academic exercise.

Instead, educators might consider how they could create more opportunities for students' own experiences, values, and perspectives to be used together with disciplinary knowledge and skill.

This might look like:

- Intentionally designing claims or arguments that invite multiple perspectives as paths to successfully engaging with/completing a task.
- Incorporating attention to student perspectives into feedback opportunities, such as peer reflection, inclusion within rubrics, opportunities for metacognitive assessments, etc.

- Providing opportunities for students to take an asset-based approach to considering alternative ways of making sense of/addressing a scenario, and consider how this might lead to similar or different outcomes.

Figure 5 illustrates how an 11th grade ELA task provides opportunities for students to incorporate their own perspectives as well as opportunities to consider others' experiences. Importantly, these opportunities are directly tied to the task's relevant disciplinary goals.



Figure 5: In this 11th grade ELA lesson assessment, students reflect and engage in an evidence-based discussion with peers about Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story."

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Conclusion

The framework for culturally conscious assessment represents a significant step toward aligning assessment practices with Chicago Public Schools' commitment to culturally responsive education. It not only addresses the need for more inclusive representation in assessment tasks but also serves as a guide for ensuring there are opportunities for students to leverage their cultural and linguistic assets while engaging in assessment.

References

Badrinarayan, A., Lyons, S., Miranda, A., Klyachkina, A., & Leonard, P. (2025). Leveraging Students' Cultural and Linguistic Assets for Assessment: A Framework for Culturally Conscious Assessment in the Chicago Public Schools. *Educational Assessment*, 30(2), 115–140.

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Further Reading

- [**How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures**](#) (2018, National Academy Press)
- [**Keeping Students at the Center with Culturally Responsive Performance Assessment**](#) (Learning Policy Institute, 2019)
- [**Socioculturally Responsive Assessment: Implications for Theory, Measurement, and Systems-Level Policy**](#) (Routledge, 2025)
- [**Culturally Responsive Assessment in Classrooms and Large-Scale Contexts: Theory, Research, and Practice**](#) (Routledge 2025)