Theoretical Foundations for Culturally Responsive Schools

Introduction

"Culturally responsive teaching: a pedagogy that crosses disciplines and cultures to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity. It accommodates the dynamic mix of race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion, and family that contributes to every student's cultural identity. The foundation for this approach lies in theories of intrinsic motivation."

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Theoretical Foundations for Culturally Responsive Schools

If you've been keeping up with professional learning in the past year, whether through conferences, on-site training, or digital resources, chances are you've come across the concept of culturally responsive teaching. It's a trend sure to gain more traction in 2018 - but what does it mean for school leaders? This guide highlights formative research on culturally responsive pedagogy with the aim of setting up school leaders as thought leaders. Keep reading for a primer on key concepts related to culturally responsive instruction, and how they can help school communities transform the pedagogical foundations into culturally responsive culture on campus.

Origins of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Why focus on cultural responsiveness? Data clearly shows that American schools don't all serve students equally: from hidden biases to disproportionately harsh discipline, students of color suffer worse outcomes at every level. The NAEP (2015) results indicated that while 46% of white 4th graders were at or above proficient in the 2015 NAEP reading scores, only 18% of black students and 21% of Hispanic students met the proficiency criteria. At the same time, research has shown that when students of color have access to texts that reflect their own experiences, they are more likely to be motivated to read (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001).

In 1995, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings defined a culturally relevant approach as one "that empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings 1995, 465). Since educators must play an integral role in empowering students, getting familiar with the following concepts and their implications for instruction can help ground classrooms in culturally responsive practices.

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5 Things Successful Teachers Do

● Draw on students' culture and history.

● Locate 'self' in a historical and cultural context.

● Enable students to create new knowledge based upon life experiences view knowledge as reciprocal.

● Create a community of learners much like an extended family, and perceive teaching as a part of their calling.

● Set high expectations for the success of all students.

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Key Concept #1: Structural Inequality

Discussions around equity and justice are often centered on race, gender, and/or class. These facets of identity factor into inequality regimes, defined as "interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker 2006, 441). While the concept of "inequality regimes" is often applied to the workplace, it's also important to understand in the context of school communities. More than 40 percent of high school students are chronically disengaged from school, according to a 2003 National Research Council report on motivation. The picture is even more stark when racial factors are taken into account: the aforementioned statistics on reading proficiency come to mind. For a more complete picture of how inequality is embedded in structures, consider the following analysis on inequality regimes from the University of Oregon's Joan Acker (2006):

- The bases of inequality: Other differences may factor into identity, but Acker highlights race, gender, and class as the facets most deeply embedded in structure and processes.

- Visibility of inequality: Awareness of inequality varies, and those in dominant groups tend not to see their own privilege.

- Legitimacy of inequality: As with visibility, those who have advantages (e.g. someone wealthy) often sees their position as earned, and perpetuate rationalizing behaviors and thoughts that uphold this belief.

Self-reflection is already critical in post-observational cycle for educators. By examining power structures and bias in relation to classroom practices, educators can move towards more effective teaching while simultaneously strengthening relationships with students.

Key Concept #2: The Invisible Knapsack

Peggy McIntosh's 1988 essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," remains a seminal text on privilege - the idea that certain groups benefit from unearned, and often unacknowledged, advantages. While the phrase "check your

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privilege" has become more mainstream, what's often less certain is the relationship between the individual and the systemic. McIntosh extrapolates the idea of visibility of inequality to posit that dominant groups are carefully taught to be privilege-blind: "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (McIntosh 1988, 1). Unpacking the knapsack involves asking questions like the following:

- I can turn on the television and see people of my race widely and positively represented.

- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

- I can be sure that if I need medical or legal help, my race will not work against me.

- I can be pretty sure that if I get angry and ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.

- I can choose band-aids labeled "skin tone" or considered "flesh-colored" and have them more or less match my skin tone.

Asking these questions is a useful exercise for educators to continue examining privilege and the role it plays in everyday interactions. Schools need to play an active role in examining and dismantling this privilege through individual educators: by honing their expertise, teachers can then support their students in doing so, as well.

Key Concept #3: Motivation and Culture

Motivation is often presented in the reductive framework of carrots and sticks, i.e., positive and negative reinforcement. This approach treats motivation as extrinsic, and undermines the agency of the learner. In reality, motivation stems from cultural conditioning: emotion drives motivation, and cultural norms drive emotion. It follows that efforts to motivate should be culturally responsive and

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intrinsic - but how can educators, in particular, do so in a system that gives outsize emphasis to summative assessment? Raymond J. Wlodkowski and Margery B. Ginsberg provide a framework for intrinsic motivation that is grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy:

- *Establishing inclusion*—creating a learning atmosphere in which students and teachers feel respected by and connected to one another.

- *Developing attitude*—creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice.

- *Enhancing meaning*—creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include student perspectives and values

- *Engendering competence*—creating an understanding that students are effective in learning something they value (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995, 17).

This framework supports culturally responsive teaching by centering student voice and ensuring that learners are bought in to their educational experiences. It can also be deployed during the classroom observational cycle: teachers continue developing a culture of respect and rapport, resulting in more impactful learning opportunities.

Key Concept #4: Identity Formation and New Media

What role does identity play in learning? Youth, and particularly adolescence, is a crucial time in identity formation - it marks a period when one often experiments with different facets of identity. Today, interactions with digital media also contribute to identity formation and expression in young adults. Learning through play and learning by doing have digital equivalents, e.g. through games, chats, and simulations where the learner navigates subtle cues through language and communication. While technology often enables one to seek out digital narratives

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and experiences that relate to one's nascent identity, new media and platforms can still be exclusionary: "Media content is, of course, not necessarily neutral or reliable: it represents the world in particular ways and not others, and it does so in ways that tend to serve the interests of its producers" (Buckingham 2008, 17). As such, it's important to consider the following:

- Educators are often digital immigrants, while learners are often digital natives. Digital immigrants are less affected by digital media affecting their formative years, so it's imperative that educators are sensitive to the singularities of digital media.

- Blind spots regarding identity and privilege may lead to the consideration of technologies and tools as neutral, when in reality they may not be.

- These considerations should inform digital literacy in the classroom, which in turn is a subset of overall media literacy.

Technology specialists should be conscious of new tools and technologies chosen for the classroom in pilots and previews, and whether they support culturally responsive teaching.
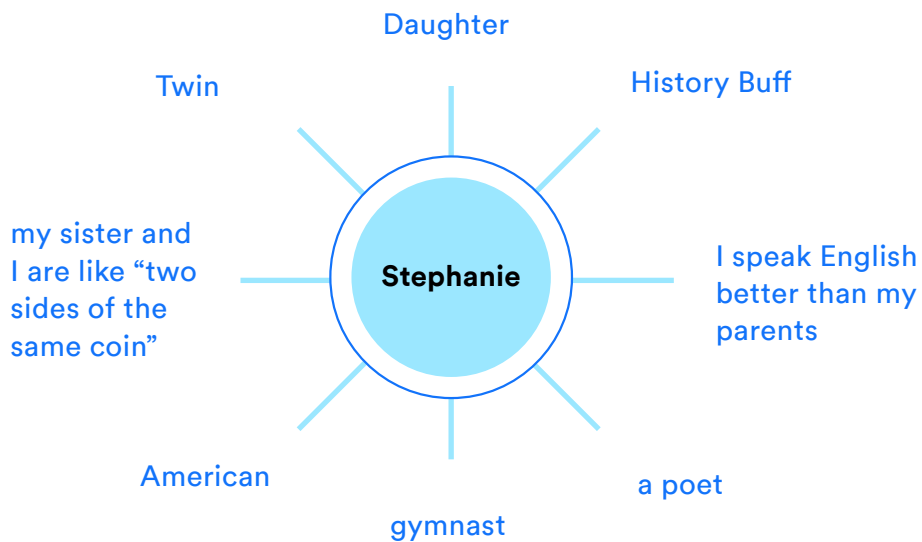
From Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to Culturally Responsive Teaching: Deconstructing Identity

Below, you'll find a two-step exercise to help educators begin analyzing the different facets of identity: self-defined vs. societally-defined, inborn vs. chosen, and more, followed by suggestions on how to take action within school communities.

ACTIVITY #1 | Create an identity map

Step 1: Create an identity map with branches. The branches can be words and phrases you use to describe yourself, as well as labels given more broadly by society.

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Daughter

Twin

History Buff

my sister and I are like "two sides of the same coin"

Stephanie

I speak English better than my parents

American

a poet

gymnast

ACTIVITY #2 | Categorize the branches

Step 2: Categorize the branches of the identity map: Each identity branch can be classified as either visible or invisible, inborn or chosen, permanent or changeable, or valued or marginalized.

Visible	Invisible	Inborn	Chosen
woman	anxiety disorder	white	vegetarian
English speaker	college educated	young	college educated
young	first generation student		

Permanent	Changeable	Valued	Marginalized
vision impaired	middle class	white	woman
white	vegetarian	English speaker	anxiety disorder
	English speaker	college educated	first generation student
		young	

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Next Steps

How can you ensure your school community is set up for success?

Consider an inservice at your school to set the stage for culturally responsive teaching. These articles and activities can serve as an entry point for teachers to begin discussing and model best practices for addressing identity and implicit bias, before creating the space to discuss and model them in their own classrooms. The broader school community can buy in to the culture and approach and begin implementation as a team to ensure authenticity and commitment.

TEXT SETS | **The following Newsela resources can also bolster culturally responsive instruction:**

[Intersectionality](#)

[A Mile in Our Shoes](#)

[Stuff that some adults](#) [might](#)

[not tell you about class](#) [(but you](#)

[need to know anyway)](#)

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